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India's Afghanistan policy: a quest for strategic space post the US withdrawal

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This paper attempts to analyse India's foreign policy towards Afghanistan in the post-9/11 era. While the 9/11 attacks marked the beginning of a new epoch in world politics, the ensuing US-led military intervention in Afghanistan offered India a much needed opportunity to re-establish diplomatic ties with Kabul. Since then, India has remained cautious in its approach toward Afghanistan by relying more on assistance-driven foreign policy measures rather than on engaging militarily in the war-torn country. However, the question remains as to what extent India has been able to create strategic space for itself in Afghanistan, given the fact that India had to shut down its embassy and consulates in Afghanistan in August 2021 when the Taliban regained control of the country? Or, has India's policy been too reliant on soft power that India failed to capitalise on the opportunity created by the overthrow of the Taliban regime in late 2001?

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The conflict in Afghanistan: a historical overview

Afghanistan has been a victim of protracted conflict for almost four decades. The causes underlying the conflict in Afghanistan have varied fundamentally over this period. During the initial years of the tumult, the Afghans found themselves at loggerheads with the expansionist Soviet Union. The recent epoch of violence has mainly been associated with the phenomenon of the rise of Islamic militancy, whose effects have transcended Afghanistan's borders. Situated at the crossroads of South, Southwest, and Central Asia, the conflict in Afghanistan has, over a period of time, manifested its ramifications throughout the region. But foremost and far more critical among these outcomes has been the escalation of religious extremism in and around Afghanistan, which threatens peace and stability in the entire region. The striking feature of the conflict in Afghanistan has been its attribute of 'exporting' religious fundamentalism among its South Asian (Pakistan and Xinjiang in China) and Central Asian (Uzbekistan) neighbours.

Afghanistan's regional neighbours have also played their part in fuelling unrest and turmoil in the country, and their anti-theoretical interests vis-à-vis Afghanistan have also undoubtedly worked to the detriment of establishing enduring peace in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has found itself at the receiving end of the rivalry among its regional neighbours, and had also, in the past, suffered from the competition among the great colonial powers (British and Tsarist Russia). All these factors have collectively made it rather difficult for Afghanistan to chart its modern history with a significant measure of autonomy and non-interference from regional powers or global hegemony. The patron-client relationship that Afghan political and ethnic factions enjoyed with the external powers always provided an international dimension to the Afghan conundrum, and external interference invariably led to an escalation in the conflict in Afghanistan.

The present-day conflict in Afghanistan can be studied from the vantage point of 9/11 attacks on the United States by al-Qaeda. The attacks transformed the otherwise internal turmoil in Afghanistan into a grave security concern for the whole world, especially the United States-led West, which was explicitly declared by the al-Qaeda leadership as its main foe. The emergence of the Taliban had raised concerns in the West prior to 9/11 as well, but their conservative attitude and atrocious outlook towards women were issues that remained confined within Afghanistan's frontiers. What turned the Taliban regime into a pariah for the West was their increasing affiliation with al-Qaeda, whose terror designs transcended Afghanistan's borders, the evidence of which came in the form of the horrendous September 11 attacks. The attacks were transformative in that Afghanistan took centre stage in the unfolding of the US-led Global War on Terror (GWoT).

This is precisely the point where Pakistan's role became more prominent vis-à-vis Afghanistan. Even though Pakistan had been involved in convoluted ways in Afghanistan's domestic politics since the days of a popular uprising against Soviet-sponsored communist regimes; the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks coerced Pakistan to emerge as a frontline state and a major non-NATO ally of the United States in Afghanistan. It was common wisdom during those days that securing Pakistan's support was indispensable for safeguarding Afghanistan from the clutches of the Taliban-al Qaeda combine. Pakistan's official policy posture suggested that it had abandoned its patronage of the Taliban and would help the United States in ushering Afghanistan into an era of democracy and development. With hindsight, it now seems palpable to conclude that Pakistan has been as much a part of the problem as of the solution. Pakistan's policy of assisting the United States in eliminating the terrorist threat emanating from

the Af-Pak region remained selective at best. Pakistan's reluctance to conform to a standardized and uniform anti-terrorist policy resulted in the prolongation of the conflict in Afghanistan. Unwillingness on the part of Pakistan to thwart the Taliban-led insurgency became the fundamental cause of the unending conflict in Afghanistan, which, in turn, made the US-led campaign in Afghanistan look ineffective and a futile exercise. The success of the Afghan campaign was all along held hostage by Pakistan's security establishment, which views Afghanistan as Pakistan's strategic backyard and looked to the Taliban as an appropriate asset to wrest control of it. So relentless had Pakistan remained to preserve the Taliban, that the United States and its NATO allies were left with no other option other than to announce a withdrawal timetable since it became evident to them that trying to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda without garnering Pakistan's support for the cause was a futile exercise which focussed on treating the symptoms of the problem of terrorism (in Afghanistan) and leaving the cause and source of the disease intact (in Pakistan). The conflict in Afghanistan has, therefore, remained far from resolved.

While the United States and its western allies no less than abandoned Afghanistan in 2021, the country still grapples with an array of formidable challenges. These include: a tenuous security environment, overwhelming dependence on foreign largesse, deplorable economic growth, widening social and ethnic divide, and most importantly, a fundamentalist regime now at the helm of affairs. All these challenges point toward an uphill task for Afghanistan to sustain itself as a stable and peaceful state. No one can deny the tangible progress that Afghanistan achieved during the presence of a US-led mission in Afghanistan, yet the return of the Taliban as the de facto regime is feared to lay the ground for the reversal of these gains. Should such a situation arise, Afghanistan can slip back into an abysmal scenario resembling the chaos and disorder during the previous Taliban regime and the preceding civil war years.

Methodology and theoretical framework

This paper employs a qualitative approach to analysing the trajectory of the evolution of India's foreign policy towards Afghanistan. It attempts to examine how India's Afghan policy underwent a change and what factors—domestic, structural, individual—drove that change. In order to explain the evolution of India's foreign policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan, the paper relies on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary sources include the official communiqués issued by governments, the text of treaties signed, and comments and remarks made by members of ruling regimes in both these countries. Secondary sources notably include scholarly articles, commentaries and news items broadly relating to the theme of Indo-Afghan relations. The trajectory of India-Afghanistan relations have been examined within the theoretical framework of the neo-realist theory in International Relations. Neo-realists, most notably Kenneth Waltz, argue that states, as rational actors, behave in a particular manner only after having assessed their own capabilities and those of others. Neo-realism maintains that in an anarchical setting states are left to fend for themselves wherein self-help is the only device available to them in order to safeguard their survival and accomplish other national interests. Situating this paper within the neo-realist framework helps in understanding the rationale behind India's quest to gain influence in Afghanistan, for cordial relations with Kabul have always been seen by New Delhi as a means to prevent Pakistan from using Afghan territory for its anti-India designs. Since neo-realism, like classical realism, believes that conflict constitutes an essential element of international politics, understanding the emergence of Indo-Pak

rivalry in Afghanistan becomes even easier to discern. Since India and Pakistan have shared an inimical relationship right since their inception, this rivalry has also played itself out in Afghanistan as well.

Salvaging lost space: India's Afghanistan Policy since 9/11

It is often asserted that India–Afghanistan relations predate India's emergence as an independent nation-state. Throughout the past many centuries, India (or, more precisely, the areas that now collectively make up India) and Afghanistan have had wide-ranging economic and cultural linkages. Soon after attaining independence, India took the initiative of preserving its relationship with Afghanistan. This was done by signing a Friendship Treaty on January 4, 1950 (Treaty of Friendship Between The Government of India and The Royal Government of Afghanistan, 1950). The treaty envisaged a commitment to everlasting peace and friendship between the two countries 'with a view to the common benefit of their people and the development of their respective countries' (Ministry of external affairs, government of India, 2015). The treaty laid a sturdy foundation for strong and cordial ties between the two nations. India, therefore, enjoyed excellent diplomatic ties with all Afghan governments, starting from King Zahir Shah to the successive regimes, including those that were hoisted on the country following the Soviet invasion in December 1979.

There is another interesting factor that helped India–Afghanistan relations to consolidate early on. The moment Pakistan came into being, New Delhi–Kabul relations gained impetus because both countries shared territorial disputes with Islamabad. Furthermore, Kabul's opposition to Pakistan's stand on the Kashmir dispute strengthened India–Afghanistan relations. India continued to assist Afghanistan even during the tumultuous decade of the anti-Soviet war. India maintained its influence in Afghanistan through investments in developmental activities including irrigation, agriculture, and hydroelectric projects.

Nonetheless, the decade of Soviet intervention witnessed India's Afghan policy oscillating between the principles of Non-Alignment on the one hand and the zeal to gain geopolitical leverage on the other. Initially, India opposed the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and called for the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan. However, realizing that the withdrawal of the Soviets would serve Pakistan's interests by virtue of the ascendance of Pakistan-backed Mujahideen¹ factions in Afghanistan, India chose to abstain from key UN resolutions calling for the complete Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. India, therefore, chose to turn a blind eye toward the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan because it feared a Mujahideen victory in Afghanistan would help Pakistan in gaining greater geopolitical leverage in the region (Sharma, 2011). Further, the scale of military assistance Pakistan received from the US and the latter's policy of turning a blind eye towards Islamabad's clandestine nuclear weapons programme shaped India's Afghan policy during that decade. India's main concern was the revitalization of the US' security links with Pakistan, which India contended could alter the natural balance of power in the region in favour of Islamabad. India was the only country outside of the Warsaw Pact bloc that maintained cordial ties with the Soviet-backed regimes in Afghanistan (Rais, 1993). Geopolitical realities rather than the rhetoric of Non-Alignment guided India's Afghan policy during that decade.

Even after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan and the subsequent fall of the Najibullah government (the last of Soviet-installed regimes), India managed to secure its influence by warming up to the new Mujahideen-led dispensation in Kabul.² Keeping in view the fact that Afghanistan was now under the

direct control of Mujahideen, who shared deep links with Pakistan's security and intelligence establishment, India came up with a very unique, albeit principle-less, policy to keep its relations with Afghanistan afloat. The essentials of this policy were laid down by India's then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, and it remained the cornerstone of India's Afghanistan policy till the advent of the Taliban regime in 1996. This policy rested on five key elements:

1. India 'should deal with all Mujahideen groups without fear or favour, and contact should be established with anyone and everyone willing to meet India despite the militancy of their Islamism.'
2. India would 'deal with whosoever was in power in Kabul, and New Delhi's focus would be on cultivating a friendly government that was sensitive to India's vital interests and concerns.'
3. India 'would conduct its dealing with the government in Kabul, no matter its proximity with Pakistan or its security agencies.'
4. India 'would not provide arms to any Mujahideen group, nor would India ostracize any.'
5. India would focus on contributing to Afghanistan's economic welfare within its capabilities and resources (Bhadrakumar, 2011).

While this policy was aimed at navigating the disorder and uncertainty in Afghanistan at the time, it certainly did not help India's cause, for violence and internecine conflict between and among the various Mujahideen factions left little room for meaningful engagement between New Delhi and Kabul. In fact, India had to close down its embassy on several occasions owing to heavy shelling in and around Kabul. Relations came to an absolute halt with the advent of the Taliban in 1996.

The ascendance of the Taliban with such swiftness and success reflected Pakistan's own unease with the unending strife in Afghanistan. What Pakistan wanted from the Taliban was to put to an end the years-long conflict between various Mujahideen factions so that an orderly Afghanistan could be capitalized for accessing the resource-rich Central Asian states. Under the Taliban regime, India lost whatever little influence it had been able to preserve during the preceding civil war years. The Taliban era marked a diplomatic black hole in the history of India–Afghanistan relations (Paliwal, 2015).

Following the ouster of the Taliban in late 2001 by the US-led coalition in response to the 9/11 Attacks, India was swift in renewing its diplomatic ties with Afghanistan. Immediately after Karzai took the reins of Afghanistan, India's Minister for External Affairs, Jaswant Singh, flew to Kabul to participate in the Interim Government's inauguration and to reopen the Indian embassy, which was closed on the eve of the Taliban's seizure of Kabul in 1996. Since then, India's relations with Afghanistan improved considerably, and a number of factors facilitated the renewal and rejuvenation of bilateral diplomatic ties. First, India kept its post-9/11 Afghan policy completely in sync with the principles mandated under the Bonn Agreement of 2001.³ Second, unlike Pakistan, Indo-Afghan relations were not hampered by the existence of a contiguous and contested border. Third, India was able to garner official support from the Kabul government because many members of the Northern Alliance, which India supported in the mid-1990s, became members of the Interim Government or held influential provincial posts (Pant, 2011).

Avoiding any sort of military engagement, India adopted the 'Soft Power Approach' towards Afghanistan by means of focussing on civilian issues rather than military matters. With the inception of the Interim Government led by Hamid Karzai, Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee immediately announced US\$100 million

in reconstruction aid to Afghanistan. Since 2001, India has already pledged more than \$3 billion on various projects, emerging as the fifth largest bilateral donor to Afghanistan (Business standard, 2018). India's assistance was largely directed toward education, health, and infrastructure-related activities. This civilian-centric policy helped in augmenting mutual trust between New Delhi and Kabul. A look at public opinion polls in Afghanistan illustrates the positive image that India garnered among ordinary Afghans. Among local Afghans, India's assistance and investment in establishing basic facilities like schools, hospitals, and transportation earned it a place of pride and is, therefore, seen positively throughout Afghanistan. Specifically, India has successfully constructed the 218-km long highway linking the town of Zaranj near the Iranian border to Delaram in northeast Afghanistan despite periodic attacks on Border Roads Organization (BRO) personnel. India has also played a significant and commendable role in constructing roads that have improved Afghanistan's connectivity with strategic ports, thereby reducing Kabul's dependence on Pakistan. India has also been able to increase Afghanistan's connectivity with the Iranian port of Chabahar, which has led to an indirect decrease in Afghanistan's dependence on the Pakistani ports of Gwadar and Karachi. India's effort at developing the Chabahar Port in Iran is also based on the fact that it provides India with the most viable option for gaining access to Afghanistan since Pakistan has on many occasions refused to provide land transit to Indian goods bound for Afghanistan through its territory (Bhatnagar and John, 2013). In July 2013, the Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan, Amar Sinha, noted that India is fully committed to the development of Chabahar Port as it represents the best option for the transit of Indian goods to Afghanistan. India used the port in 2012 to deliver humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, demonstrating that the sea-route access to Afghanistan through Pakistan is not the only option available to India in the long run (Mullen and Ganguly, 2012). Furthermore, India accomplished the task of constructing Afghanistan's new parliament building and the construction of the Afghan-India Friendship Dam (formerly known as Salma Dam) project in Herat, from which a power transmission line to Kabul has also been set up. Moreover, India successfully renovated the damaged Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health and regularly dispatched teams of doctors to Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Kandahar to attend to the massive medical needs of Afghanistan. India also granted 500 scholarships annually to Afghan students under the auspices of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR). India's civilian-centric policies have gained wide currency and deep appreciation at the official level and among the local populace as well.

Since 2001, several high-level official visits from both countries strengthened the case for closer and enhanced cooperation between the two countries. For instance, India and Afghanistan signed a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) in 2003, aimed at removing all obstacles in the way of increasing mutual trade and commerce. This agreement made India one of its major trading partners in Afghanistan and its fifth-largest source of imports. Similarly, in 2005, when Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Kabul, they agreed on expanding bilateral cooperation to wide-ranging areas, including development, defence, education, energy, trade, combating terrorism, and working towards greater economic and cultural integration of South Asia. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's perfectly timed visit, just three weeks before the September 2005 parliamentary elections in Afghanistan, pointed toward India's desire for a tangible and long-term engagement in Afghanistan. Indian Prime Minister reaffirmed India's commitment to the Afghan reconstruction process and pledged additional financial assistance of US\$50 million to Afghanistan. Besides announcing

500 scholarships for Afghan students to pursue higher education in India, India also announced that it would adopt hundred (100) villages in Afghanistan to promote and enhance integrated rural development by introducing solar electrification and rainwater harvesting using technologies that have already proven to be successful back in India. India also threw its support behind Afghanistan's entry into SAARC as a full-fledged member (Chandra, 2007).

On October 4, 2011, India and Afghanistan signed a milestone agreement on "Strategic Partnership" that included provisions for both security and economic cooperation, training and equipping of Afghan National Security Forces, provision of economic aid and assistance, development of mining and energy production, and establishment of 'strategic dialogue' between their national security advisers to provide a framework for cooperation in the area of national security (Wright and Stancati, 2011). The fact that Afghanistan signed such a broad-based agreement for the first time in the region underlines the finely tuned and deepening ties between Afghanistan and India. Commenting on the importance of India's renewed engagement with Afghanistan and India's readiness to assist Afghanistan in the future, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said: "Our cooperation with Afghanistan is an open book. We have civilizational links, and we are both here to stay. India will stand by the people of Afghanistan as they prepare to assume the responsibility for their governance and security after the withdrawal of international forces in 2014" (Lakshmi, 2011). India also remained extensively involved in building institutional capacity by way of training Afghan diplomats, doctors, paramedics, entrepreneurs, lawyers, judges, and government officials. The meeting between Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Afghan President Hamid Karzai in November 2012 in New Delhi provided further impetus to the bilateral partnership. Both leaders agreed on the need for deepening economic cooperation in areas ranging from agriculture and small business to mining and infrastructure. President Karzai also participated in the inaugural ceremony of Narendra Modi as the new Prime Minister of India in 2014.

The change of governments in New Delhi and Kabul did not act as an impediment in carrying forward the goodwill and cordiality achieved since 2001. President Ashraf Ghani visited India in April 2015 and held extensive deliberations with Indian officials. Both sides "expressed determination to work together, along with the international community, to combat and defeat the scourge of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations," while also calling "on the international community to severely deal with the safe havens for terrorists that continue to threaten regional and global security" (Ministry of external affairs, government of India, 2015). Prime Minister Modi paid an unannounced visit to Kabul in December 2015. Two landmark events made headlines during his visit. First, Modi inaugurated the Afghan parliament building, which was seen as a "symbol of India's support to Afghanistan's democracy and civil reconstruction support" (Haider, 2015). Second, and most important, India handed over four Mi-25 attack helicopters to the Afghan Army. This was seen as a remarkable departure from India's earlier policy in so far as New Delhi was now becoming open to the idea of supplying offensive military equipment to Afghanistan. Undoubtedly India-Afghanistan relations witnessed a qualitatively new chapter since the ouster of the Taliban in late 2001 until the group regained hold of the country in August 2021.

The return of the Taliban: *Déjà vu* over again

The almost two-decades-long US-led 'state and nation-building' exercise in Afghanistan came to naught on August 15, 2021, when the Taliban captured the capital city of Kabul and ousted the

Ashraf Ghani-led civilian government. A sense of *déjà vu* pervaded Afghanistan for the Taliban embarked on and successfully completed the conquest of the entire Afghanistan, resembling their earlier takeover of the country in 1996. This time around, their campaign was characterized by sheer speed and little bloodshed. Many analysts had long expressed their cynicism regarding the capability of the Afghan security forces, absent foreign combat support, to keep the Taliban threat under control. Come August 15, 2021, experts on Afghanistan found it hard to grasp and explain why the Afghan security forces were in complete disarray, unable and unwilling to even put up a decent fight. This meant that the Taliban were able to make huge territorial gains in the face of little or no resistance.

The Taliban's blitzkrieg campaign rested on the back of the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. President Biden's announcement on July 8, 2021, that the United States would withdraw all its troops by August 31, 2021, emboldened the Taliban to launch its conquest campaign. Earlier, in April 2021, President Biden had set September 11, 2021 (the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 Attacks) as the deadline for the withdrawal of the US troops. The deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, however, forced the Biden administration to advance the deadline for the withdrawal of its troops. The United States completed the withdrawal of its troops on August 30, 2021, ending twenty years of war that ultimately ended with a complete takeover of the country by the adversary the US military spent two decades fighting.

President Biden, while explaining the rationale behind the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, argued that "there was no longer any justification—if there ever was—to believe that the United States military presence could turn Afghanistan into a stable democracy" (Sanger and Shear, 2021). The 20-year-long US (and other allied nations') presence in Afghanistan could neither help establish a strong, democratic state nor could it defeat an insurgency it considered dead and obsolete within months of the commencement of US intervention in late 2001. The end result being that Afghanistan continues to reel under a regime, deliverance from which was otherwise one of the stated objectives of US intervention in Afghanistan.

In 1996, when the Taliban captured the city of Kabul after intense fighting with the erstwhile Northern Alliance, India was left wanting space to retain its sphere of influence in Afghanistan. Since India had entered into a working relationship with the Northern Alliance, composed mainly of non-Pashtuns factions (Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras), during the preceding civil war years, the ascendance of the Pashtun-dominated Taliban regime proved to be a nightmare for New Delhi. The Taliban were unequivocal about their antipathy towards India since it had become quite obvious during the civil war years that New Delhi had supplied the anti-Taliban factions (which more often than not happened to be non-Pashtun in character) with money and arms in order to stop the Taliban from capturing Kabul. India had established links with the anti-Pashtun Northern Alliance so as to negate the possibility of Afghanistan coming under Taliban control, which India saw as a proxy of the Pakistani security establishment. Following the Taliban's capture of power in 1996, India was forced to shut its embassy and consulates in Afghanistan. Under the Taliban regime, India lost whatever little influence it had been able to preserve during the preceding civil war years. The Taliban era marked a diplomatic black hole in the history of India-Afghanistan relations (Paliwal, 2015).

Soon after their ouster in late 2001, India, just like the US-led West, considered the Taliban a spent force not worthy of being engaged with even when the group showed signs of revival beginning 2005–06. In fact, India was content to see the Taliban go and did not waste any time renewing its diplomatic ties with Afghanistan. Immediately after Hamid Karzai had taken the reins

of Afghanistan, India's then Minister for External Affairs, Jaswant Singh, flew to Kabul to participate in the Interim Government's inauguration and to reopen the Indian embassy, which was closed on the eve of the Taliban's seizure of Kabul in 1996.

India emerged as the largest regional aid donor to Afghanistan in the post-9/11 era. Till late 2021 India had spent almost \$3 billion on various developmental and reconstruction projects in Afghanistan. New Delhi, in a bid to carve a niche in the 'new' Afghanistan, employed the winning hearts and minds (WHAM) strategy and insulated itself from getting involved in military matters. India cultivated warm diplomatic ties with both the Karzai and Ashraf Ghani-led civilian governments in Afghanistan. As a result of its civilian-centric policies, India carved out for itself a special place in terms of being perceived by ordinary Afghans as a friendly neighbour committed to Afghanistan's peace and development.

New Delhi's soft power approach vis-à-vis Afghanistan proved appealing yet strategically short-sighted. As long as the US-led international community remained in Afghanistan (in terms of their military presence and by providing financial assistance to Afghanistan), democracy seemed to be taking root, and the Afghan state seemed poised for acquiring a mature form. The moment the US-led West began to withdraw⁴ from Afghanistan, the weakness of the nascent Afghan state became evident for everyone to see.

All along the last two decades, New Delhi had put its proverbial eggs in just one basket, and that basket belonged to the Afghan state. India did not spend enough diplomatic resources on engaging with the Taliban even when it seemed imperative. The reason for this reluctance stemmed from the historical hostility the Taliban had exhibited against India and the various attacks that Indian security and civilian personnel in Afghanistan endured as a result of the Taliban insurgency post-2001. Part of this anti-Taliban approach also stemmed from the fact that no government in New Delhi wanted to be seen as being soft towards an Islamist extremist group known for having little regard for human rights in general and women's rights in particular.

Not having engaged with the Taliban over the last decade invariably meant that when the Afghan state started crumbling down owing to the country-wide conquest campaign launched by the Taliban in May–July 2021, India faced its 1996 Afghan moment once again. The Taliban's ascendance compelled India to close its embassy in Kabul and consulates elsewhere in the country.⁵ Experts and analysts had long been advocating the need for engaging with the Taliban, especially since the latter's resurgence in 2005–06. The security and foreign policy establishment in New Delhi, however, chose to cultivate bilateral ties with just the government in Kabul and turned a blind eye toward the fact that with each passing year (especially since 2012) even the United States began to focus more on 'talks'⁶ and less on 'military means' as the more practical way of establishing peace in Afghanistan (Ganaie, 2013). As a result of the Taliban's blitzkrieg campaign in August 2021 and the subsequent fall of the Ashraf Ghani government, India, literally and metaphorically, lost its presence on the ground in Afghanistan.

Since the Taliban are now in control of the country; there is no alternative for India to regain a semblance of strategic presence in Afghanistan other than to engage with the Taliban. In this direction, New Delhi has apparently taken certain novel initiatives which may collectively pave the path for opening formal and official channels of communication between the Taliban and the Indian government. "None can change one's neighbours or region," Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen noted in an interview. "We must accept this reality and have peaceful coexistence," Shaheen further added (Subramanian, 2021). These remarks by the Taliban spokesperson came as a response to a question pertaining to India's worldview of the Taliban. Given how strong the Taliban phenomenon is at the moment, India

would do well to go by the same logic (as enunciated by the Taliban spokesperson) and try to engage with the neighbour (Afghanistan in this case), even if that means a tacit endorsement of the Taliban regime.

Taliban takeover of Afghanistan: the way forward for India

As noted above, the Taliban's return as the de facto ruling regime in Afghanistan spelt an ominous development for India. Given that India's approach towards Afghanistan has historically been viewed as a zero-sum dynamic against Pakistan, in which loss for one side entails gain for the other, the Taliban's return implied that the game had all been lost by the Indian side with Pakistan all set to accrue the benefits of the regime change in Kabul. While India grappled with the uphill task of evacuating its diplomatic mission and citizens from Afghanistan, a sense of euphoria pervaded Pakistan's security and foreign policy establishments. Islamabad's reaction to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan stood in contrast to the despair in western capitals. Prime Minister Imran Khan captured the essence of the sense of accomplishment in Pakistan when he asserted that "Their [the Taliban's] triumph had shown that Afghans had "broken the shackles of slavery" (The Hindu, 2021). Pakistan's triumphalism was again on display when Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) chief Lt. Gen. Faiz Hameed visited Kabul to meet the senior Taliban leadership ahead of the formation of the interim government in Kabul.

Unsurprisingly, India was dismayed to see these developments transpiring in Afghanistan. Had it not been for India's myopic Afghan policy and had New Delhi opened channels of communication with the Taliban (when the West itself was seriously pursuing peace talks with them), India would not have felt a sense of strategic defeat in August 2021. All this, however, is rumination in retrospect. The more important issue at hand remains: How can India recalibrate its Afghan policy so as to salvage a semblance of strategic presence in Afghanistan despite the Taliban being in power? The answer is simple: New Delhi needs to engage with the Taliban.⁷

Towards this end, New Delhi has taken a few noteworthy steps. When the United States was about to complete the evacuation of its troops from Kabul, the United Nations Security Council, under India's presidency, adopted a resolution recognizing the Taliban as a state actor (Roy, 2021).⁸ A negative vote on the resolution would have meant reduced chances for New Delhi finding a favour with the Taliban.

The hasty withdrawal of foreign troops and the concomitant closure of western embassies in Kabul spelled a rough chapter for Afghanistan, which had hitherto been receiving enormous financial support from the West. Absent western support, coupled with a failed crop season, the Afghan economy began to crumble, with food shortage emerging as one of the serious challenges facing the Taliban regime. Keeping with its decades-long civilian-centric strategy, India lost no time in announcing food aid to Afghanistan. India declared that it would provide 50,000 MT of wheat to Afghanistan. In fact, India signed an MoU with the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) to arrange the distribution of wheat in Afghanistan. India has already despatched three consignments of wheat (amounting to a total of around 6500 MT). WFP headquartered in Rome called India's assistance a "landmark" thanking New Delhi for the "generous contribution of wheat in support of the people of Afghanistan facing severe food shortages" (Haider, 2022). Besides being humanitarian in character, India's food aid was also meant to create an opening for New Delhi to begin its direct engagement with the Taliban regime.

India's wheat supplies received considerable appreciation within Afghanistan, including from the Taliban. As a reciprocal and reconciliatory measure, the Taliban promised to provide a secure environment for the Indian embassy in Kabul. For the Taliban, the

opening of India's embassy would mean a step forward to being seen as the legitimate regime in Afghanistan. The more the countries engage with the Taliban, the more legitimacy it gains.

Even though India is yet to fully reopen its embassy and consulates in Afghanistan, New Delhi has chosen to follow yesteryear's tradition of providing financial support to Afghanistan. On February 1, 2022, New Delhi allocated Rs. 200 crores (around US\$ 27 million) for assistance to Afghanistan in its 2022–23 fiscal budget. The amount will be disbursed to pay for existing Indian projects in the country, scholarships for Afghan students, and aid for the Afghan people. Afghanistan's ambassador to India, Farid Mamundzay, appreciated India's financial aid package. Praising India's continuing financial assistance to Afghanistan despite the Taliban takeover, Mamundzay remarked that "[New Delhi's aid assistance] is a signal that India is not switching off" (Hindustan Times, 2022).

India continues to provide food, medicines, and financial aid to Afghanistan. While this may help India to preserve the goodwill it has earned in Afghanistan over the last two decades; New Delhi needs to move above and beyond these assistance-drive measures and try to carve for itself a strategic niche in Afghanistan. Towards this end, Afghanistan's deteriorating ties with Pakistan may be a solid entry point. On April 16, 2022, Pakistan launched air strikes in the eastern Afghanistan provinces of Khost and Kunar, resulting in the death of at least 47 persons, including women and children. The Taliban responded by warning Pakistan from launching such attacks inside Afghanistan. "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan condemns in the strongest possible terms the bombardment and attack that has taken place from the Pakistan side on the soil of Afghanistan," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in the aftermath of the airstrikes (Aljazeera, 2022). "This is cruelty and it is paving the way for enmity between Afghanistan and Pakistan...We are using all options to prevent repetitions (of such attacks) and calling for our sovereignty to be respected" (Aljazeera, 2022). Pakistan, for its part, justified the strikes on the ground that the strikes were targeted at Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants. Experts believe that recent tensions between Islamabad and Kabul stem from "the Taliban's unwillingness to crack down on the TTP, a close ideological and organizational ally" (Siddique, 2022).

In the first week of June 2022 an official delegation from India headed by the Joint Secretary of the Pakistan–Afghanistan–Iran division of the Ministry of External Affairs, J.P. Singh, met senior Taliban leadership. The delegation mainly discussed the delivery operations of India's humanitarian assistance and trade-related issues. The team also visited developmental projects financed by India. The Taliban once again requested the Indian side to restore diplomatic ties and consular services in Afghanistan. Following the meeting, Pakistan once again made it clear that Islamabad still sees India playing the role of a 'spoiler' in Afghanistan (Hussain, 2022).

Pakistan's allegations notwithstanding, Kabul's relations with Islamabad have taken a turn for the worse. Given the fact that Afghanistan still faces an uphill task of managing the crisis of shortage of food, medicines, and healthcare facilities, India can step in more concertedly and lay the foundation for a renewed strategic footing under the auspices of the Taliban regime. Staying away from Afghanistan and the Taliban can never translate into any perceptible benefits for India. It is only through cultivating a functional relationship with the Taliban that India can capitalize on the latter's disenchantment with Pakistan and thus tilt the balance in its own favour.

Conclusion

India has spent tremendous diplomatic energy and financial resources in developing cordial ties with Afghanistan over the last so

many decades. Ever since the fall of the Taliban regime in late 2001, India has turned out to be a formidable financial and humanitarian assistance provider to Afghanistan. All the goodwill India garnered in Afghanistan over the last two decades risks being lost if prompt action is not taken by New Delhi to engage with the Taliban. For instance, thousands of Afghan citizens who had been provided scholarships by the Indian government to study in India continue to remain disenchanting with the Indian government's Afghan strategy. These students cannot return to India simply because they are unable to get hold of a visa. Had the Indian embassy been reopened, even with limited capacity, these students would have returned to India to complete their studies.⁹ Besides, engaging with the Taliban does not mean an endorsement of their worldview. Rather, through the route of engagement, India, or for that matter, other countries as well, can partake in reviving the development processes in Afghanistan. Engaging with the Taliban can also prove instrumental in preparing the ground for a broad-based government, which the international community sees as a respectable approach to ensure the participation of other ethnic groups in the decision-making processes in Afghanistan. India along with Afghanistan's other regional neighbours must try to cultivate an understanding with the Taliban so that they can be influenced to accept the formation of an inclusive government as a means to gain diplomatic recognition. Further, India must, individually, and as part of regional groupings like SAARC and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, try to facilitate dialogue with the Taliban so that enough leverage is exerted on them for the inclusion of representatives belonging to minority ethnic factions within its government. The formation of a broad-based and inclusive government in Afghanistan forms an essential part of the joint declaration issued at the end of the SCO summit held in Uzbekistan on September 15–16, 2022. In this regard, India must work together with other like-minded states so that a regional framework for engaging with the Taliban regime can be worked out so that Afghanistan can be secured from falling into yet another phase of conflict and turmoil.

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Notes

- 1 The term 'Mujahideen' here refers to all those groups who collectively shared the motive of seeing the ouster of Soviet troops from Afghanistan and who, in varying degrees, was financed and directed by Pakistan's security establishment. However, not just Pakistan but Iran as well was financing some of the Mujahideen factions.
- 2 In an attempt to put an end to the deadly fighting between various Mujahideen factions, the then Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif helped to broker a peace deal known as the Peshawar Accord, which installed a Mujahideen-led regime in Kabul. The accord was signed and announced in late April 1992.
- 3 The Bonn Agreement was a series of agreements meant to install a transitional government in Afghanistan. It actually meant instituting a government in Afghanistan owing to the vacuum created by the ouster of the Taliban regime.
- 4 The withdrawal of US troops had begun as early as 2012. The withdrawal of all US troops was completed on August 30, 2021.
- 5 India had already closed its consulates in Jalalabad and Herat in March 2020 in view of growing security threats.
- 6 Under the Obama administration, 'talking to the Taliban' became part of the official US policy towards Afghanistan. Even though Obama had ordered a surge in troops in 2011, he, however, at the same time, outlined the need to engage with the Taliban through negotiations. Commenting on the need to pursue negotiations with the Taliban, Obama had remarked that peace in Afghanistan will remain elusive until 'reconciliation among former enemies' is sought.
- 7 'Engage' here does not imply granting the Taliban full diplomatic recognition. Engagement as an analytical category refers to the process of opening channels of communication with the Taliban. This is a prudence-driven approach whereby both countries can accomplish primary objectives vis-à-vis each other (see Paliwal, 2015).
- 8 Only China and Russia abstained. Rest 13 members of the UNSC voted in favour of the resolution, which was sponsored by France, the UK, and the US. The resolution

also strongly warned that Afghan soil cannot be used to act as a safe haven for terrorism.

- 9 Towards the end of June 2022, India decided to reopen its Kabul embassy by sending a 'Technical Team' to revive India's diplomatic presence in the country. This step is seen as a pre-cursor to India establishing full-scale diplomatic presence in Afghanistan. It is also seen as a major shift in India's erstwhile position of not engaging with the Taliban.

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The authors declare no competing interests.

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Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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