



A ROAD UNTRAVELED

Reset or rivalry? India and Afghanistan post-2021

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This policy brief explores the history of security relations between India and Afghanistan and the prospects for any future engagement, considering the recent developments and disintegration of the security sector in Afghanistan. It investigates how the two countries can find common ground for military cooperation and what role India could take in helping stabilize Afghanistan and ultimately the region. The brief also elaborates on potential security threats to India in Afghanistan and concludes with recommendations for future engagement.¹

A history of India's security engagement in Afghanistan

Even though they do not share a border, India and Afghanistan have a long relationship based on historical and cultural links that can be traced back to the Indus Valley civilization.² India's policies in Afghanistan are typically characterized as driven by the aim to counter Pakistan's influence and minimize its political involvement in the country. Until recently, India's policies prevented Pakistan from expanding its regional influence and using Afghanistan as a bridge to connect with Central Asian countries. They also targeted Pakistan's support of radical anti-Indian groups.³ India and Pakistan's conflict is rooted in territorial disputes over the Kashmir region, which has sparked three wars between the two countries (in 1947, 1965 and in 1999, albeit limited).⁴

The Pakistan-supported Islamic militancy and the rise of China as a rival have been the primary impetus for India to economically engage and pursue strategic interests in the region. India has been particularly favourable to Central Asia in those pursuits, mainly because it sees benefit in having trade and other economic connections with a major provider of oil and natural gas. It has also wanted to establish a broader security horizon with Central Asian countries as a counterbalance to its adversaries.⁵

The friendship between the two countries encompasses an estimated \$3 billion in development assistance since 2001. The bulk of that Indian investment targeted infrastructure in Afghanistan, including building roads, dams, electricity transmission lines and substations, schools and hospitals.⁶ India is one of the six-largest

donors in Afghanistan, but it has chosen humanitarian and development aid over military support.

India was one of the few countries that supported the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979, which significantly damaged its reputation within the international community.⁷ India also welcomed the subsequent Soviet regime in Afghanistan out of recognition for its disregard of Islamist ideology while Pakistan backed the Mujahideen groups with a shared Islamic ideology. During the 1990s, India's policy towards Afghanistan aligned with Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, both of which viewed the Taliban as a serious threat to their respective national security. Hence, the three countries helped the Northern Alliance against the Taliban regime.⁸ The Taliban's close relationship with Pakistan's Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam party, which is presumed responsible for several terrorist attacks across the Indian mainland fuelled India's agenda.⁹

After the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001, India moved to strengthen its relationship with the new government. However, India did not maintain parallel relations or back-channel contacts with any political figures or non-state armed groups at that time. All interactions were coursed through diplomatic, formal and other recognized channels between Kabul and New Delhi.¹⁰

Although India has not had military presence in Afghanistan, New Delhi sent military equipment, such as Mi-25 armed helicopters, fortified check posts and watch towers to the Afghan National Army.¹¹ Indian technicians maintained the Afghan Air Forces'

1 The project "A Road untraveled? Options, Scenarios, and Recommendations for Future International and Regional Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan" is an independent effort of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the Institute of War and Peace Studies (IWPS). This brief is part of a series discussing the implications of the US withdrawal for bilateral relations between Afghanistan and its neighbors. The complete list of policy briefs may be accessed here: <https://afghanistan.fes.de/publications>

2 ClearIAS Team, "India-Afghanistan relations – everything you need to know", 4 March 2019. Available at www.clearias.com/india-afghanistan-relations/.

3 Harsh V. Pant, India's Challenge in Afghanistan: With Power Comes Responsibility. Working Paper (Philadelphia, PA: Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania, 2010).

4 Global Conflict Tracker, "Conflict between India and Pakistan" 17 November 2021. Available at www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-between-india-and-pakistan.

5 Nicholas Howenstein and Sumit Ganguly. "India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan", JIA, 25 March 2010. Available at <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/india-pakistan-rivalry-afghanistan>.

6 Nirupama Subramanian, "Explained: what are India's investments in Afghanistan?", Indian Express, 16 July 2021. Available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-indias-afghan-investment-7406795/>.

7 Pant, 2010.

8 Avainash Paliwal, New Alignments, Old Battlefield: Revisiting India's Role in Afghanistan (Carnegie India, 2017).

9 "U.S.–India cooperation in Afghanistan: is India's "strategic autonomy" sustainable?", Truman Center, undated. Available at <http://trumancenter.org/doctrine-blog/u-s-india-cooperation-in-afghanistan-is-indias-strategic-autonomy-sustainable/>.

10 Interview with Arun Sahgal, Executive Director, Forum for Strategic Initiative (with Alamuddin Rizwan), 19 October 2021.

fleet of MiG-21 fighters and other military equipment. In one rare situation, India deployed a small number of Indo-Tibetan border police commandos to protect road construction personnel working with the Border Roads Organization in 2007.¹²

In 2011, the governments of India and Afghanistan signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement on cooperation in security, law enforcement and justice. Both nations agreed to collaborate to fight international terrorism, organized crime, narcotics trafficking and money laundering. The agreement also committed India to provide training, capacity-building workshops and equipment to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces.¹³ Although India trained many Afghan security forces and technicians over the past two decades, the training programmes were never aimed at countering insurgency in Afghanistan. Instead, they focused on building up the capacity of the Afghan security forces. Support measures were never part of the NATO or other joint collaborative programmes.¹⁴

Although India has long advocated an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled reconciliation and peace process, it was a strong backer of the American and NATO mission in the republic and opposed their military withdrawal. It expressed concerns about the recent expeditious withdrawal of the United States and NATO forces from Afghanistan, which would enable its adversaries, such as Pakistan and China, to step in and exploit the vacuum in their favour.¹⁵

The West undermined the Afghan government in the Doha negotiation partly due to Pakistan's lobbying and its influence on the United States and the Taliban. India remained out of the US-Taliban talks, officially stating that it would only participate in talks that are Afghan-owned and Afghan-led. Despite the scepticism and coming late to the process, India's foreign minister attended the inauguration ceremony of the intra-Afghan talks in Doha in September 2020.¹⁶

Implications of the United States and NATO withdrawal for India-Afghanistan relations

Indian views on the recent American withdrawal from Afghanistan vary: The American administration did not care or badly miscalculated or even deliberately facilitated the eventual takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban. From the perspective of India, even a minimal presence of the United States and NATO in Afghanistan was a stabilizing influence.¹⁷

Although there is no direct threat to India's national security from the Afghan conflict, there are concerns that a proxy war could surface between elements involved in the ongoing conflicts. Afghanistan under Taliban control could become a base for Islamist

militants in Kashmir who are allied with Pakistan in its fight against India.¹⁸ After the takeover of the country, the Taliban issued an amnesty for all Afghans and released prisoners throughout the country, including some of the most dangerous operatives linked with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP). Reports also indicate the possibility of many Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish Mohammad, Tahreek Taliban Pakistan and other insurgent fighters being freed who may have accessed advanced weaponry and ammunition left by the disintegrated security forces. Along with the advanced arms, these fighters are feared to have moved on to Kashmir, posing an extreme threat to India's national security.¹⁹

Although Pakistan believes that India supports non-state armed groups, such as the Tahreek Taliban Pakistan, India's footprint in Afghanistan has been too small for such activities.²⁰ After the American and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, India's role has been shattered. It no longer has direct access, and its development projects have been forced to stop. Nonetheless, Afghanistan will remain a significant point on India's foreign policy agenda, and India is unlikely to abandon it.²¹

In the wake of the American and NATO withdrawal, terrorist groups may become more active under the Taliban. The Haqqani network, responsible for horrifying attacks in Afghanistan, controls key functions of the new government. IS-KP has become more active than ever before, and there are allegations of some degree of cooperation between the Haqqani network and IS-KP. Indian stakeholders fear that these factors will conspire to ultimately destabilize Afghanistan and the region.²²

Another feared impact of the Taliban takeover is that radical and religious extremists might become more active in the region. The capture of Afghanistan could be inspiration for other Jihadi groups. Among them, the anti-India actors could become more active due to the broad support they receive from Pakistan. It is believed that the Taliban takeover will enable Pakistan to use such groups against India as leverage on the long-running dispute over Kashmir.²³

For the moment, India is pursuing a "wait and see" strategy with the Taliban.²⁴ India's engagement with the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban will rely on the Taliban's foreign policy and whether or not it commits to the social development and democratic values achieved in the past two decades.²⁵ New Delhi might make re-starting cooperation with the new government in Afghanistan conditional on a political settlement and assurances of distance from regional extremist groups. However, the humanitarian assistance would not be conditional and India would continue to provide basic aid to the people of Afghanistan.²⁶

India is expected to continue with humanitarian aid, scholarship

11 Harsh V. Pant, India's 'Af-Pak' Conundrum: South Asia in Flux (Elsevier Limited, 2012).

12 *ibid.*

13 Truman Center, undated.

14 Sahgal, 2021.

15 Paliwal, 2017.

16 Interview with Gautam Mukhopadhaya, Senior Visiting Fellow, Centre for Policy Research (with Alamuddin Rizwan), 26 October 2021.

17 *ibid.*

18 "With the Taliban's rise, India sees a renewed threat in Kashmir", NPR, 14 September 2021. Available at www.npr.org/2021/09/14/1036877490/with-talibans-rise-india-sees-renewed-threat-in-kashmir?t=1637234100962.

19 Sahgal, 2021.

20 *ibid.*

21 Interview with Kabir Taneja, Research Fellow, Strategic Studies Programme (with Alamuddin Rizwan), 25 October 2021.

22 Mukhopadhaya, 2021.

23 *ibid.*

24 Taneja, 2021.

25 Sahgal, 2021.

26 Mukhopadhaya, 2021.

programmes, medical assistance and, if the security issues are sorted out, trade and travel of Afghan citizens to India for humanitarian, education and medical purposes. From the Indian perspective and despite the urgency to accept reality, provide humanitarian assistance and other support that would legitimize the Taliban, its past atrocities should not be forgotten. And the Afghan people should not be abandoned in their struggle for their fundamental freedom.²⁷

If the Taliban do not establish an inclusive government, grievances and resistance against their rule might grow by the day, especially among Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks and other minorities living in Afghanistan. India is seen as a potential supporter of such a resistance in the future but unlikely to intervene militarily. Although India would want to continue efforts to stabilize the country and support an inclusive process acceptable for all stakeholders, it appears that the Taliban would not bring any substantial stability on its own. The Taliban lack the legitimacy to rule the country, and noticeable divisions and rivalries within the Taliban are already surfacing.²⁸

Considering their history, it is not easy for India to start engaging with the Taliban. And yet, it has no option. Each year, a vast volume of trade transits to Central Asia through Afghanistan. Afghanistan's strategic location is crucial for regional connectivity, and it is central to India's New Silk Road project to connect with trade, transit and energy in the Central Asia region. Transit through the Chabahar port, for instance, gives India the leverage to transform trade in South and Central Asia.

The considerable investments of India in Afghanistan include the Salma Dam in western Afghanistan, the Delaram-Zaranj highway and the building of Afghanistan Parliament. The Taliban appear not completely opposed to engagement. The Taliban government reached out recently to the Indian authorities to facilitate the departure of Afghan students to India and to resume commercial flights between the two countries.

The Islamic Emirate lacks national and international legitimacy and needs to establish an inclusive and structured government in Afghanistan. India's cooperation with the Taliban might be conditional on a political settlement whereby all people of Afghanistan see themselves in a government that ensures distance from the regional and international extremist groups. Should cooperation also reach the area of security policies, India would require the Islamic Emirate to ensure no links between the Taliban and extremist elements in the Indian mainland, especially in Jammu and Kashmir.

India, Australia, Japan and the United States established the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad,²⁹ a collaborative platform to promote the rule of law, democratic values, peaceful resolution of disputes and territorial integrity. India can use that influence towards stabilizing the region and contributing to the peace process in Afghanistan. The Regional Security Dialogue in India³⁰ will be an important event for India to discuss possible threats emerging from Afghanistan with the national security advisers of regional countries, including the Islamic Republic of Iran, Russia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and the other Central Asian republics.

27 *ibid.*

28 *ibid.*

29 Sheila A. Smith, "The Quad in the Indo-Pacific: what to know", CFR, 27 May 2021. Available at www.cfr.org/in-brief/quad-indo-pacific-what-know.

30 Maj. Gen Harsha Kakar. "How India's NSA-level meet will help crack the Afghan riddle, expose Pakistan's duplicity", First Post, 9 November 2021. Available at www.firstpost.com/india/how-indias-nsa-level-meet-will-help-crack-the-afghan-riddle-expose-pakistans-duplicity-10121111.html.

Recommendations

- India should keep an open communication channel with the Taliban to safeguard its investments in Afghanistan and to prevent loss of its strategic interests in the region.
- India should continue strengthening the institutional capacity-building in Afghanistan through knowledge exchange programmes, such as the Indian Council for Cultural Relations programme, which provides hundreds of Afghan students with scholarships to study in India each year.
- Because India no longer has an active presence in Afghanistan, it should channel its humanitarian support, especially to internally displaced people, through other neutral organizations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. India should also help mobilize resources and support from other countries through existing platforms, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.
- India should cooperate with the United States to counter terrorism stemming from Afghanistan. Both have worked together in the past, for example through the United States–India Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership,³¹ which is a platform for information-sharing, consultations on potential terrorist threats and combating the financing of terrorism.
- To safeguard two decades of investment in Afghanistan, India needs to reconsider its policy towards the Taliban and establish relations with the Islamic Emirate warily.
- Regional countries as a coalition should initiate a robust diplomatic effort to find a regional solution for the crisis in Afghanistan. Such a coalition would ensure that no country would use the current situation for their benefit and thus turning Afghanistan into another battlefield of proxies.
- The Islamic Emirate should ensure that Afghanistan does not become a safe haven and breeding ground for radical groups and extremists that would thus pose a threat to the security and stability of the region and the world.

31 “Ensure Afghan soil is not used for terror, U.S., India tell Taliban”, The Hindu, 29 October 2021. Available at www.thehindu.com/news/international/ensure-afghan-soil-is-not-used-for-terror-us-india-tell-taliban/article37240170.ece.

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