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Abstract

The re-emergence of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan is a major setback for India's ambitions in the region. The paper elucidates the implications of the resurgence of the Taliban triumph in Afghanistan on India. The long-standing bilateral relations between India and Afghanistan are analyzed. The present threats emanating from Afghanistan, namely the possibility of security issues brewing up in Kashmir, the humanitarian crisis, and the large exodus of refugees, are examined. Lastly, the paper provides insights into India's role in establishing peace in Afghanistan by shifting from its previous approach and focusing more on regional diplomacy.

Keywords: India, Afghanistan, Taliban, Pakistan, Kashmir, Politics, Diplomacy.

Introduction

In 2001, after the 9/11 twin tower bombings, the USA launched a war on terror in Afghanistan. This has ensued when the previous Taliban government refused to hand over then Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden to Washington for his involvement in the 9/11 attacks. Consequently, the Taliban were ousted from power by the NATO forces led by the US. This paved a way for regime change in Afghanistan. However, as time passed the occupation of Afghanistan was costing more to the US. According to the studies from Brown University, from 2001-2022 the United States has spent \$2.313 trillion on the war in Afghanistan, not to mention the innumerable loss of human lives the war has caused¹. On the other hand, the Taliban, who grew from a group of madrasa students in the 1990s under the leadership of Mullah Omar, were gaining control, albeit slowly, over Afghanistan.² The hasty withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban back to power have resulted in the shifting of power dynamics in the region. The militant organization now holds the centre stage of the world's attention with its co-founder, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, featuring on Time Magazine's 2021 list of 100 most influential people.

Afghanistan is now going through a grave humanitarian crisis with a shattered economy. The country is facing acute malnutrition, with almost every household facing a shortage in food consumption and food security.³ According to the United Nations, over half of the population is "expected to be in crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity".⁴ In addition, the series of attacks by Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)

¹ Crawford, N. C., & Lutz, C. *human and budgetary costs to date of the U.S. war in Afghanistan*, (2021).

² Johnny, S. *What's next for Afghanistan?* The Hindu, (2021). Retrieved from <<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/explainer-what's-next-for-afghanistan/article35977836.ece>>

³ *Afghanistan: economic roots of the humanitarian crisis*. Human Rights Watch, (2022).

⁴ *Afghanistan. Global Humanitarian Overview*, (2022). Retrieved from <<https://gho.unocha.org/afghanistan>>

on civilians and the Taliban have further escalated the security challenges.⁵ Although the Taliban claimed they would not tolerate any terrorist activities on Afghan soil, the attack on ISKP coupled with the deteriorating security challenges contradicts their claim.⁶ Moreover, there are apprehensions and skepticism that, in retrospect, the Taliban has never broken its ties with Al-Qaeda.⁷ The latter still occupies a strong position in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Despite the calls for an inclusive government, the new interim government has appointed all males, mostly from the Pashtun tribe, consisting of at least 14 members listed who are under the United Nations Security Council terrorism blacklist. Needless to say, women have been stigmatized and segregated in classrooms and workplaces, despite the Taliban guaranteeing women's rights. Nevertheless, under Shariah law.⁸

While no country has recognized the new Taliban regime, all of the regional countries are engaging with Taliban officials. The embassies of China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia in Kabul are kept open. In contrast, India shut down its Kabul embassy shortly after the onset of the Taliban triumph, leaving no official Indian presence in Afghanistan. This also underlines that India, in the current scenario, is not a major stakeholder in dealing with the Taliban. New Delhi was left out of many discussions on the future of Afghanistan as well. For instance, the "Troika Plus" talks of the USA, Pakistan, China, and Russia. Furthermore, the new interior minister of the Taliban, Sirajuddin Haqqani, the head of the Haqqani network, is on the FBI's most-wanted list and is wanted by India for many crimes, including the alleged suicide attacks on Indian diplomats in 2008 and the attack on Gurdwara Har Rai Saheb in Kabul.⁹ The Haqqani network is believed to have deep ties with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), accentuating Islamabad's role in Afghanistan.¹⁰ The ISI holds significant leverage over the Taliban given the long and bitter history between the two states (Indo-Pak), mainly in Kashmir. India believes Pakistan's rise in gaining influence in Afghanistan lowers their gains in the region. This galvanizes India to bolster its security domain, particularly in Kashmir, where the previous Taliban regime and Pakistan supported militant groups such as *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT) and *Jaish-e-Mohammed* (JeM). Also, Pakistan proposed admitting Taliban-led Afghanistan to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which was opposed by the other nations.¹¹

SAARC is the only common platform where India can engage with its South Asian members, with many soft power instruments such as the South Asian University, and the addition of the Taliban can derail the core foundations on which SAARC is built.¹² Thus, letting the deep state of Pakistan exclusively deal with the Taliban could prove costly to New Delhi. This leaves India with limited options in safeguarding its stakes in Afghanistan.

⁵ Agency France-Presse. *ISIS claims responsibility for blasts on minibuses in Afghanistan*. NDTV.Com, (2022). Retrieved from <<https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/isis-claims-responsibility-for-blasts-on-minibuses-in-afghanistan-2930527>>

⁶ Taneja, K. *Under the Taliban bonnet: Al Qaeda—ISKP rivalry and its security implications for India*. Observer Research Foundation, (2021). Retrieved from <<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/under-the-taliban-bonnet/>>

⁷ Elias, B. *The Taliban won't compromise AlQaeda. here's why*. Foreign Policy, (2021). Retrieved from <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/21/taliban-al-qaeda-afghanistan-ties-terrorism/>>

⁸ Hooda, L. G. D.S. *India's options in Afghanistan*. Chanakya forum, (2021). Retrieved from <<https://chanakyaforum.com/indias-options-in-afghanistan/>>

⁹ Haidar, S. *Afghan-origin terror prime concern: India*. The Hindu, (2021).

<<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/main-concern-is-curbing-terror-threat-from-afghanistan-india/article36256827.ece>>

¹⁰ Shah, Aqil. "What will happen to Afghanistan and Pakistan's uneasy border?", (2021).

¹¹ Sohini, G. *Pakistan wanted Taliban to represent Afghanistan in SAARC meeting*. Hindustan Times, (2021). Retrieved from <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/pakistan-wanted-taliban-to-represent-afghanistan-in-saarc-meeting-report-101632283752032.html>>

¹² Ranjan, Prabhash. "Suspending Afghanistan from SAARC and international law." (2021).

Review of Literature

Paliwal¹³ adopted Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) to analyze the dynamic relationship between India and Afghanistan. The framework is imperative for understanding Afghanistan's political landscape as well as for deciphering the proxy parties in the country that deal with global and regional forces. He further elucidates the trajectory of the relationship between New Delhi and Kabul by differentiating Indian foreign policy into two groups: conciliators and partisans. The former contends that New Delhi must support whichever regime comes to power in Afghanistan. Whereas the latter calculates every decision and policy on Afghanistan depending on the strategies of Islamabad. Paliwal contends that weak nations' foreign policy behaviors are influenced by domestic variables, most notably the influence of Afghan domestic policy, which realigns, evolves, and responds to both India and Pakistan's policies toward Afghanistan, thus balancing factional and national policy goals. In addition to this, while most Afghans want good relations with India, a segment of the population prefers closer ties with Pakistan, which impacts Kabul's approach to New Delhi. Following the Taliban's resurgence, it is likely that Islamabad will gain more influence. The author argues that India's reservations about sending troops and supplying arms to its counterpart played a part in reducing the influence.

Pant¹⁴ gives a broad analysis of India's engagement with Afghanistan post 9/11. He classified the dynamic relationship into three periods. The first phase underlines the soft engagement New Delhi made with Kabul during the initial stages of the democratic regime in Afghanistan post 9/11. This includes the various visits made by leaders from both countries, along with numerous projects and infrastructural developments put forward by India for their counterparts. The second phase marks the period when Indian interests in Afghanistan were targeted. This includes the bomb attacks on the Indian Embassy in 2008 and 2009. This period witnessed India's role in stabilizing the security of Afghanistan getting marginalized. The third phase highlights India's efforts to gain influence in Kabul by implementing several policy measures. These measures indicate New Delhi's ambitions of stepping up to take a major role in the Afghan peace process. This includes the unprecedented strategic partnership between the two states that also gives India the role of training Afghan security forces. Likewise, the phase also saw India seeking more coordination with countries such as Russia and Iran.

Saxena¹⁵ discusses the rationale behind India's development partnerships and gives an overall picture of India's investments in Afghanistan. That said, the author also raises concerns about India's position in the emerging scenario given that the Taliban have attempted multiple attacks on Indian properties before. She further states that with the recent turn of events, the onus is on India to make sure that its development projects are secured by engaging with the Taliban government, while also keeping in mind that the interim government was established so that it could avoid taking accountability for the decisions in the coming years. In this context, the author emphasized that India cooperates with other states in providing humanitarian aid to the people of Afghanistan.

Wani¹⁶ examines India's apprehension of the security of Kashmir, underlining the possibility of spillover with the reinstatement of the Taliban in Kabul. The study offers a deep retrospection of the spillover on Kashmir when the Taliban came into power for the first time in 1996. Likewise, during the previous Taliban rule, Pakistan used its trained *Mujahedeen* to fight along with Islamic militant organizations including *Lashkar-*

¹³ Paliwal, Avinash. *My Enemy's Enemy: India in Afghanistan from the Soviet Invasion to the US Withdrawal*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

¹⁴ Pant, Harsh V. "India's changing afghanistan policy: regional and global implications." (2012).

¹⁵ Saxena, C. *India's developmental partnership in Afghanistan: Here to stay or to go?* Observer Research Foundation, (2021). Retrieved from <<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-developmental-partnership-in-afghanistan-here-to-stay-or-to-go/>>

¹⁶ Wani, A. *Resurgent Taliban and its implications on Kashmir*. Observer Research Foundation, (2021). Retrieved from <<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/resurgent-taliban-and-its-implications-on-kashmir/>>

e-Taiba (LeT) and *Jaish-e-Mohammed* (JeM) to wage *Jihad* (the holy war) for the liberation of Kashmir. While the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which granted special autonomy to the region of Kashmir, and the improvement of India's military and tactical preparedness to counter terrorist attempts have reduced terrorist attacks on Kashmir, the Taliban resurgence is a morale boost to the Islamist militants, and the security challenges for Kashmir will increase significantly in the coming years. Hence, the Taliban resurgence has put India in a difficult position to maintain security in the South Asian region.

India's options in Afghanistan are well evaluated by many media houses and think tanks. Hooda¹⁷ for the Chanakya Forum gives more emphasis on the security challenges faced by India amid the recent geopolitical changes. Hooda strongly criticizes the sidelining of India by other states such as China and Pakistan. India can focus more on protecting its areas and must only prioritize humanitarian actions led by international actors if India has an equal say in them. Whereas Johny¹⁸ for the Indian daily Hindu gives an overall picture, with the dire mission of India should be the safety and security of its investment, and the long-term goal is to find a permanent political solution to the security challenges.

India's Engagement with Afghanistan

Pre 2001

India's relationship with Afghanistan is nothing but civilizational. By having strong historical and cultural links, the bilateral ties between the two countries span centuries. This led to stable relations between India and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, a cause of concern originated when Afghanistan became a pawn in the "great game" between Great Britain and Russia, culminating in the creation of the Durand Line that separates British India and Afghanistan. But after India gained independence in 1947, the Durand line was transferred to Pakistan, leaving India out of the border dispute. The Treaty of Friendship, signed in 1950, marked the beginning of cordial ties between New Delhi and Kabul. A friendly partner gravitated by the norm of global non-alignment and sought to balance Pakistan regionally was a positive boost for India. In fact, in 1947, Afghanistan opposed the creation of Pakistan at the United Nations. By the 1970s, India had initiated many developmental projects in Afghanistan, notably the Indira Gandhi Hospital in Kabul, the Chardeghorband Microhydel Scheme, and many technical assistance programs in the areas of planning, industry, mining, irrigation, and power.¹⁹ Likewise, agricultural research stations for rice, wheat, and potatoes were also built in Bamian, Kandahar, and Kabul.

The advent of the cold war galvanized the two states to adopt different policies. India was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). While Kabul also tried to adopt an independent foreign policy, it gradually fell into the ambit of Soviet Russia's influence, paving the way for the Soviet invasion in 1979. The NAM states had a different viewpoint on the invasion, and India was one of the few nations to justify the invasion. This was reflected in New Delhi's decision to recognize the Soviet-backed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) in 1978.²⁰ New Delhi's decision undermined the very essence of the Non-Alignment Movement. India continued to support the Kabul regime till the triumph of the Mujahideen in 1992.

¹⁷ Hooda, L. G. D.S. *India's options in afghanistan*. chanakya forum, (2021). Retrieved from <<https://chanakyaforum.com/indias-options-in-afghanistan/>>

¹⁸ Johny, S. *What's next for Afghanistan?* The Hindu, (2021). Retrieved from <<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/explainer-whats-next-for-afghanistan/article35977836.ece>>

¹⁹ Paliwal, Avinash. *My enemy's enemy: India in afghanistan from the soviet invasion to the us withdrawal*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

²⁰ Pant, Harsh V. "india's changing afghanistan policy: Regional and global implications." (2012).

India's influence decreased rapidly when the Taliban came to power in 1996. The embassy was shut down. During the Taliban's seven-year rule, India, along with Russia and Iran, supported the Northern Alliance, a resistance front against the Taliban led by Ahmed Shah Massoud, operating from the Panjshir Valley by financing and assisting with resources. The 1990s were also a period of cross-border infiltration of trained militants into Kashmir. The hijacking of the Indian Airlines flight IC814 in 1999 by *Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)* and *Jaish-e-Mohammed (Jem)*, two Kashmir insurgent groups that landed in Kandahar, also increased anti-Taliban norms in India. The government of India had to negotiate with the Taliban for the safe return of the passengers on board.

Post-2001

In post-Taliban Afghanistan, New Delhi's relations with Kabul improved. An immediate outcome of this development was the elevation of India's Liaison Office to an Embassy in Afghanistan in 2002. India is actively engaged with the government of Afghanistan by assisting with humanitarian and infrastructural projects, as well as small and community-based development projects and capacity-building programs. In this regard, India-Afghan relations have witnessed significant growth in the present century. It is pertinent to note that the security and stability of Afghanistan are central to India's foreign policy given that the stability of the former is vital for the stability of the latter. In this backdrop, India has affirmed its support for the democratic establishment and its development in Afghanistan.

Despite not being a traditional donor, Indian aid to Afghanistan has totaled over US \$3 billion over the past two decades, becoming the largest regional donor. Under the training program of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), partnered with India, over 60,000 Afghan civil servants received their education in India. In addition, India has over 400 small development projects to bolster local governance. Likewise, projects on encouraging women's enterprises were also implemented. When Afghan President Hamid Karzai visited India in 2011, India became the first country with which Afghanistan signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement.²¹ The agreement facilitated a bilateral partnership between the two South Asian states in political, economic, social, cultural, capacity-building, and people-to-people contacts. Moreover, under the Strategic Partnership Agreement, India provided special training, equipment, and, more importantly, capacity-building programs to the Afghan National Security Forces.

India has invested heavily in many projects in Afghanistan, seeking to bolster cooperation with its South Asian partner. New Delhi has also emerged as Afghanistan's primary partner in terms of infrastructure development assistance. Some notable projects include: the sponsorship of 200 schools in Afghanistan with over a thousand scholarships; the construction of the Salma Dam, also known as the India-Afghanistan Friendship Dam; the establishment of power substations and power transmission lines allowing electricity import from Uzbekistan; and the \$90 million construction of the parliament building.²²

Being a landlocked country, Afghanistan was heavily dependent on Pakistan, given Karachi was the only port it had access to. Thus, India initiated a project to create another option for its partner by developing a route connecting Chabahar port in Iran and also building a 200-kilometer highway in Afghanistan to help connect it to the Iranian border town of *Zahidan*. It became one of the most high-profile infrastructure projects undertaken by India. The construction of the 220-kilometre-long *Zaranj-Delaram Road*, which will enable Afghanistan to have access to the sea via Iran and will provide a shorter route for Indian goods to reach Afghanistan, was completed in 2008.

²¹ *India-Afghanistan Relations*. (n.d.). Embassy of India Kabul, Afghanistan. Retrieved from <[https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0354?000#:-:text=The%20Strategic%20Partnership%20Agreement%20\(SPA,Afghanist an's%20natural%20resources%2C%20providing%20oduty](https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0354?000#:-:text=The%20Strategic%20Partnership%20Agreement%20(SPA,Afghanist an's%20natural%20resources%2C%20providing%20oduty)>

²² *India-Afghanistan a historic and time tested friendship*. (n.d.). India ministry of external affairs. Retrieved from <https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/30860_India-Afghanistan_Map_Book.pdf>

It is also worth mentioning that, unlike its western counterpart, New Delhi's approach to Kabul was non-interventionist, always chose not to play a political role and sought to increase the notion of the rule of law in Afghanistan. To this effect, India also bolstered defence ties by training the Afghan army and police and providing military equipment to its counterpart.²³

After Taliban Resurgence

The opportunities for India to facilitate its relations with Kabul were high until the Taliban came into power in August 2021. Notwithstanding India's current role in the Afghan peace process has been subdued, being a regional player still has many opportunities. For instance, India is engaged in delivering humanitarian aid to Afghan citizens under the United Nations for humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. India is committed to sending 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat to the Afghan population. In addition to this, India assisted with 13 tonnes of essential medication and winter clothing, as well as 500,000 doses of COVAXIN to Afghanistan by commercial flights. Furthermore, in its 2022–23 budget, the Government of India has announced financial assistance of USD 27 million to Afghanistan.²⁴ With the Taliban coming into power again, the government of India has already evacuated almost all its citizens and the Indian Embassy has been shut down, leaving no official presence in Afghanistan. With the Haqqani group occupying important positions in the interim government, India now worries about its infrastructure development projects in Afghanistan, which over these years, given the previous attacks by the Haqqani group, have proved costly to India.

Threats on Kashmir

Now the overriding concern of India is to mitigate the terrorism threat and security challenges emanating from Afghanistan. There is an apprehension that the turn of events in Afghanistan, with the support of Pakistan, could have a major spillover of violence into Kashmir. The last time the Taliban was in power, there was a military outbreak in Kashmir, led by Pakistan with the support of the Afghan *Mujahideen*. Many foreign fighters, mostly non-Pakistani *Mujahideen*, infiltrated and incited chaos in the valley of Kashmir. The Taliban also had close ties with *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT) and *Jaish-e-Mohammed* (Jem), two anti-India terror groups responsible for the rise in violence in Kashmir as well as the 1999 Indian Airlines hijacking of Kandahar.²⁵

After the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution which granted special autonomy to Kashmir,²⁶ The government of India has claimed it repressed militant organizations and subsided violence in the region. However, with the triumph of the Taliban, there is a possibility that Pakistan could act against India with the support of the militant group. Moreover, the rise of the Taliban is perceived as a sheer blessing to other terror groups who were waiting for a favorable time to act.²⁷

²³ Saxena, C. *India's developmental partnership in Afghanistan: Here to stay or to go?* Observer Research Foundation, (2021). Retrieved from <<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-developmental-partnership-in-afghanistan-here-to-stay-or-to-go/>>

²⁴ *Notes on Demands for Grants, 2022–2023*. Indian Ministry of External Affairs, (2022). <https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/doc/eb/sbe29.pdf>

²⁵ Aryal, Saroj Kumar, and Simant Shankar Bharti. "Post-Taliban takeover: What is at stake for India in Afghanistan?" *South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF)*, 2021.

²⁶ Hilali, A. Z. "Kashmir combustible region: Abrogation of article 370 & 35-and its grave implications." *Journal of Indian Studies* 7, no. 2 (2021): 247-268.

²⁷ Wani, A. *Resurgent Taliban and its implications on Kashmir*. Observer Research Foundation, (2021). Retrieved from <<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/resurgent-taliban-and-its-implications-on-kashmir/>>

India's Future Role and Aspirations in Afghanistan

Earlier, India strongly opposed any kind of engagement with the Islamist organization, stating the peace process should be "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan controlled". Now the situation has changed. With the Taliban coming into power on the Indian day of independence and former Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani fleeing to Central Asia, India has been met with an unprecedented conundrum. This urged India to make a decisive shift in its approach toward the Taliban. India had its first official engagement with the Taliban on August 31 when Ambassador to Qatar Deepak Mittal met with his counterpart, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, in Doha. The meeting discussed security, safety, and the return of Indian nationals back to their homes. India also expressed its deep concerns about not using Afghan soil for anti-Indian activities and terrorism. For this, India has shifted beyond bilateral engagements to regional diplomacy.

India was also part of the 10 nation meeting with Taliban officials known as the Moscow Format Consultations, which acknowledged the new reality unfolding in Afghanistan. These engagements underscore India's willingness to prevent an isolated Taliban from becoming Pakistan's satellite. Moreover, during the G-20 virtual summit hosted by Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi lamented the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Afghanistan and called for a unified response to provide immediate aid and assistance to the afflicted nation.²⁸

When India presided over the UN Security Council in August 2020, it adopted Resolution 2539, which aims to prevent Afghan soil from being used for terrorist activities and calls for joint counter-terrorism measures in Afghanistan. In addition, India, led by National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, hosted a meeting of NSA's with the countries of Iran, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan to discuss how to mitigate the security challenges emanating from Afghanistan.²⁹

It is imperative for India and other regional countries to ensure the Taliban keep their commitments to form an inclusive government and to prevent Afghanistan's soil being used for terrorist activities. In this context, India must utilize the international platforms to use its voice to induce the Taliban to respect its citizens' rights, especially women and children. Given the humanitarian crisis looming around Afghanistan with over 4 million people internally displaced, India must provide its assistance to organizations that are assisting the displaced refugees with food and shelter, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). New Delhi can also consider giving monetary assistance to Iran and the Central Asian countries which are providing housing for refugees. Likewise, New Delhi can also liberalize its visa policy by granting more e-visas to Afghan nationals.

Moreover, India, along with other states in regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), put pressure on the Taliban to follow its commitments. Since the Taliban is craving for international recognition, such pressure can help in alleviating the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

²⁸ Mohan, G. *Need to ensure Afghan territory not used for terrorism: PM Modi at G20 extraordinary summit*. India Today, (2021). Retrieved <<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/ensure-afghan-territory-not-used-for-terrorism-pm-modi-g20-extraordinary-summit-1864078-2021-10-12>>

²⁹ Haidar, S. *Explained| Why is Delhi holding an NSA meet on Afghanistan?* The Hindu, (2021). Retrieved from <<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/explained-why-is-delhi-holding-an-nsa-meet-on-afghanistan/article37362742.ece>>

Conclusion

India's policies on Afghanistan are based on two factors. One is the geopolitical reason. The influence of Pakistan and China on Afghanistan has elicited India to engage with Kabul. The second is the geo-economic factor. Afghanistan plays a pivotal role in facilitating trade links between India and the Central Asian region. The coming back of the Taliban to power has undermined India's aspirations in the country.

Although New Delhi presently has no representative in Kabul, it would be imprudent if it follows a wait-and-watch policy and leaves the Afghan conundrum to its fate, keeping in mind that the other regional players involved in the peace process are not very welcoming toward India. The emerging scenario has greater security implications for India, especially in Kashmir. While giving more emphasis to the security threats, New Delhi must not let the global and regional states and organizations turn the tide of the situation, as India was sidelined in some major discussions determining the future of Afghanistan before. In this context, India must step up and dance with the devil; otherwise, the ramifications can be more or less detrimental. Also, it is pertinent to note that engagement does not translate into recognition of this new reality and that every regional and international stakeholder continues to keep all their options open. However, engagement at certain levels for India with the Taliban is inevitable and a need of the hour for its own geopolitical and strategic interests.

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