



Commentary: To Safeguard Its Interests, India Needs To Step Up As Afghan Partner

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By Raghav Sharma

The current period in Afghanistan has drawn comparisons to the 1990s in the country. As the United States withdraws its remaining troops, the Afghan political elite continues to fracture, and the government loses territory to a Taliban bent on challenging the legitimacy of the republic, India has found its Afghan policy at a crossroads. Amid the shifting contours of Kabul's political landscape, New Delhi is struggling to engage with the Taliban.

Through much of the 1990s, India's foothold in Afghanistan was largely confined to pockets in the northeast of the country controlled by the internationally recognized Afghan government. The latter increasingly comprised an assortment of parties identifying with ethnic minorities from the north that banded together under the banner of the Northern Alliance. But it was not until the U.S.-led military intervention in late 2001 that New Delhi's forays into Afghanistan gained traction. India emerged as the largest regional and fifth-largest international donor to the country with development projects spread across all 34 provinces, working to dispel political association with the Northern Alliance.

Less than a decade after the U.S. led intervention, the 2010 London Conference on Afghanistan made clear the question of not if but when and how the political rehabilitation of the Taliban would take place. India was reluctant to pursue this as it regarded the Taliban as a proxy of Pakistan, which makes it unpalatable for New Delhi.

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Ten years later, the 2020 Doha agreement between the Taliban and the United States dispelled any illusions New Delhi may have about the militants' political future. Many in India viewed the agreement as a sell-out to the Pakistani military and a "strategic defeat" for the United States, which ceded much but got little in return. The agreement is seen as boosting the legitimacy of the Taliban, which continues to indulge in wonton violence and undermine the already-fragile government in Kabul while offering no guarantees to protect the gains made over the past two decades.

Adapting To The Times

Unlike in the 1990s, India now confronts a dramatically reconfigured geopolitical and social landscape as it seeks to recalibrate its strategy toward Afghanistan, which is poised for yet another political, military, and ideological transition.

India's primary concerns in Afghanistan are related to security. Tellingly, New Delhi describes the country as a "contiguous neighbor." Closely echoing the language of Kabul's political elite, it maintains that the challenge of terrorism confronting the international community lies in Pakistan, where enduring peace is contingent on the "ending of terror sanctuaries and safe havens operating across the Durand Line."

Although the Doha agreement calls on the Taliban to provide “guarantees to prevent the use of Afghan soil by any international terrorist groups or individuals against the security of the United States and its allies,” it offers little solace for New Delhi. It fails to address regional terrorists networks such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, which have espoused a virulent anti-India agenda. Moreover, the Taliban has demonstrated little commitment to severing its ties with international terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda or the Haqqani network, which has targeted India in Afghanistan.

The waters are further muddied by the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan, which has attracted some Indian Muslims as well as disaffected commanders from the ranks of the Taliban. The deadly bombing of an Afghan Sikh and Hindu delegation waiting to meet with President Ghani in July 2018 by IS and the attack on a Kabul gurudwara in March 2020, in which one of the assailants was from Kerala, India, underscore India’s security concerns.

The rhetoric echoed by Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmud Qureshi, who said India wants “a peaceful Afghanistan and region,” is betrayed by developments on the ground. Credible reports point to a regrouping of militants in Pakistan’s tribal areas, which is something opposed by many opposition groups in Pakistan who are under relentless crackdown. Such developments are likely to amplify security concerns for India.

Regional Influences

Through much of the 1990s, Moscow and Tehran were seminal to India’s efforts in channeling support to the anti-Taliban alliance in Afghanistan via Tajikistan. Today, as Russian and Iranian relations with Washington have frayed, both have moved swiftly to embrace the Taliban and closely coordinated their outreach in conjunction with Islamabad and Beijing.

Neighboring Central Asian republics, too, have followed suit. This makes any attempt to support an anti-Taliban coalition exceedingly difficult for India. Furthermore, Beijing’s rise has whittled down Islamabad’s dependence on Washington and allowed for a reset in relations with Moscow and Tehran. There is no Northern Alliance left in Afghanistan.

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New Delhi must make the most of the strengths of its Afghan policy. Over the past two decades, it has forged a credible development partnership with Kabul. India should position itself as reliable partner for development, which will be seminal for economic reconstruction in any post-American Afghanistan. India can be an important mobilizer of resources and help build political consensus on the international stage.

Second, India must work to strengthen constituencies within Afghanistan that mirror the tremendous sociopolitical changes Afghanistan has witnessed over the past two decades in access to education, freedom of expression, political mobilization, and exposure to the outside world. India has been a part of this transformative journey for thousands of Afghans through its educational and training programs.

Third, India must strive to realize the full potential of the Strategic Partnership Agreement signed with Kabul in 2011. New Delhi should scale up its training for the Afghan security forces, sharing intelligence with the National Directorate of Security, and providing defense equipment.

On the political front, India needs to cast its net far and wide to include an engagement with the Taliban. This would give both New Delhi and the Quetta Shura greater room for diplomatic and political maneuvering. While India's skepticism with regard to the strategic autonomy enjoyed by the Quetta Shura is well founded, one must not forget India has engaged with a plethora of militant, separatist outfits patronized by Islamabad in the Kashmir valley.

The rapidly changing political dynamic in Afghanistan leaves little room for complacency, and the onus is on New Delhi to seize the opportunity and ensure its voice is effectively heard and its security concerns are addressed.

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