

SUBIR BHAUMIK

AFGHANISTAN AFTER THE US WITHDRAWAL: HOW WILL ITS INDIAN NEIGHBOUR RESPOND?

India has strongly supported the US-driven, NATO-led International Security Assistance Force mission in Afghanistan right from the time of the post-9/11 military intervention that drove the Taliban out of power. For Delhi, the foreign military intervention led by the Bush Administration helped save Afghanistan from becoming the hub of radical Islamist terrorism in the strategically important South and Central Asian region. Since most of these radical Islamist forces were proxies of Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI),¹ beginning in the late 1980s, when the Soviet withdrawal became imminent, India sought to build a counterweight by developing close links with anti-Taliban and anti-Pakistan groups within the Afghan resistance. Indian military and intelligence advisers were secretly deployed in support of the forces led by Ahmed Shah Massoud, one of the three Afghan warlords said to have been recruited by the Indian external intelligence agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).² In fact, these warlords were to later form the US- and NATO-backed Northern Alliance as it sought to drive the Taliban out of power and move against the Al Qaeda bases inside Afghanistan, details of which had been provided by a CIA mole inside the terror group before its suicide bombers struck the Twin Towers in New York.³

If India's covert and then overt intervention in East Pakistan in 1971 led to the emergence of Bangladesh as a friendly nation prepared to ease Delhi's security concerns in the East, its covert intervention in Afghanistan, long before Western forces landed in Kabul, has served both a defensive and an offensive purpose. The defensive purpose was to secure India's western frontier by ensuring the defeat of radical pro-Pakistan forces in the Afghan civil war and creating an India-friendly government consisting of Afghan nationalists (or at least anti-Pakistan warlords) who could not be used to back the separatist campaign in Indian Kashmir. The offensive purpose was, if possible, to put political and military pressure on Pakistan's western front by reopening the unresolved issue of the Durand Line and by playing on a Pashtun nationalism that had the potential to bring together Pashtuns

in Afghanistan and Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP).⁴ Aiding and abetting local nationalisms (Bengali, Baloch, Sindhi and Pashtun) against radical Islam has been part of India's post-colonial strategy aimed at undercutting Pakistan, a country created by the partitioning of Britain's Indian Empire along religious lines as a "homeland for Indian Muslims". No wonder that India felt defeated when Pakistan successfully managed to bring the Taliban to power in Afghanistan. When fortunes then shifted in the wake of 9/11, the US-backed intervention was seen as an opportunity to prop up the Northern Alliance, which is to say the same forces that India had secretly assisted even after their defeat at the hands of the Taliban. India was promptly rewarded for its support for the US with permission to open four new consulates in Jalalabad, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif and Kandahar. Pakistan has persistently expressed disapproval of these consulates and alleged that they have been used for Indian intelligence activity, while India has argued that they are necessary for monitoring the increasing number of development projects that India supports in Afghanistan.

The huge boost to India's relationship with the Northern Alliance-led government, largely made up of its pre-9/11 ethnic allies inside Afghanistan, has continued. Though the Indian consulates and even the embassy in Kabul have suffered major terror attacks, which Delhi blames on Pakistan's ISI, Delhi has persistently cultivated the relationship. In October 2011, the Indian government signed a strategic partnership agreement with the Afghan government, committing itself to training the Afghan National Army and National Police, investing massively in the Afghan mining, energy, communications, and transportation sectors, and providing an additional aid package of US\$500 million in reconstruction and development projects. As late as November 2020, India signalled its long-term commitment to Afghanistan's future—be it under Taliban or other political forces—by announcing about 150 projects worth US\$80 million (about ₹592 crore) in the conflict-ridden country. New Delhi also agreed to build a new dam, which

will provide drinking water to 2 million residents of Kabul. According to Indian foreign minister S. Jaishankar, “there is no part of Afghanistan today untouched by our 400-plus projects, spread across all the 34 provinces of Afghanistan.”⁵

Since 2002, India has committed US\$3 billion (about ₹2,200 crore) towards rebuilding and reconstruction in Afghanistan. India’s current development programmes in Afghanistan are centred around five pillars: large infrastructure projects, human resource development and capacity building, humanitarian assistance, high-impact community development projects, and enhancing trade and investment through air and land connectivity. Large infrastructure projects completed include the construction of 218 kilometres of road from Delaram to Zaranj on the Iranian border (which provides alternative connectivity for Afghanistan via Iran), Salma dam, and the Afghan Parliament building, which was inaugurated in 2015.

More than 65,000 Afghan students have studied in India under various scholarship programmes and 15,000 students are presently studying here; 3,000 scholarships have so far been granted to young Afghan women to study in India. Going beyond basic education, India has also provided vocational training to a large number of women in Afghanistan. Jaishankar has also said that Afghanistan’s growth has been constrained by its landlocked geography and “we need to address that”—an oblique reference to Pakistan blocking transit access. “Through Chabahar port, we have provided an alternate connectivity to Afghanistan that has helped transport 75,000 tonnes of wheat during the COVID- pandemic. We were also able to send more than 20 tonnes of life-saving medicines and other equipment to address the COVID-19 challenge,” he said.⁶

While India did not invest in Afghanistan during the Taliban years from 1996 to 2001, the government’s recent decision to invest in Afghanistan’s future, where the Taliban is set to play a dominant role, is being seen as a major departure. It signals that India is finally shedding its former hesitancy and preparing to face a situation in which the Taliban will emerge as a very important stakeholder, if not the most important one. The February 2020 agreement is seen in India’s policy-making circles not only as a response to a hasty US withdrawal to be implemented without any consideration for the interests of strategic partners like India, but also as one that raises serious doubts about the future of the present India-friendly Afghan government. India has not agreed to US proposals that it put “boots on the ground” in the form of combat units. One former Indian general has even described the proposals as the “usual American habit of creating a mess and then asking well-meaning allies to clean the shit they leave behind.”⁷

Jaishankar flagged India’s concerns in Afghanistan when the US withdrawal, to which New Delhi has been firmly opposed, became imminent after the 29 February 2020 “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan” between United States and the Taliban laid out a clear timetable for the withdrawal of US and NATO forces.

“(The) increasing level of violence in Afghanistan remains a matter of grave concern. While we support all efforts to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan, India calls for an immediate and comprehensive ceasefire. We also believe that the peace process must be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled. As an important stakeholder, India looks forward to walk hand in hand with the people of

Afghanistan and the world community to work towards a peaceful, prosperous, sovereign, democratic and united Afghanistan.”⁸

INDIA’S SILENT TALIBAN OUTREACH

In a carefully calibrated shift in India’s position, New Delhi participated in the commencement ceremony of the intra-Afghan talks in Doha on September 12, 2020. Indian attendance at the Doha event, where a 21-member Taliban team was present, reflects South Block’s appreciation of the realities on the ground and the shifting sands in Kabul’s power structure. It was significant because it signalled an Indian desire to come to terms with reality and seek to maintain its presence in Afghanistan even after the US-NATO military withdrawal. In early 2020 following sustained violence by Islamist radicals, India closed down two of its consulates in Herat and Jalalabad, but kept those in Kandahar and Mazar-e-Sharif.⁹ But India’s intelligence community has successfully reached out to elements within the Afghan Taliban—especially one of its top leaders and founder Mullah Baradar—in order to secure Indian interests, especially the continuity of its development outreach and to ensure that in a post-US Afghanistan, India’s traditional allies are represented in a possible national government and not marginalized, as pro-Soviet leaders like Najibullah were after the Russian withdrawal.¹⁰ Indian intelligence officers formerly involved in Afghan operations have, on condition of strict anonymity, told the author that this silent outreach will focus on the “nationalist elements” within the Afghan Taliban. It is interesting that Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the leader with whom Indian intelligence has reportedly established contacts, suffered a long eight years in a Pakistan prison (2010-18) because the ISI saw him as a danger to Pakistani interests. Mullah Baradar was actually released, according to media reports, on the request of the Qatar government, which wanted to facilitate the talks between the US and the Afghan Taliban.¹¹

During a webinar on 21 June 2021, Mutlaq bin Majed al-Qahtani, the Qatari foreign minister’s special envoy in the Afghan peace process, confirmed that India was quietly engaged with the Taliban. He said he believed that India was engaging the Taliban not because they might take over the country but because they are an important part of the new power structure, the emerging political set-up there.¹² The author of this paper has personal knowledge of the Taliban outreach project, which is led by National Security Adviser Ajit Kumar Doval and Indian intelligence agencies reporting to him. The Indian ministry of external affairs is in the picture, with its spokesman Arindam Bagchi admitting: “We are in touch with various stakeholders, as I said, in pursuance of our long term commitments towards development and reconstruction of Afghanistan.”¹³

Indian foreign minister S. Jaishankar’s two June 2021 visits to Qatar, the venue of the Afghan peace talks, are evidence of a dual strategy. In the first place, Delhi seems to be using its influence as a top US strategic partner to slow down the American military withdrawal from Afghanistan, stretching it beyond the September 2021 deadline.¹⁴ For this, India is playing on fears in the US strategic community over huge gains made by the Taliban through the violent campaign which it has intensified even while remaining engaged in the Doha peace process. US envoys in Afghanistan have already gone public over Taliban aggression which is seen

as violating the terms of the 2020 agreement.¹⁵ India itself is playing up the Taliban aggression with S. Jaishankar flagging the need for “enduring double peace” in Afghanistan during his address to the UN Security Council on UN assistance to Afghanistan: “For enduring peace in Afghanistan, terrorist safe havens and sanctuaries must be dismantled immediately and terrorist supply chains disrupted. There needs to be zero tolerance to terrorism in all its forms and manifestations including its cross-border manifestations. Afghanistan needs double peace—peace within Afghanistan and peace around Afghanistan. It requires the harmonizing the interests of one and all.”¹⁶ Jaishankar’s “harmonizing the interests of one and all” points to Delhi’s reconciling itself with conceding the fact of the Taliban being a part of the future Afghan power structure, but his insistence on “zero tolerance to terrorism” emphasizes India’s core concern over possible exports of Islamist radical terror to Indian Kashmir, where the Modi government is involved in fresh political engineering through a possible restoration of the statehood that was nullified two years ago. That the Taliban is already in control of 50 out of the 370 districts in Afghanistan and that more areas are being taken over by the radical Islamist group makes it important for India to deal with them in order to protect the substantial number of development projects. This has seemed all the more urgent in light of a new US intelligence assessment suggesting that the Afghan government could collapse within six months of the US military withdrawal.¹⁷

INDIAN OBJECTIVES & OPTIONS

Broadly, India’s present objectives in Afghanistan look set to include:

- Preventing Afghanistan from being used as a base for Pakistan to train and kick-start terror attacks against Indian cities or boost the separatist campaign in Indian Kashmir;
- Weakening and limiting Pakistani and Taliban influence over Afghan politics and boosting its own influence by promoting Afghan nationalism or the sub-nationalism of smaller ethnic groups to counter-balance forces of radical Islam promoted by Pakistan;
- Establishing a transport network to access oil- and gas-rich regions of Central Asia via Afghanistan through pipeline projects for greater energy security.

Moreover, India, as a major regional power, will surely aim to:

- Reinforce its sphere of influence across South and Central Asia;
- Maintain a high level of political influence in Afghan politics, especially by promoting Afghan nationalism as a larger entity;
- Deliver financial aid in order to maintain some sort of economic influence over the Afghan economy to secure access to its mineral and other resources, although in a much more benign way compared to China’s aggressive extraction-driven diplomacy;
- Promote Indian soft power (cricket, Bollywood, IT education, and more) to create India-friendly perceptions in Afghanistan.

The three real options for India in the dynamic, fast changing Afghan scenario are as follows:

India has to work for a future “national government” in Afghanistan but one in which not only India’s traditional friends but also the Afghan Taliban is represented. Since there is no way the Taliban can be denied a role in a post-

US Afghanistan, India has to develop close links with the “nationalist elements” within the Afghan Taliban and secure from them promises that will align with the defence of Indian interests, especially its large number of development projects, but also the security of its diplomats, engineers, and development professionals. However, there is no way that India can overlook the interests of its traditional allies, especially among the Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara and even the Pashtun communities. In post-US negotiations, India must therefore present itself as a balancer, protecting the interests of those in the present Afghan government even as it gets them to accommodate the Taliban. How can India not be mindful of the need to protect the likes of Vice President Amrullah Saleh, the former National Security Adviser, whom India counts as its strongest ally in Afghanistan!

India has to work closely with Russia, Iran and even China for peace and stability within Afghanistan, ensuring there is no major eruption of a fresh phase of the civil war that has plagued Afghanistan since the Soviet withdrawal. Delhi’s major option lies in Indian peace diplomacy in the form of a possible Gandhi Peace Mission in both Afghanistan and Myanmar, and working for the restoration of democracy in the latter. Afghans are suffering war fatigue—so presenting them with prospects for peace will likely be effective.

India will ultimately have to open peace talks with Pakistan and factor Afghanistan into them, because without securing a firm guarantee that Pakistan will desist from backing violence and terrorism, no durable solution to the Afghan problem is possible. Pakistan worried about increasing violence in Balochistan and NWFP, and in the future possibly also in Sindh, may finally agree to drop its “avenge 1971” agenda and make peace with India on Afghanistan. The Central Asia-India pipeline through Pakistan which holds huge revenue prospects for a crumbling Pakistan economy may prompt Islamabad to abandon “jihad backing” as state policy in both Afghanistan and India.

India realizes that it has no military options in Afghanistan. Its army is too thinly stretched across the borders with China and Pakistan (and in internal security operations in Kashmir and the Northeast) for a “boots on the ground” operation in Afghanistan. Its covert operational capability may help to counter Pakistan’s aggressive Afghan policy, but the only real option India has in the war-torn country is “peace diplomacy” that brings together various stakeholders to rebuild the country from the ravages of war. The prospect of a civil war between the present Afghan government and the Taliban has to be avoided at all costs and a regional consensus seems to be emerging. Even China had reservations about a sudden US withdrawal and worries about the Taliban influence on its Muslim dissidents in Xinjiang. If there has to be an “Asian century”, it cannot be ushered in by a Cold War in Asia. Asian powers like China and India have to get their act together and start with making peace durable in Afghanistan. This is their first real test of statesmanship.

Subir Bhaumik is a veteran BBC and Reuters Correspondent in South Asia and author of five books on the region. He is a former Fellow at Oxford and Frankfurt universities and at the East-West Centre, Washington. He is now editorial director of www.theeasternlink.com.

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