

NEW ALIGNMENTS, OLD BATTLEFIELD: REVISITING INDIA'S ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN

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Afghanistan is transitioning from one crisis to another. It has moved from being a place where extremists coexisted and used terrorism to gain a political voice on a national and international scale, to a place where radical ideologues are fighting for dominance and external powers' priorities diverge. This raises questions about India's long-standing approach to the country.

India's Afghanistan policy, especially after the 1979 Soviet invasion, has worked on the premise that an external friendly power would do the heavy lifting in Afghanistan's security and political sector. India, meanwhile, would invest in soft sectors, such as infrastructure development, and would limit its involvement in the security domain. In the 1990s, India's Afghanistan policy was tied to Iran and Russia, and a regional alignment between the three states was strategically viable. Though the states had differences, they supported the United Front of the so-called Northern Alliance against the Taliban. This allowed India to avoid direct involvement in the conflict.

That was potentially an acceptable choice when other major actors involved were behaving in line with India's interests and aims. But today, the context is different. Russia's and Iran's approaches are no longer in accord with India's. Russia's ongoing outreach to the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan has raised concerns that

Moscow could be deviating from earlier approaches that it had shared with India. Moscow and Tehran are challenging India's advocacy of an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and Afghan-controlled reconciliation process. India relies on U.S. support to Kabul for maintaining stability, and it is largely focused on what it views as the threat from Pakistan. But whether the United States can be relied on is an open question, and India's stance on Pakistan puts it at odds with Iran and Russia.

This shifting context means that India should start to rethink its long-held stances on Afghanistan, and take an active role in shaping the diplomatic approach to the conflict.

POST-SOVIET AFGHANISTAN

Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the country witnessed polarization along religious, tribal, and ethnic lines with the emergence

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of a multipolar and multicausal civil war. The rise of the Taliban by 1996, and its support of international jihadi organizations including al-Qaeda, was viewed as a threat by most regional powers except Pakistan, which was confident about its tenuous but persistent hold over the regime.

India's Afghanistan policy in the 1990s was dependent on external powers. As Lalit Mansingh, former foreign secretary of India from 1999 to 2000, said:

“We [India] discovered that we could play a security role during the Taliban period when the Northern Alliance was formed. And since Russia and Iran were on the same page, we were very comfortable in giving military assistance. But then we didn't have to worry about the routes because we had the active support of the Iranians. Therefore, getting military supplies across to the Northern Alliance was not a big problem. . . . But the fact is that it also acknowledges that India can't work alone. India by itself cannot play a major role in the security situation of Afghanistan.”¹

India, Russia, and Iran thus found common ground in the 1990s. All of them viewed the United States as an unwelcome power in the region. Russian relations with the United States were marked by Cold War rivalry. India found U.S. support for Pakistan as a major cause of concern. And postrevolutionary Iran's relations with the West were deeply tormented for political and religious reasons.

All three countries also viewed the Taliban as a threat to their domestic security. For Iran, a Saudi-supported Sunni regime on its eastern flank was anathema. Moscow was concerned that the Taliban's consolidation of power in Afghanistan with support from al-Qaeda could strengthen Islamist movements in Chechnya. India viewed the Taliban as a Pakistan-sponsored entity that could exacerbate the ongoing insurgency in Kashmir.

After the United Nations failed to broker peace among the different warring factions in Afghanistan, Iran seized the initiative to conduct an international conference on the conflict in 1996. The then Iranian president, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, refused to entertain Pakistan's calls to isolate India from the conference, causing Islamabad to boycott the event.² About a week earlier, Indian president K. R. Narayanan had visited Tehran to discuss Afghanistan and Kashmir and found a receptive audience.³

There were strong grounds for India-Iran bonding. Former Pakistan president Zia-ul-Haq and successive leaders in Islamabad proactively tried but were ultimately unsuccessful in preventing the deepening of India-Iran ties.⁴ Rafsanjani's April 1995 visit and Iranian foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati's January 1996 visit to India proved critical in cementing ideas on a variety of strategic issues. The visit strengthened perceptions of a U.S.-Pakistan nexus that might be detrimental to India's interests. Relations between Tehran and Washington, too, were tense after the former acquired nuclear reactors from Moscow and denounced the Taliban as a U.S. creation abetted by Islamabad.⁵ Meanwhile, the Taliban's rise in Afghanistan and the ongoing Shia militancy within Pakistan restricted the normalization of relations between Islamabad and Tehran.⁶ India's diplomatic support to Iran during the mid- and late 1990s was further highlighted in India's refusal to accept the United States' efforts to link Iran with terrorism.⁷

For its part, Moscow threatened to use force against the Taliban, which boosted India's, Iran's, and Russia's strategic convergence on Afghanistan. In October 1996, Vladimir Lukin, international adviser to then Russian president Boris Yeltsin, said that brazen U.S. interference in Afghan affairs to counter Iran was “primitive and short-sighted.”⁸ Moscow was anxious about the Taliban's emergence as a dominant force.

Moscow had recently lost the First Chechen War, and had just about managed to facilitate a tenuous ceasefire in the bloody Nagorno-Karabakh war. With the Tajik Civil War far from resolution and the Georgian Civil War fresh in its memory, Moscow was determined in its anti-Taliban intent. Moscow had already stationed a division of troops in Tajikistan near the Afghan border.

Also in October 1996, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, and Russia met in Almaty to discuss regional stability and security. They concluded that the Taliban was a direct threat to the domestic stability and national interests of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) members as well as the region. The CIS members were less concerned about a heavier Russian military presence on their soil in the wake of the Taliban's rise.⁹ They were open to a negotiated settlement with the Taliban, but they had limited say in the final outcome of the meeting. Turkmenistan, at the time, supplied energy to the Taliban and was firm on remaining on good terms with all stakeholders in Afghanistan to ensure safe passage of oil pipelines for which U.S. and Argentinian firms (Unocal and Bidas) were actively lobbying.¹⁰

The CIS appealed to the Taliban to cease its military activities at the Almaty meeting, threatening to give an “adequate response” if this did not take place.¹¹ The Indian Ministry of External Affairs wholeheartedly endorsed the outcome of the meeting, seeking to continue enjoying Russian support.

There was a catch though. Indian policymakers were undecided about whether to reach out to the Taliban or not—even if unofficially. The Taliban's capture of the city of Mazar-i-Sharif in May 1997 shook India's faith in its own policy of boycotting the Taliban.

A few days after the city fell, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs came out with a cautious statement

that the “new situation is entirely within the domestic sphere of Afghanistan.” It also said that Afghans have a right to decide their future “free from outside influence and interference.”¹²

Soon thereafter, Indian media reported that the government sought to open a channel with the Taliban.¹³ According to the report, a fast-emerging and dominant view in the ministry was that India will “have to deal with the reality in Afghanistan” for its “long term national interest.”¹⁴ Officials had privately started admitting that India's Afghanistan policy over the last year had been set back.¹⁵ And it quickly became apparent that the Taliban was keen on engaging with India.

Engagement with the Taliban, however, could have cost India diplomatic support on Kashmir and jeopardized other material benefits that were accruing given its various defense and energy deals with Russia, the CIS, and Iran. India, thus, continued to depend on Iran and Russia to set the tone on Afghanistan and did not reach out to the Taliban.

AFGHANISTAN TODAY

External military intervention came to Afghanistan again just a few years later. Since 2001, the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and its successor have tried and failed to build Afghan state institutions and defeat the Taliban militarily. With support from across the border in Pakistan, the Taliban launched a potent insurgency against Western forces that persists as of mid-2017.

In Afghanistan after ISAF, many of the above-mentioned cleavages remain, but the country is witnessing something fundamentally different from the situation in the 1990s. Instead of being a safe haven for, and springboard of, radical ideologies

comfortable in the use of terrorism as a political tool, Afghanistan is becoming a site of contestation of such ideologies. Unlike the 1990s, when a confident Taliban leadership accepted the presence of al-Qaeda on Afghan soil despite complaints from its cadre, it is much more circumspect today.

As the internal ideological contestation has ramped up, the self-proclaimed Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISK) has gained prominence. The Afghanistan expert Antonio Giustozzi noted in a recent talk at King's College London that the aim of ISK is to create a "sub-brand" of the Islamic State in Afghanistan. ISK is not projecting itself as a partner of the Taliban, but as a better, more puritanical, and more violent alternative. The group offers better prospects both financially and ideologically to armed youth, having raised nearly \$271 million in 2016.¹⁶ It is then not surprising that the ISK has attracted various breakaway factions from the Afghan and the Pakistani Taliban, along with China-focused groups. As of 2017, estimates of the total number of ISK fighters have gone down from an alleged 6,000–8,000 to about 1,000–1,500.¹⁷

The direction this entity will follow in the future is unclear, but it has complicated Afghanistan's insurgent Islamist landscape. The underlying structural inadequacies of the Afghan state and deep societal divisions remain. The emergence of the ISK in combination with internal rifts within the Kabul government, and a deeply fragmented Taliban coupled with an acutely unpredictable Washington, is a phenomenon without historical parallel.

Moreover, the strategic intent of both Russia and Iran is different than it was in the 1990s, complicating India's position. Their aim is to undermine the United States and reassert their leadership in Afghanistan. Neither country enjoys good relations with Washington. If anything, U.S. President Donald Trump's rhetoric on Tehran risks undermining the

gains from the 2015 U.S.-Iran nuclear deal that brought some hope of normalcy to the relationship.¹⁸ Russia's relations with the United States continue to be strained, especially since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and Moscow's military involvement in the Syrian Civil War.

Russia is concerned about the Islamist expansion driven by the ISK, but it is not opposed to Pakistan's role in Afghanistan anymore. Given the ISK and the Taliban's ongoing rivalry for dominance over Afghanistan's militant landscape, Moscow finds it valuable to develop good relations with Islamabad, which has some degree of influence over the Taliban's leadership. Russia's increasingly strong relations with China,¹⁹ especially in the wake of the Belt and Road Initiative, add strategic synergy to its bonhomie with Islamabad.²⁰

Russia's presidential envoy to Kabul, Zamir Kabulov, has candidly stated that Russia and the Afghan Taliban's interests were "objectively" aligned in fighting this new entity on the Afghan militant landscape.²¹ The China-Russia-Pakistan trilateral meeting in December 2016 sought to hammer out specifics of jointly countering ISK, and added weight to Kabulov's statement.²² In April, U.S. officials blamed Russia for arming the Afghan Taliban covertly.²³

Iran's proactive engagement with and material support to select Afghan Taliban factions further complicates the situation. Far from being opposed to contact with the Sunni Taliban, Tehran has succeeded in cultivating it.

Given Russia's consistently troubled relations with the United States, Moscow's "objective alignment" with the Afghan Taliban, ostensibly in the wake of an exaggerated threat perception from ISK,²⁴ is a tactic to further undermine already failing U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan. Iran's engagement with the Afghan Taliban can also be attributed to its historically strained relationship with

the United States (despite the U.S.-Iran nuclear deal) as well as to Tehran's desire to maintain influence over political groups that might one day become part of the Kabul government.

Kabul's near-existential dependence on U.S. financial and military support, Washington's estrangement from Moscow and Tehran, the Afghan Taliban's increasing influence over vast swaths of Afghan territory, Russia and Iran's support to the Taliban coupled with Pakistan's historical support for the movement, and the rise of ISK are all factors that have severely complicated the political situation in and around Afghanistan.

India, meanwhile, emphasizes Pakistan's role in Afghanistan. It is also unwilling to engage with the Afghan Taliban beyond covert contacts, and it uncritically supports the Kabul government. What is more, New Delhi relies too heavily on the sustained U.S. security presence.

These Indian positions stand at odds with both Iranian and Russian policy trajectories today. The consensus from the 1990s between those countries that the perceived Taliban-Pakistan-U.S. troika was harmful to their national interests does not exist anymore to help bind them together. Indian spies and diplomats have been unable to convince Moscow and Tehran that the real problem in Afghanistan lies across the Durand Line, in Pakistan.²⁵ Many in Moscow are keen to continue undermining U.S. efforts because they believe that, just like the mujahideen in the 1980s and the Taliban in the 1990s, ISK is an U.S. creation. Tehran, for its part, is concerned about ISK's links with Saudi Arabia and Qatar and wants to keep developing its leverage over the Taliban. Russia and Iran's collaboration in Syria makes it highly unlikely that the two would part ways in Afghanistan on India's urging. Yet by insisting that ISK is a creation of the Pakistani Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence, New Delhi has lost place among its former regional allies.

INDIA'S WAY FORWARD

Not least because of the divergent priorities of external powers such as Russia, Iran, and the United States, it is sound diplomatic practice for India to try to shape the contours of dialogue with the Afghan Taliban, regardless of who brokers this dialogue. It will allow India to support its partners in Kabul in maintaining an upper hand at the negotiation table, and ensure India's policy aim of maintaining a strategic balance between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Some progress has been made on this front. India's National Security Adviser Ajit Doval's five-hour meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin's team in January 2017 ensured that India was invited to the six-party talks on Afghanistan in February.²⁶ Russia reassured India that redlines such as shunning violence, abiding by the Afghan constitution, and cutting ties with al-Qaeda will be prerequisites for negotiating with the Afghan Taliban.

This diplomatic approach, however, will require India to shed its traditional reluctance to officially talk to the Afghan Taliban. There are enough indications that not all Afghan Taliban factions are Pakistan's proxies, not all Taliban are hostile toward India, and many of them do not actively support Kashmir-centric militants. If anything, the Afghan Taliban is deeply wary of hosting global jihadists today, after having paid the price of hosting Osama bin Laden in the 1990s.

The most attractive policy option for New Delhi in the near term is to couple its diplomatic approach with continuing developmental support to Afghanistan. Critically, this would allow India to ensure its presence in Afghanistan without undermining the gains of the last fifteen years, regardless of whichever power leads the reconciliation process.

Indian officials commonly ask what they should talk to the Taliban about, arguing that the movement just

wants to consolidate power for itself.²⁷ That is true. But power is highly contested in Afghanistan. If anything, Iran and Russia's engagement with the Afghan Taliban shows how these countries are competing for influence and contributing to the diversification of the movement's options beyond Pakistan.

The other question often raised in India is related to whom exactly should New Delhi talk to in the Taliban.²⁸ The assumption behind such a question is that the Afghan Taliban is a binary movement, with factions that depend on Pakistan's support and are powerful on the ground and with factions that are trying to carve an independent political space for themselves (from Qatar, for instance) but are powerless on the ground. While contact with the former is considered anathema and contradictory to India's desire for a strong and stable Afghanistan, engagement with the latter is considered strategically pointless.

Breaking from this analytical trap of viewing Afghanistan from a Pakistan-centric lens will be a challenge for New Delhi. Just as engagement with the Afghan Taliban is not an exercise in embracing the movement to the detriment of Kabul, neither is avoiding contact with the movement an effective strategy to contain its destabilizing influence to Kabul's benefit.

India can either undertake a similar enterprise of working with Russia and Iran to engage with the Afghan Taliban, or wait for the situation to settle and then take that diplomatic leap forward.

The United States is a wild card in all of this. Given the bureaucratic confusion in Washington, it is unlikely

that the United States will play as decisive a role in Afghanistan in the coming years. In fact, it is likely that the United States could request that India pitch in its share in Afghanistan by putting boots on the ground. Such a request could prove very costly for India, as it has no appetite to station Indian troops in Afghanistan.

On this front, India could learn from its own past errors. In 1989, Indian security agencies assessed that with Soviet support, Mohammad Najibullah—Afghanistan's president at the time—would last for years to come. New Delhi had failed to grasp the fragility of the Soviet Union itself. In April 1992, Indian diplomats in Kabul felt the pinch of this analytical error when they failed to exfiltrate Najibullah to security and exile in India. President Trump's domestic troubles and foreign policy incoherence should set off alarm bells in New Delhi on the Afghan question. Trump could work with Russia, China, and Pakistan (if not Iran) to reach a compromise on Afghanistan. Or he could let Afghanistan go completely. More likely is that he would increase the number of U.S. combat troops, as sought by his security advisers, to ebb the Afghan Taliban's military momentum.²⁹ Though enticing in the near term, it is exactly this situation that India should be most concerned about. More U.S. troops will offer a tempting but temporary respite.

The only solution to the Afghan conflict is a political one. An open-minded approach by India vis-à-vis regional cooperation can help secure the gains of the previous fifteen years, and inch closer to an end to the Afghan conflict.

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