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India and Afghanistan: Constructing Strategic Options

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The American evacuation of Afghanistan is one factor that has freed up space for India to manoeuvre vis-à-vis Afghanistan. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

SYNOPSIS

The fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021 initially alarmed many in India, who saw it as a major strategic victory for Pakistan. Since then, however, recognition that India has several levers to keep the diplomatic pressure on the Taliban regime has led to more optimistic assessments of the longer-term implications of the Taliban's re-emergence for India.

COMMENTARY

The Taliban's ability to wrest control of Kabul in mid-August 2021 surprised and alarmed several governments. India's leaders seemed particularly stunned, and Indian analysts bemoaned the grave setback to broader Indian interests. The event was viewed as a major victory for Pakistan, with comparisons drawn to the Taliban victory in 1996. China's seeming public endorsement of the Taliban's seizure of power in Kabul further entrenched this view within India.

Following these early apprehensions, however, there have been more sanguine observations on the longer-term implications for India arising from the Taliban's capture of Kabul. These can be grouped into three main points. The first relates to India's expanded options in the context of the changing geopolitics within the Middle East as they relate to Afghanistan. The second speaks to the change in Pakistan's role within the United States' regional strategic calculus. The third observation relates to the challenges involved in constructing a new political settlement in Afghanistan, which could work to India's advantage by the hold-up of international recognition for the Taliban.

India's Expanded Outreach in the Middle East: Enlarging Strategic Options

In 1996, when the Taliban first took control of Kabul, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), together with Pakistan, were the only states to recognise the government it set up. Until the US invasion in 2001, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE continued to support the Taliban regime. Now, in a marked realignment, Saudi Arabia has withheld recognition of the new Taliban regime in Kabul, while Qatar has been hosting Taliban elements in Doha since the 2010s, and in the run-up to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan even served as intermediary between the group and the United States.

India's outreach in recent years towards the states in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, has broadened its diplomatic options in Afghanistan as compared to its position in 1996. Saudi Arabia and the UAE share certain Indian apprehensions about the Taliban, and this could allow India to be part of broad regional coalitions exerting pressure on the Taliban with respect to the hosting and training of various terrorist groups targeting India, specifically in Indian-administered Kashmir. Indian leaders will attempt to harness India's multipronged outreach in the Middle East since 2014, exploiting cleavages and uncertainties in the region to its advantage. India has been able to upgrade its bilateral relationship with Israel, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar at the same time and this will provide India with some influence among states in the Middle East that share, to varying extents, concerns about the Taliban regime in Kabul.

Pakistan's Diminished Leverage with the United States

The United States, since the 1990s, has increasingly decoupled its relationship with India from its relationship with Pakistan. Indian leaders nonetheless felt that the US need for Pakistani assistance in Afghanistan frequently came at India's cost. The United States, while sympathetic to Indian concerns about Pakistan's alleged sponsorship and training of terrorists operating in India, was mindful of pushing

Pakistan too hard. It was concerned that such pressure would adversely affect US goals in Afghanistan. However, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has dramatically reduced the influence Pakistan may have had on US foreign policy, specifically in relation to Indian concerns about alleged Pakistani support for various terrorist outfits.

India will see these changed circumstances as an opportunity to marshal global opinion against Pakistan, in the hope of imposing economic costs on the latter via organisations such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). India expects that the United States, significantly less encumbered by considerations related to Afghanistan, will demonstrate greater appreciation for Indian concerns as it works to develop closer US-India strategic ties in the context of addressing the challenge posed by China. This could mean that if India were to exercise a broader range of military options against Pakistan, in retaliation for terrorist attacks in India judged to be sponsored by Pakistan, the United States would be unlikely to react vehemently.

Legitimacy as a Tool for Leverage

India's early anxiety relating to possible international recognition for the Taliban government has been largely allayed. In fact, the unveiling of an interim government by the Taliban in September 2021 exposed divisions within the group rather than speeding up international recognition of the regime. Up till now, no country has formally recognised the Taliban government, and this has been an unexpected, albeit small, diplomatic victory for India. India has used this interregnum to attempt to influence the conditions under which the Taliban regime should receive international recognition as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. It has asked for assurances that Afghanistan will not be used as a base for terrorist activities, and concrete guarantees that gender and ethnic and religious minority rights will be respected through the establishment of an inclusive government.

India potentially can achieve two positive outcomes from this approach. Firstly, it holds any future Taliban government accountable to key international actors for ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a recruitment and training base for terrorist acts within India. This, obviously, is a key concern. India's ability to convene a meeting in New Delhi of some of Afghanistan's neighbours (sans Pakistan, which refused to attend) to discuss developments in Afghanistan — just a day before the so-called Troika Plus meeting on Afghanistan involving the United States, Russia, China and Pakistan — demonstrates India's determination to influence developments within the country. The Delhi Declaration emanating from this meeting pushes the Taliban to disavow terrorism and radicalisation within Afghanistan, as well as to guarantee minority rights in the framework of a more inclusive government.

Secondly, through this process, India hopes to exploit intra-Taliban differences as well as encourage Afghan groups opposed to the Taliban. India recognises the diplomatic necessity of some degree of engagement with the Taliban and has held both formal and informal talks with the group — the last formal talks being in September 2021 in Qatar — but it has concluded that Pakistan's grip on the Taliban will remain into the near future. In India's longer-term plan, engaging the Taliban will have limited benefits. Instead, India will aim to coordinate greater international pressure on the Taliban as well as promote greater opposition to the Taliban interim government, both from within the Taliban itself and outside it.

Displaced but Not Out

The capture of Kabul by the Taliban in August 2021 dealt a considerable blow to India's position within Afghanistan. However, despite being displaced from being able to directly influence events in Afghanistan, India can still indirectly influence the future complexion of Afghanistan's politics. India has attempted to convene a loose caucus of Afghanistan's neighbours and extra-regional powers to apply diplomatic pressure on the Taliban regime by leveraging on common fears about terrorism and radicalisation. India's efforts to lead and organise regional and international efforts in holding the Taliban to certain commitments allow it to create conditions for divisions within the Taliban as well as credible opposition to it domestically. Given current circumstances, this strategy allows India an opportunity to influence ongoing events in Afghanistan, albeit indirectly, and the flexibility to respond more directly, if needed, should circumstances in Afghanistan change.

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