



As Taliban Marches towards Kabul, India's Biggest Fear May Be Realised

As the Taliban accumulates more districts and advances towards Kabul, the Indian government grows more impatient that its influence in Kabul will be greatly diminished. For years, New Delhi has supported the Afghan government with money, weapons and expertise, and paid very little attention to the Taliban movement and their supporters. Now India is clambering to open a dialogue with the Taliban, which is part of new drive by Modi to retain influence in the war torn country. There are three reasons why India is extremely concerned by the rise of the Taliban.

First, the Hindu elite is very much mindful of the fact that historically Afghanistan has on numerous occasions launched forays deep into India to established Islamic rule. During Mahmud Ghazni's (971-1030) reign in Afghanistan, India was invaded seventeen times to expand the territory of his sultanate, collect tributary and enforce Islamic law and order. He also destroyed famous idols of Somnath, Kangra, Mathura and Jwalamukhi to make Hindus realize that their idols were powerless to protect them and that refuge could only be found in tawheed. The Ghurid Sultanate (1175-1206) conducted seven incursions into India to uphold Sharia law in places like Anhilwara, Thanesar, Chandawar, Multan and Lahore. Even the famous Delhi Sultanate (1206 to 1526) that ruled large parts of India for 320 years had its origins in Afghanistan. Its founder Qutb ud-Din Aibak was a slave general under the command of the Ghurid Sultanate. Finally, the whole of India was brought under Islamic rule during the Mughal Sultanate (1526-1857). Baber - the founder of the Mughal Sultanate - established himself in Kabul first before traversing the Khyber Pass to defeat Ibrahim Lodhi at Panipat. After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the Durrani Sultanate with its base in Afghanistan intervened in Punjab several times to restore Islamic order. Hence, the threat of invasion from Afghanistan takes huge prominence in the minds of the Hindu elite.

Second, this historical context combined with the threat of Pakistan has driven Indian policy towards supporting the nascent Afghan government post September 11, 2001. Furthermore, America's embracement of India to counter China added extra impetus in New Delhi to shore up the government in Kabul. India has invested a total of \$3 billion in dams, roads, infrastructure and trade over the past two decades in the country. In 2011, India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement recommitted Indian assistance to Afghanistan's reconstruction efforts and bilateral trade, which today is worth \$1.5 billion. Besides the reconstruction effort, India also trained and equipped Afghan security forces and used its network of consulates to conduct covert operations in Baluchistan. Even as the Taliban gather momentum to launch an assault on Kabul, India is still ferrying arms to the Afghan army. On July 16th an Indian Air Force (IAF) C-17 aircraft arrived at Kandahar Airfield to deliver 40 tons of 122mm artillery shells. The Taliban in the past have reacted vehemently to such developments and hitherto have rebuffed Indian overtures at peace. Suhail Shaheen,

a spokesperson for the group said, “We have reports from our commanders that India is providing weapons to the other side. How is it possible that they want to talk to the Taliban but practically they are providing weapons, drones, everything to Kabul? This is contradictory.” India’s main objective behind these measures is to ensure Afghanistan remains secular and to prevent an Islamic takeover of the country.

Third, after the humiliation of Kargil in 1999 and the displacement of the Taliban from power in December 2001, India’s military doctrine and foreign policy in Afghanistan underwent several revisions. Elements of this strategy took into account the loss of Pakistan’s strategic depth—due to America’s defeat of the Taliban and the establishment of a new government in Kabul based on the contours of the Bonn Conference. Today, India’s political calculus rests on nurturing a hostile environment on Pakistan’s Western and Eastern borders, and entrapping Pakistan between Afghan and Indian security forces. This almost resulted in armed conflict between the two nuclear powers in the early 2000s, until the US intervened to calm the situation down. Nevertheless, a hostile Afghanistan opposed to any reconciliation with Pakistan remained the mainstay of Indian policy for the past twenty years. However, the spectacular gains made by the Taliban recently risks upending this strategic logic as the prospects of Pakistan re-establishing its strategic depth in Afghanistan looks closer than any time in the past twenty years. This comes at a worse possible time for New Delhi because India faces growing militarization along its border with China and has faced hot skirmishes with the Peoples Liberation Army at Laddakh. Consequently, India is clambering to open channels with the Taliban to ascertain to what degree adjustments have to be made to its military doctrine and foreign policy in Afghanistan.

The Afghans defeated the British in 1862, the Soviets in 1989 and the Americans in 2021. Under such circumstances India will not send troops dreading a similar fate. India also fears that the Taliban will ascend to power in Kabul. But the Hindu elite’s biggest apprehension is for Islamist to take power in Islamabad and then proceed to unify Pakistan and Afghanistan under banner of the shahada. This will not only spell the end of India’s belligerence towards Muslims, but also accelerate the Islamisation of India and the establishment of Sharia law in the sub-continent.

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