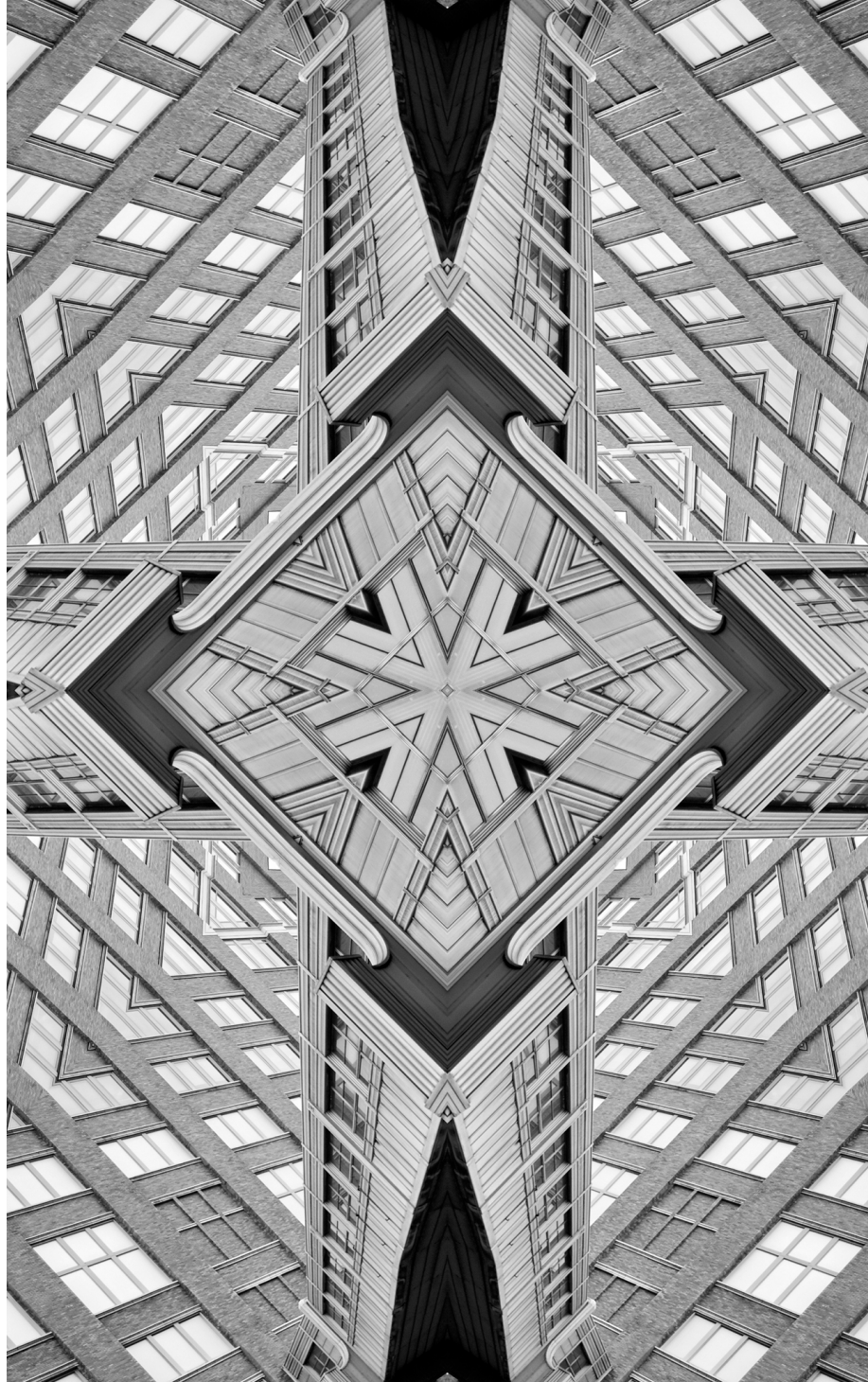


Issue

Brief

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India's Stakes in Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan

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Abstract

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 changed the strategic dynamics in the region. For India, the new regime and its attendant risks—especially the threat of terrorism—quickly put it in an unenviable position. This brief assesses India's policy towards Afghanistan since August 2021. It will cover how India has articulated its Afghan policy, domestically and in multilateral organisations, and its incremental engagements with the Emirate. This brief argues that while India has shown no inclination to recognise the regime, it will continue to engage pragmatically with the group in a limited manner and simultaneously help augment the capacities of the Afghan people through aid. Moving forward, New Delhi's ability to retain its influence in the region and secure its interests will depend on whether it can work with other regional actors and gradually formulate a more stable and less ad-hoc policy towards Kabul.

India-Afghanistan Relations: An Overview

Afghanistan has historically been a theatre of great-power politics, from the British colonial period to when the United States (US) launched its ‘War on Terror’ in the early 2000s. India, owing to its strategic location straddling Pakistan and Iran and other Central Asian Republics (CARs), has had a keen perception of the threat of terrorism emanating from the region. When Kabul fell to the Taliban in August 2021, India was compelled to rethink its policy towards its western neighbour.

Irrespective of the regime in power in Afghanistan, India has always helped stabilise the country and projected itself as an influential actor in the region. While India’s development support to the country tapered off when the Soviet Union invaded the country in 1979, in the decades since the War on Terror was launched in 2001, it has focused more on the development partnership aspect of the relationship. This approach was facilitated by the presence of the US security umbrella in Kabul. Between 2001 and 2021, India had more than 500 projects spread across Afghanistan’s 34 provinces, covering various critical sectors in development, reconstruction, and capacity-building.¹ India swiftly became one of the country’s biggest development partners, providing more than US\$3 billion in aid in the same period.

India’s presence in the country became more ubiquitous over those years. Helping it win the trust and support of the Afghan people are the education ties: More than 60,000 Afghan students have completed their studies in India in the past 16 years, with many obtaining scholarships from the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) for their college education.

Initial Response to Kabul's Fall

As fighting intensified in Afghanistan and it appeared that the Taliban were capturing more cities, India organised a consultation on 6 August 2021 as president of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), calling on the implementation of “double peace”^a in Afghanistan. It called on the Taliban to respect the peace talks and sever all ties with other international terrorist groups like the Al-Qaeda. India also called for the dismantling of terror supply chains and their safe havens and expressed its support for a sovereign, democratic and peaceful Afghanistan.²

On 26 August, a terrorist attack at the Hamid Karzai International Airport killed some 300 civilians and 28 military personnel. The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) took ownership for the attack, reinforcing India's fears about the proliferation of terror sanctuaries in the country.³ Framing terrorism as a regional problem, India's initiatives to counter the threat have focused on forging bridges between its partners and cooperating on counterterrorism.⁴

Following the fall of Kabul, India's presidency of the UNSC put its envoy in a tight spot. With the Taliban accelerating their gains in the country, it had become incumbent on the international community to take decisive action to manage the crisis. For India, the passage of Resolution 2593 was an important highlight of its presidency.⁵ The Resolution urged the international community to ensure that Afghanistan is not used as a base to launch an attack on another country, nor should it act as a shelter or financier. It also called on all parties to seek an “inclusive, negotiated political settlement, with the full, equal and meaningful participation of women.”⁶ As per then Foreign Secretary, Harsh Vardhan Shringla, the resolution specifically referred to the Lashkar-e-Taiyaba (LeT) and the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) terrorist groups.⁷ Aimed at building a consensus among the international community and the regional actors, the resolution became the basis of India's policy—i.e., “guiding the collective approach of the global community towards Afghanistan.”⁸ At the G20 Extraordinary Summit on Afghanistan in October 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged the G20 countries to seek accountability from the Taliban on the basis of Resolution 2593.⁹

a In his statement in the UNSC, Ambassador T.S. Tirumati, India's Permanent Representative to the UN outlined the importance of ‘double peace’, i.e. “peace within Afghanistan and peace around Afghanistan”. See: <https://press.un.org/en/2021/sc14604.doc.htm>

Initial Response to Kabul's Fall

As UNSC president, India used its discretion to bar Pakistan from attending the Council's consultations on Afghanistan. While both Russia and China abstained from voting on Resolution 2593—saying it failed to address their concerns—it was still a success for New Delhi. The resolution also showed a subtle shift in India's earlier reticence about recognising Taliban's new role in the country. Showing a pragmatic acceptance of the Taliban's role as security provider in the country from thereon, it noted the Taliban's commitment to allow for the safe passage of both Afghan and foreign nationals wanting to leave the country and urged the "relevant parties" to work with international partners to strengthen security. This tacit acknowledgement of the Taliban's new role was also evident in the press statement of 27 August which preceded the resolution. In a break from the statement passed on 16 August which still considered the Taliban as one of the actors supporting terror inside Afghanistan,¹⁰ the 27 August statement dropped the reference to the Taliban's support to other terror outfits.¹¹

According to some analysts, such a shift was in response to increasing pressure from China.¹² India could either withhold the release of the statement or agree to Beijing's ask. Compelled by the gravity of the situation and the urgent need to act, the press statement was passed and the reference deleted from other subsequent communications. There emerged a perceptible shift from the Taliban being one of the groups that could inflict terrorism to being tasked with ensuring that no other groups use the Afghan territory to facilitate terrorist attacks.¹³

India's Aid and Assistance to Afghanistan

As fighting intensified in Afghanistan in the months of July and August, India shut its consulate in Kandahar, evacuated its diplomats and personnel, and stopped operations at its consulates in Herat and Jalalabad. While the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) was taking stock of how best to respond to the looming political crisis, its response to the security crisis was swift. The immediate priorities for New Delhi were the safe evacuation of some 1,500 Indian nationals in Afghanistan, including government officials.¹⁴ While initially there was no formal evacuation mechanism and security advisories¹⁵ were released asking people to leave the country through commercial flights, *Operation Devi Shakti* began from 16 August and repatriated 669 people, of which 206 were Afghans. A 24X7 Special Afghanistan Cell of the MEA was set up to bridge the government and the Indians and Afghan minorities stranded in Afghanistan. In the month of August alone, the cell responded to 3,436 phone calls, 9,581 WhatsApp messages, and 4,569 emails.¹⁶ For successful evacuations, India had to coordinate with Kabul to ensure a safe transfer till the airport, with the US which had control of the Kabul airport, with Dushanbe for access to the Tajikistan airport, and with Iran and Uzbekistan for overflight assurances.¹⁷ Another batch of evacuations were done in December through a special flight from Kabul to New Delhi, which carried 10 Indians and 94 Afghans.

In the initial days, the Indian embassy in Kabul continued to function, providing consular services and automatically extending visas for some 4,557 Afghan nationals who were already in India and whose visas were about to expire.¹⁸ As the situation deteriorated and the embassy was temporarily shut,¹⁹ India revoked pre-existing visas across all categories for Afghans who were not in India and introduced a new visa category—i.e., e-Emergency-x-Misc, valid for six months.²⁰ Till December 2021, around 200 people, most of them belonging to minority communities, were granted such visa. While the provision of e-visas helped rescue people from the violence, some 2,500 Afghanistan students attending university in India failed to get their visas renewed. Even two years later, many students' visa applications are being rejected, sometimes even multiple times. In 2022, e-visas were granted to only 300 Afghans.²¹

Since August 2021, India has facilitated the provision of aid including 40,000 MTs of wheat, 65 tons of medical aid including anti-TB medicines, 500,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines, and 13 batches of medical and surgical items to Kabul.²² It also supplied stationery items and winter clothing for primary school students

India's Aid and Assistance to Afghanistan

of Habiba School, partnered with UNDOC^b for the welfare and rehabilitation of drug users, and ensured the supply of blankets and hygiene kits for women.²³ It also supplied COVAXIN vaccines to Iran to administer to Afghan refugees.²⁴ After the debilitating earthquake in June 2022, as a first responder, India supplied almost 28 tons of relief assistance through international organisations like the UN World Food Programme (WFP), the Afghan Red Crescent Society, and UNOCHA.^{c,25}

India's development partnership with Afghanistan has four stated components—infrastructure projects, humanitarian assistance, small and community-based development projects, and education and capacity development initiatives.²⁶ India disburses aid by working with international organisations and specialised UN agencies, apart from providing medicines through the Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital in Kabul and polio vaccines through UNICEF.^d For New Delhi, irrespective of how the political situation develops in Kabul, access to aid should be direct and unrestricted and given without any conditions.²⁷ In the FY 2023-24 budget, the Ministry of External Affairs earmarked INR 200 crores (approx. 25 million USD) as aid to the country, raising concerns with certain sections that India was funnelling money to the Taliban.²⁸ For India, however, ensuring that aid reaches those who need them has been the priority. When the UNSC debated a resolution on providing a 'humanitarian carve out' from the sanctions, India agreed in principle but raised concerns about ensuring that the money is not misused by the Taliban; India abstained from voting on the resolution.²⁹

b United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

c United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

d United Nations Children's Fund

Strategic Necessity or Strategic Patience?

In June 2021, there were reports about India opening a line of communication with some sections of the Taliban.³⁰ At that time, in response to questions about engaging with the Taliban, India had said it was “in touch with various stakeholders, including regional countries.”³¹ A year later, in early June 2022, New Delhi sent its first official delegation to Kabul, headed by the Joint Secretary of the Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran Division, JP Singh. The apparent aim of the visit was to oversee the disbursement of Indian aid and gauge the security situation in the country. Apart from meeting with Taliban senior leaders, Amir Khan Muttaqi, Shah Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, and Sirajuddin Haqqani, the team met with international humanitarian organisations and took stock of Indian projects that were pending.

India has faced the question of engaging with the Taliban multiple times in the last two decades. Beyond the reputational damage that an upfront declaration of talking to the Taliban can cause to the goodwill that India enjoys, the matter also raises concerns about India’s own principled positions and red lines about engaging with a terrorist group. Notwithstanding the debate inside India, the June 2022 visit was followed by the announcement of the opening of a ‘technical mission’ in Kabul. This raised speculations about the possible recognition of the Taliban regime by New Delhi.

The mission included diplomats who were expected to “closely monitor and coordinate the efforts of various stakeholders for the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance.”³² The MEA cautioned against reading too much into the trip from the perspective of recognition, underplaying the importance of nomenclature and focusing more on ensuring the country’s security and stability. It also rejected the notion that the presence of the mission signifies that India has a diplomatic presence in the country. In August, the EAM revealed that India was sending more diplomats, except the ambassador, to the embassy in Kabul.³³ The spokesperson of the Taliban’s Foreign Ministry, Abdul Qahar Balkhi, welcomed India’s decision to upgrade its diplomatic representation in Kabul and pledged to ensure the security of the diplomats.³⁴ The media, however, quoted ministry officials as saying that they considered the Taliban’s response as only a “matter of interpretation.”³⁵

Dodging the question of ‘engagement’

While Russia, Iran and China have made clear expressions of their willingness to engage with the Taliban, India has been more evasive. Such reticence can be attributed to the conflictual considerations of principles and realpolitik considerations in India’s foreign policy calculus. While New Delhi has not completely abandoned its emphasis on principles and morals, it is now “tempered by a more pragmatic discourse.”³⁶

In the immediate aftermath of the fall of Kabul, the MEA spokesperson stated how India has always had a ‘wait and watch’ approach, hoping to first gauge the situation³⁷ and how other countries are responding to the crisis.³⁸ This is an extension of the policy that it followed in the last few decades, where apart from ensuring that there is strategic balance between Afghanistan and Pakistan, New Delhi was also influenced by the changing regional and international alignments.³⁹

A month before August, the EAM had reiterated India’s refusal to legitimise forceful seizure of power.⁴⁰ Calling for a cessation of violence, New Delhi considered a political settlement as the only feasible solution to the crisis.⁴¹ For India, the gains of the last two decades, especially on widening opportunities for women and minorities and the constitutional framework which allowed for free and fair elections, were non-negotiable. It expressed its support in actualising the hopes of the Afghan people for a “peaceful, democratic and prosperous future where all sections are protected.”⁴² The EAM gave a three-step roadmap⁴³ calling for the cessation of violence, emphasising the settling of the conflict through political dialogue and ensuring that the interests of all ethnic communities are respected and reflected in a post-US Afghanistan. He also outlined what according to India is an “Afghan owned, and Afghan led” solution—a settlement with the elements of the Doha process, the Moscow format, and the Istanbul process.^c

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- e i. Doha Process - Agreement signed between the US and the Taliban on February 29, 2020 to end the war in Afghanistan. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf> ; <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-to-attend-us-taliban-peace-deal-event-in-doha-today/story-JGDf4FhWvjnqJhUgtZqmTJ.html>
- ii. Moscow Format Consultations - Launched in 2017, they include representatives from Russia, Afghanistan, India, Iran, China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Pakistan and call for an “inclusive government and national reconciliation”. <https://theprint.in/world/india-participates-in-moscow-format-consultations-on-afghanistan/1220532/>
- iii. Istanbul Process - Began in 2011 in Istanbul, to address the shared challenges in Afghanistan faced by the region’s countries. <https://www.hoa.gov.af/about-us/about-hoa-ip.html>

Strategic Necessity or Strategic Patience?

Historically, India has largely been a marginal player in Afghanistan and the reconciliation process in the country despite its development cooperation, mainly because it did not engage in talks with the Taliban. In 2010, some 70 countries participated in the London conference on Afghanistan to discuss matters related to security, development and regional cooperation. The conference marked a crucial shift in the crisis in Afghanistan as it urged the Taliban to cease violence and engage in talks. While failing to change the course of the war, the conference changed how other countries would respond to the terrorist group and heralded a turning point on the question of reconciliation.⁴⁴

India feared that pursuing reconciliation with the Taliban will accord an ascendant role to Pakistan, which dominated the talks.⁴⁵ These fears were confirmed as the Pakistan army conducted a crackdown on the Quetta Shura and some 124 Taliban militants in the immediate aftermath of the conference.⁴⁶ Avinash Paliwal, writing in *My Enemy's Enemy*, noted the quick acceptance on New Delhi's part about the inevitability of dealing with the Taliban, leading it to go ahead with the Strategic Partnership focusing on an Afghan-led and owned process.⁴⁷ New Delhi began lobbying with different stakeholders to chart an alternate reconciliation process. This 'conciliatory policy shift' was done to make reconciliation an 'Afghan-owned process'. India's changed stance was also evident in its voting at the UN where it stopped short of equating the Taliban with the Afghan government but no longer considered them as terrorists.⁴⁸

In 2005, amidst increased attacks on India's workers and personnel working in Afghanistan, India participated in back-channel negotiations aimed at both, stopping the attacks⁴⁹ and communicating with the Taliban for intelligence sharing.⁵⁰ In the subsequent years, India did not wish to be isolated in the region, particularly given the heightened engagement by Russia, China and Iran after 2010.⁵¹ Thus, engaging with the Taliban is not a pivotal break from India's past policies—a point highlighted by the current dispensation as well, which accepted that India has always interacted with all stakeholders in Afghanistan.⁵² Where a shift is discernible is the degree of this engagement and its tacit acceptance among India's community of foreign policy analysts.

The Taliban's Outreach to India

Upon the invitation of the Taliban, the Indian Ambassador to Qatar met the Head of the Taliban's Political office in Doha in September 2021. While the meeting was apparently done to chalk out the details of the evacuation process, New Delhi also raised its concerns about the use of Afghan territory to launch destabilisation activities against India. Although the MEA underplayed the meeting, it was a significant development in India's policy towards Afghanistan.

Some analysts are of the view that the Taliban will be much more receptive to engaging with India today as opposed to when it first ruled Afghanistan in the 1990s, when India was directly supporting the resistance, hoping to 'dissuade' New Delhi from supporting any opposition in the country this time around.⁵³ The group is also keen to court the recognition of more countries. Its isolation has compelled it to engage more with other countries, including India. The group has assured India that they will not allow Afghan territories to be used for launching terrorist attacks against India. It has also expressed support for the resumption of commercial flights so Afghan students can return to India, and made a pitch for an increase in India's investments.^{54,55} However, there is still a spanner on the issuance of visas to students stranded in Afghanistan.

In March 2023, an internal memo of the Afghanistan Institute of Diplomacy (IoD) under the Interim Taliban Administration, was leaked to the press.⁵⁶ The memo, asking its officials to enrol in a short-term capacity building programme organised by the Indian MEA under Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programmes, provoked an uproar amongst Afghan students. The course, called 'Immersing with Indian thoughts: An Indian immersion program for cross-sectoral foreign delegates', was aimed at familiarising participants with the socio-political environment of India. Of the 20 students who enrolled, 18 were from Afghanistan. While the MEA advised against treating the course as an indication of India's overall approach towards the Taliban, it did not completely reject the assertion that members of Taliban must have enrolled for the same.⁵⁷ The Director General of the IoD, asked about the source of the memo, said they received it as a note verbale from India's technical mission in the country.

Back in January 2023, the Taliban requested India to allow it to station its envoy in New Delhi.⁵⁸ Reports said the group has made close to 14 attempts to remove the Ghani government-appointed Ambassador from the embassy.⁵⁹ A

The Taliban's Outreach to India

few months later in May, the Taliban's Chief of Political office in Qatar, Suhail Shaheen announced the appointment of a new envoy to India.⁶⁰ The Taliban foreign ministry issued an order back in April, replacing the Ghani government appointee, Farid Mamundzay with Mohammad Qadir Shah. Shah was a former trade counsellor working in the Embassy, and his elevation to the post of ambassador was criticised by the Afghan embassy in India. The embassy accused the Taliban of deliberately spreading misinformation about the appointment of a new Ambassador, urging the Indian government to “take reasonable and appropriate steps in line with diplomatic norms.”⁶¹

While Shah himself has tried to distance his appointment from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, his basis to claim the ambassadorship is the letter signed by Muttaqi in April. New Delhi's stance on this squabble for power has been rather muted, with the MEA categorising the issue as an ‘internal matter’.⁶² This relatively soft response and its failure to reject the assertion made by either Shah or the IEA or actively come in support of the republic-appointed ambassador, feeds into India's recent pragmatism while interacting with Afghanistan.

Collaborating or Competing with the world?

India has been participating in regional and international peace initiatives like the Moscow Format consultations to articulate its policy approach towards Afghanistan, work towards building a global and regional consensus on how best to deal with the situation, and bolster its leadership credentials as an important player in Afghanistan. The jury is still out on whether New Delhi has been successful in steering these conversations. India has historically relied on support from other countries, particularly in the security sector to pursue its goals in Kabul. However, this reliance works only when the interests of the regional and extra-regional powers are in sync with those of New Delhi.

At the time that the US and its allies withdrew from Afghanistan, the growing rivalry between the US and China was intensifying and Russia was re-emerging as a security threat for Washington. With Russia and China now being the two key players in the region along with Iran, there are speculations about Moscow's and Beijing's intentions to fill the vacuum left by Washington and expand their influence. Both wish to advance their ‘regional hegemonic goals’ in the country and have been engaging with the Taliban actively since at least 2015. They have followed a dual strategy: they engage with the group in a limited manner, refraining from blatantly criticising them while being cognizant of the terrorist

The Taliban's Outreach to India

threat that the group poses to them, and their quest to gain strategic influence in Central Asia.⁶³ Although China's and Russia's long-term interests might diverge, in the short term they both want to limit the influence of the United States and its allies in the region.

This threat of terrorism could be a rallying point for countries in the region, but various political and other differences may impede cooperation. When the UNSC was debating Resolution 2593, both Russia and China abstained. Moscow did not agree that the draft of the resolution divided the terrorists in silos, i.e. 'ours and theirs' and excluded the names of groups like East Turkestan Islamist Movement (ETIM).⁶⁴ Russia also objected to the deportation of skilled professionals who would have helped in Afghanistan's reconstruction. Both Beijing and Moscow highlighted the omission of any reference to the US freeze on Afghanistan's central bank reserves following the fall of Kabul. They asserted that the resolution was being drafted with the objective of shifting the blame for the chaos of the last 20 years from the US to the Taliban. For China, Washington's withdrawal led to further deterioration of the security situation in the country, stressing the need for the international community to work with the Taliban.⁶⁵

Notwithstanding these competing interests, India has continued its conversations with these countries on the question of Afghanistan by actively participating in regional organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and frameworks like the Moscow Format Consultations. It leveraged the SCO summit in Samarkand in September 2021 and the joint SCO-CSTO outreach session on Afghanistan which followed, to champion a 'code of conduct' on zero tolerance for terrorism.⁶⁶ Its chairmanship of the BRICS^f reflected this sentiment, with the member countries committing to accelerate the implementation of the BRICS Action Plan on Counterterrorism.⁶⁷

In November 2021, New Delhi hosted the third 'Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan'⁶⁸ at the level of national security advisers with participants from Russia, Iran and the Central Asian Republics. Both Pakistan and China turned down the invitation. The participating countries deliberated on ways to improve the security situation in Afghanistan, and released the 'Delhi Declaration' which called for collective cooperation against "radicalization,

f Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa

The Taliban's Outreach to India

extremism, separatism and drug trafficking” in the region and reiterated the need to form an inclusive government for a “successful national reconciliation process in the country.”⁶⁹ India also participated in the Moscow Format consultations in November 2022, on the sidelines of which it had bilateral consultations with the Special Envoys of all the participating countries.⁷⁰

India and Russia announced a permanent channel for regular consultations on Afghanistan.⁷¹ This development was a step towards working with Russia on Afghanistan. However, difficulties in cooperation persist—in the initial months, New Delhi was excluded from certain conversations owing to what the Russian envoy refers to as its lack of ‘hard’ influence in Afghanistan.⁷² The war in Ukraine has brought to question India’s dependence on Russia and the latter’s reliability.⁷³ This relative isolation, and the divergent approaches, will create obstacles to long-term cooperation between New Delhi and Moscow.

Quest for Influence in Central Asia

In the days ahead, the competition for influence in Central Asia will only increase, determining to an extent how the region will fare. Indeed, the importance of the Central Asian Republics for India has been growing since 2015. The Modi government, in their second term, have worked to expand their engagement with all the five Republics, specifically focusing on trade, connectivity and development cooperation. When the Taliban came to power, India's concern was how to relate to these Republics; it made it imperative for New Delhi to form its Afghanistan policy keeping in mind its interest in the former Soviet republics.

Building up on this, New Delhi hosted the first India-Central Asia Summit in 2022, followed by the meeting of the Joint working group on Afghanistan between the two sides in early March this year. These engagements reflect an increased convergence of positions between the two. India has leveraged the SCO to highlight the centrality of the needs and aspirations of the CARs and work with them to counter terrorism, especially through the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure.⁷⁴

New Delhi's engagement with the world has become more result-driven and interest-based, and concerns about the marginalisation of India in the international community have abated.⁷⁵ India has shown willingness to be a responsible stakeholder in regional and international governance forums. Its efforts, however, at managing the geopolitical contradictions that define the region around it have only met with limited success. Its response to the crisis in its immediate neighbourhood is being perceived as incoherent and its calls for strategic patience are under scrutiny.⁷⁶

The alleged 'ambiguity' in how India is dealing with Kabul's new rulers, has had adverse impacts on its overall relationship and goodwill with the people of Afghanistan. While New Delhi has delivered on its promise of providing humanitarian aid and assistance in line with its historical relations, its evasiveness on the question of visas for Afghan students studying in India has affected how its role in the country is being perceived. When the news about the online course of MEA became public, many students felt betrayed at being left hanging by New Delhi on its commitment to support their education. While the EAM asked for patience till a semblance of trust and security could be established, for the students, the law and order situation back home and the turning away of an old friend pushed them against the wall.

Owing to the fast-changing dynamics in Afghanistan, the formulation of a long-term sustainable policy becomes a difficult task. For New Delhi, while *realpolitik* has been key to its decision to initiate engagement with the Taliban, its deep-seated ideas and principles, and its relationships with the region's countries, compel it to cloud its policy in a degree of ambiguity. This also affects India's own interests.

Since the peace process in Afghanistan began, New Delhi's discomfort with acknowledging the need to directly engage with the Taliban has put it on a back-foot as opposed to Russia or China. For New Delhi, managing the contradictions that its policy attracts, both domestically and internationally, has only increased its difficulties. Domestically, while it is receiving criticism for abdicating its commitment to the Afghan people, its outreach to the Taliban is being noticed too, as a deviation from its supposed principles and ideals. Internationally, while New Delhi understands the importance of working with

Conclusion

countries in the region, especially Russia, Iran and the Central Asian Republics to counter terrorism, its relationship with the United States is pitted against a growing anti-US sentiment in the region. This diminishes New Delhi's ability to effectively secure its interests. While India's relationship with Russia has been put to test since the war in Ukraine, it will have to work with the other regional actors to secure its interests and to slowly form a more stable and a less ad-hoc policy towards Kabul. [ORF](#)

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