

INDIA AFGHANISTAN

CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL AND DOMESTIC DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN AND INDIA AFGHANISTAN POLICY

INTRODUCTION

- Afghanistan derives its political significance because of its **geo-strategic position** i.e. it is situated at the crossroads of ancient civilisations – Indian, European, Chinese.
- The modern state of Afghanistan has the **curse of being the battleground of intense ideological, political and military conflict between the great powers.**
- It was the **epicentre of the 'Great Game'** between the Great Britain and Russia for hegemony over Central Asia and South Asia in the second half of the 19th century; it became a decisive factor in holding reign of the US over the Soviet Union during the Cold War that ultimately led to **disintegration of the Soviet Union.**

BRIEF OVERVIEW

- various global actors supported by the regional powers have **endorsed non-conventional strategies like terrorism and civil wars bringing devastating impact on Afghanistan's stability.**
- The centuries of conflict has made **Afghanistan a perpetual security nightmare- an outcome of complex interplay of internal disturbances and political interference** of the global and regional players.
- Afghanistan, often called the **graveyard of empires has itself become graveyard of civilization** due to decades of conflict fought to preserve geopolitical interests of the great powers.
- The fallout of protracted conflict lead to **emergence of weak governance structure along with the proliferation of radicalism** and the **flow of narcotics to the neighbouring regions.** Eurasia is one such region which has largely been affected by the developments in Afghanistan.
- The **present geopolitical imbroglio** is largely emanating from the **decision of the United States to leave Afghanistan and the Russian's desire to fill the vacuum**
- Politics and power in Afghanistan are strongly influenced by the country's ethnic complexities. Thus, **the deep ethno-linguistic divisions and the decentralised nature of the Afghan polity provide convenient faultlines ready for exploitation.**

CURRENT SCENARIO WITH RESPECT TO CHINA

- Emerging trend of political and **diplomatic moves from China and the US is that a new Cold War is imminent in near the future** between the two countries, **introducing new security dynamics in Afghanistan.**
- China is on ascendance in Afghanistan. has strengthened its ties with many Central Asian countries, and is increasing trade and commerce ties with Afghanistan
- It has in the last couple of years created a crucial space for itself, which it is using for a future political solution in Afghanistan that is conducive to its economic interests.
- China remains the third largest trading partner and the largest source country of investment in Afghanistan. The bilateral trade between China and Afghanistan has crossed US\$1 billion mark.
- China has proposed to include Afghanistan in the US\$57 billion economic corridor in Pakistan, a part of Beijing's Belt and Road initiative. Afghanistan has welcomed Chinese offer to join the belt and road initiative, and china is slowly becoming reliable partner of Afghanistan
- China continues to crackdown on its Uighur Muslim community in Xinjiang Province, but worries about insurgent groups creating bases in Afghanistan.

- China's pragmatism led them to offer highway networks in Afghanistan to facilitate the reduction of violence. China is also interested in Afghanistan's untapped mineral wealth, and has offered to expand the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

New Strategy, New Alignment of the Regional Players

- **Afghanistan has always been at risk of unwelcome external influences**, primarily from the **opportunistic neighbouring states**.
- There is **formalization of relations going on among China-Pakistan-Russia-Iran on one hand**, and on the **other US-India-Afghanistan**. Each country is crucial for the outcome of the Afghan problem, and each country has its own set of interests and its own strategies to gain maximum stronghold in the region.
- Another noteworthy dimension is the annual production of some 9,000 tonnes of opium in Afghanistan[2] which contributes to the generation of employment in most of the Afghan provinces as well as the creation of vested interests. The opium trade generates profits for the Taliban, local warlords, and criminal networks; therefore, there are vested interests in prolonging the conflict in Afghanistan

ROLE OF PAKISTAN

- Pakistan is the **most predatory neighbour**, a key player, a crucial ally of the US in determining the fate of the war the US had fought against the Soviets as well as Al-Qaeda, the Taliban and now the Islamic State of Khorasan.
- **An Afghan analyst rightly terms Pakistan "the wrong moderator with the wrong actors in the wrong place."**
- As argued by **C Raja Mohan, Pakistan army's "investment in Taliban is about controlling the political future in Afghanistan**. Pakistan will do as much as it can **to exploit the multiple faultlines in the Trump administration** and the Ghani government's need to ensure a favourable political outcome.
- It has often been blamed for helping the international forces on one hand, and patronising the terrorist groups on the other. Pakistan has played this double game purely for the sake of **gaining what it calls strategic depth in Afghanistan**.
- The Afghan Taliban's reliance on Pakistan for military logistics, medical care and sanctuary holding the key to getting the Taliban to the table;
- President Trump has warned Pakistan to mend its ways or else be ready to pay the price. The US administration has increased pressure on Pakistan by trying to put it on the "gray list" of the Financial Action Task Force, cutting off US\$1.3 billion in aid.
- What appears from the latest developments is that Pakistan is ready to move to the China camp at the cost of American interest
- Scholar Andrew Small suggests that unlike the past, China won't hesitate to defend Pakistan, if it becomes impossible to retain the status quo of the relation between the two

ROLE OF USA

SUSHANT SHAREEN- In other words, **the US can gain a lot more for a lot less than lose a lot more to save a lot less.**

- The long 19-year war in Afghanistan has been costly, both in human and financial terms.
- While the US urge to withdraw from Afghanistan is entirely understandable – politically it enjoys no support at home, economically it is a drain, strategically it is diverting attention from other bigger challenges, and militarily it is a quagmire – what doesn't make sense is the Americans frittering away all the gains made in Afghanistan in the rush for the exit
- **The military intervention in Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks of al-Qa'eda terrorists- to materialize their long-awaited dream of the monopolar world predicted by scholars like Fukuyama** after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the bipolar world. **Fukuyama, among others, believed that American liberal thought would be universally accepted and this would eventually lead to U.S. global domination.** The Taliban's deplorable abuse of basic human rights, women, and narcotic drugs, etc. could justify the U.S.'s presence as a defender of human rights
- Ever since US President **Donald Trump's August 2017 announcement of a "new Afghan strategy"—centred on**

convincing Pakistan to take more severe action against terrorists—the US has claimed putting greater military pressure on the Taliban to bring it to the negotiating table with the Kabul government.

- As the former **Defence Secretary James Mattis** put it, **"The U.S. doesn't lose wars, it loses interest."** **Political optics demanded a relabelling of the withdrawal.**
- The fact that the two sides have begun a long negotiation process is a significant development by itself, the product of slow developments and a requirement of the February 2020 agreement signed between the United States and the Taliban, headed by U.S. Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad.
- In years past, the Taliban have fought for the restoration of an Islamic emirate that ran Afghanistan from 1996-2001. What is certain is that in order to reach a stable peace, the Afghan government will need to concede some aspects of governance, giving it a role to play in whatever new system is implemented.
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ROLE OF IRAN

- Iran too has **made bold strategic gambit in Afghanistan.** Once a very strong rival of Pakistan-based insurgent groups, it now has its own calculations to **support the Taliban in Afghanistan to keep it unstable and force the international community to leave Afghanistan.**

OTHER POWERS

- **Saudi Arabia**, which has been a loyal partner of the US and Pakistan against communism, backed Taliban for long before turning away from the group.
- **Russia** is also pushing for its influence in the region, and is accused of supporting the Taliban
- One thing which is common in China-Pakistan-Russia-Iran axis is that these countries want the international forces out of Afghanistan. Neither Iran nor Russia want the US in their backyard what they consider as their strategic area of influence.

ROLE OF INDIA

- **S. Jaishankar reiterated** that the **peace process must be "Afghan led, Afghan owned and Afghan controlled"** but Indian policy has evolved from its earlier hands-off approach to the Taliban.
- In Afghanistan India would like a **stable regime which is sensitive to Indian interests.** It had backed the Soviet Union installed government in Afghanistan in 1979 and has given its support to every successive government, before the takeover by the Taliban.
- India's expanding economy and search for markets in Central Asia through Iran and Afghanistan is also an important determinant
- India's historic conflict with Pakistan, which through its proxies in Afghanistan has used its territory against India.
- India has implemented some important infrastructural projects in the past and is implementing some new projects such as the **Shahtoot Dam, salma dam, and drinking water project for Kabul that would also facilitate irrigation, water supply for Charikar City, and road connectivity to Band-e-Amir in Bamyán Province** that would promote tourism.
- **SOFT POWER- training of Afghan security forces under the India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement of 2011,** to its wider support for governance initiatives, infrastructure development, capacity building, and ICT.
- The **links between New Delhi and Kabul are not simply bilateral, but with an eye on Pakistan and China.** India worries that the peace process will favor Pakistan and the increased influence that the Taliban will likely have in Kabul.
- The **Chabahar port is the most tangible symbol of India-Iran-Afghanistan trilateral cooperation,** signed the TAPI pipeline project that aims to bring natural gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India
- However, the impending withdrawal of the US army is an issue of concern for India as the geopolitical and military vacuum created in Afghanistan may be filled up by China and Pakistan respectively, especially due to the continued prevalence of ethnic disharmony in Afghanistan.
- The relations between Kabul and Islamabad are growing which is evident from Afghan president Ashraf Ghani choosing Pakistan for its first foreign visit which was followed by subsequent exchange of visits between the two nations. Also Pakistan will be training Afghan soldiers. Further China's interests and influence are also rising in the

region as China is keen to make use of resources along with curbing the Uighur movement in its Xinjiang province

Support to the Afghan Peace Process

- This is **not the first time an Afghan government has reached out to the Taliban to end the conflict** but **peace talks get stalled by the mistrust among the parties**

STEPS TAKEN-

- President Ghani offered a ceasefire, the removal of sanctions, release of prisoners, the recognition of the Taliban as a political party, the conduct of fresh elections, „promised to share power with it, but also agreed to “review” the Constitution to meet one of its persistent demands.
- Afghanistan President **Ashraf Ghani** wrote that **“the Afghan people want peace” and that is why the government “made the decision to take another risk for peace”**.he added that **“we acknowledge the Taliban as part of our reality” and urged that “the Taliban must, in turn, acknowledge the changed reality of today’s Afghanistan”**.
- Ghani’s offer constitute **unconditional and comprehensive confidence-building measures** aimed at reconciliation with the insurgent group.
- Other conditions of that deal involved a prisoner exchange, the withdrawal of American troops and the Taliban breaking ties with other insurgent groups like Al-Qaeda. Previously, the Taliban viewed the Ghani government as a puppet of the United States and the West
- Supporting a successful and sustainable Afghan peace process is a top priority

THREE WAY PEACE PROCESS-

- Direct negotiations with the Taliban began two years ago with Ambassador Khalilzad’s appointment as Special Envoy. Actually, it became a three-way negotiation. **The Doha track was with the Taliban, a second track was with Islamabad/Rawalpindi to cajole the Pakistan Army to lean on the Taliban to get them to the negotiating table, and the third was with Kabul to ensure that the Afghan government would accept the Doha outcome.**
- **Ghani’s recent public declaration that peace does not require a political deal on power sharing**, implying that he has no intention of stepping down in favour of an interim government, was an attempt to reassure many Afghans uneasy with the frightening possibility of Taliban dominance. It was also a signal to India that all is not lost

FUTURE DISCOURSE

- After staying on the sidelines for too long, **India’s decision to participate in intra-Afghan talks seems aimed at regaining diplomatic momentum and re-asserting India’s position** on an “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled” peace process. **New Delhi recognizes that Afghanistan is a treacherous terrain**
- **Trump’s hasty troop withdrawal fails to acknowledge a simple reality of the Afghan conflict: that Rawalpindi is the principal driver of every facet of it.** Therefore, alliance politics and the need for a hedge against a US exit must shape New Delhi’s policy discourse.
- **India likely envisages Moscow’s role in the regional security matrix not as a disrupter, but as a balancer.** Despite the alliance-like relationship between Russia and China, **Moscow does share with New Delhi an instinctive preference for holding China in check.** Greater coordination between India, Iran and Russia has to be cultivated.
- **What happens in Afghanistan never stays in Afghanistan. Therefore, India must urgently mobilize a coalition** for a major regional diplomatic push aimed at resolving the Afghan crisis.
- India, Iran and Russia can develop cooperative mechanisms for commercial and economic ties with Afghanistan. This could help India moderate Chinese aggressiveness and Pakistani intransigence.
- Since the Taliban believe that the Afghan government is not the final decisionmaker in Afghanistan, they have always insisted on talking directly to the US.
- The Americans have backed Ghani’s peace offering with repeated affirmations by their top diplomats and commanders of a political solution to the conflict.

Unanswered questions

- **Who would stop fighting first?** despite Ghani's offer to recognise the Taliban as a legitimate political actor, the latter may be worried about the attitude of the Afghan security forces,
- Second, **various power centres within the Afghan government do not speak with one voice regarding the peace process.** EX-- VARIOUS FACTIONS IN TALIBAN
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RAKESH SOOD-

- **Instead of an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled reconciliation, it had become a U.S.-led and Taliban-controlled process with nobody claiming ownership or responsibility.**
- Trump administration's National Security Strategy identifying Russia and China rather than terrorism as the principal threat to American security, the new Cold War-type of rivalry between Washington and Moscow is bound to create insecurity in this volatile region.
- **Peace negotiations often fail due to the hardening of positions.** For example, the Taliban have advocated for a centralized system of government with a single sovereign leader acting under the guise of Sharia law;

WAY FORWARD

- New Delhi cannot afford to ignore its Eurasian frontiers even as it focuses on shaping new realities in the Indo-Pacific.
- The Ghani government's ability to preserve its cohesiveness, deliver key services, and provide security to the Afghan people can weaken the Taliban's tide.
- **M Ashraf Haidari, "We can't build schools during firefights; but without schools, the firefights will continue... [A] disproportionate amount of international resources ... have been devoted to military operations at the cost of job creation... But it is more jobs – not just more bullets – that will help persuade militant fighters to lay down their weapons.**
- The **Afghan conflict is multi-dimensional**, involving Afghan, regional and global actors. **Due to its inherent complexity, no single actor holds the key to resolving the crisis.** Therefore, any peace process in Afghanistan is going to be long and difficult, and there will be plenty of room for skepticism that the process is going to falter.