



Afghan Turmoil And India

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This article is based “Fail-safe exit for America, but a worry for India” which was published in The Hindu on 12/03/2020. It talks about the geopolitical disadvantage that India may face after the US-Taliban deal.

Recently, **the US and Taliban have negotiated a peace deal** to bring an end to a near twenty years of war in Afghanistan. However, within 24 hours of the much-hyped deal, violence and major disagreements about it have erupted in Afghanistan.

The terms of the deal, the manner in which it was negotiated, indicate that the deal was more about providing an honourable exit route for the US' military campaign in Afghanistan rather than about ending the violence in the country.

The US withdrawal may perhaps put Afghanistan on the verge of yet another long-drawn battle. Further, these events may prove geopolitically disadvantageous for India and may have serious implications for our national security.

Reversal of Balance of Power

- Between 1996-2001 majority of global and regional players were against the Taliban. However, nearly after 20 years, the Taliban has become an important stakeholder as most of the regional powers are backing it.

This is because of the U.S. withdrawal suits future prospects of countries like China, Pakistan, Iran, or Russia. **These countries consider the U.S. is the bigger challenge than the Taliban.**

- Given the war fatigue and the geopolitical stakes in Afghanistan, most of the key players are lending legitimacy to the Taliban.
 - **US:** US president wants to fulfil his electoral promise of withdrawing the US military from the conflict zone.
 - **Russia:** Russia, just like Syria, sees Afghanistan as another theatre to outplay the US.
 - **Pakistan:** Pakistan military may consider the Taliban as a strategic asset once it returns to power, which can be used against India to fuel terrorism.
 - **China:** Pakistan's closeness with the Taliban and given the strong strategic relationship between Pakistan and China, these may be used by China to extend the influence of its Belt and Road initiative over Afghanistan.

India's Approach

India is the state that seems to be on the losing end in Afghanistan. The reason for this lies in India's approach in dealing with the Taliban starting from supporting the Northern Alliance (the force that fought against the Taliban) in 1996 and now supporting Ashraf Ghani Government in Afghanistan.

- The Taliban regime was anti-India because India had militarily supported the Northern Alliance that kept up the military pressure against the Taliban.
- India insisted with a moralistic approach towards Taliban i.e India will not engage in any dialogue with any terrorist group.
- Further, India put all its eggs in the democratically elected government, even on the eve of the signing of the peace deal in Doha.
- This approach has been called by many foreign policy experts as not a smart diplomatic strategy and called for a more dynamic policy.

Northern Alliance

- The US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was preceded by over two decades of war in Afghanistan.
- In 1979, Soviet attacked Afghanistan, to restore stability following a coup that brought communist parties to power.
- However, the Soviet presence touched off a nationwide rebellion by Islamist fighters, who won extensive covert backing from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States and who were joined in their fight by foreign volunteers. These fighters called themselves Taliban.
- The guerrilla war against the Soviet forces led to their departure a decade later in 1989.
- After this Afghanistan got involved in a civil war between Islamist fighters.

- In 1996 the Taliban seized Kabul and instituted a severe interpretation of Islamic law. That same year, al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was welcomed to Afghanistan (having been expelled from Sudan) and established his organization's headquarters there.
- In retaliation of this, the Afghan Northern Alliance, officially known as the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, a united military front (composed of many tribal factions like Tajiks, Uzbeks) that came to the formation in late 1996 after the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban) took over Kabul.
- The Northern Alliance fought a defensive war against the Taliban government. They received support from Iran, Russia, Turkey, India, Tajikistan and others, while the Taliban were backed by Pakistan.

Impact of the Deal on India

- India's relations with Afghanistan is expected to take a hit in the immediate aftermath of the US-Taliban deal and India's economic investments may get into headwinds.
- China now may try to deepen involvement in the geopolitics and geoeconomics of Afghanistan. This will limit India's traditional ability to influence the region's political and security dynamics.
- Other regional actors in Afghanistan are also less friendly towards India than ever before:
 - Although India and Iran have been closely associated, US sanctions on Iran act as an irritant in the bilateral relations.
 - Similar can be said for Russia. India and Russia share a strong strategic partnership, however, the level of strategic convergence is not the same as it used in the Soviet era.
- Kashmir Angle: While the direct physical impact of the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan on Kashmir will be negligible. However, the most important impact is going to be psychological.
 - The return of the Taliban can be projected as a signal a victory of religious fundamentalism in the region and it might have serious implications for the region as a whole.
 - The U.S.-Taliban deal will require Pakistan's assistance towards ensuring its success. Pakistan is leveraging this to involve the US in India-Pakistan equation related to Kashmir.

Conclusion

Unless India carefully envisages a counter-strategy, these factors will increasingly push India into a geopolitical tough spot in the region. Smart statecraft, therefore, is required to deal with changing dynamics in Afghanistan.

Drishti Mains Question

India needs a smart diplomatic strategy in the event of geopolitical flux that is taking place in Afghanistan. Discuss.