



India's Options In Afghanistan

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This article is based on **Evaluating India's options in Afghanistan** which was published in The Hindu on 27/07/2021. It talks about the US's withdrawal from Afghanistan and the option available for India in order to tackle the challenges emerging after that.

It is not a coincidence that the United States of America (US) is **exiting Afghanistan** at the same time that the focus of its foreign policy is shifting to East Asia.

There is growing consensus that the USA, instead of staying engaged in the lost wars should now urgently prepare itself for the unfolding geopolitical contest with China.

Defeating the Taliban and nation-building were part of the **neoconservative ideology** (promotion of democracy and interventionism in international affairs) of the US, which has evidently failed.

However, the US can abandon the Afghan government and exit the theatre, but India cannot. It has to protect its investments, prevent Afghanistan from becoming another safe haven for anti-India terrorist groups, and also check Pakistan deepening its influence in Kabul.

US's Changed Priority

- **Changing Priorities From Middle East to Indo-Pacific:**
 - The USA may have retreated from Afghanistan as part of a **grand strategy to take on China in maritime Asia**, in which it needs India's involvement, and India might find it tempting to join the ranks, especially after China's aggression on the Line of Actual Control.
 - America's strategic response to China's rise is its **Indo-Pacific strategy**, which is aimed at containing China's rise and challenging its high-functioning single party dictatorship.
 - The US wants India to play a key role in the **Quad bloc**. But there is one problem. **India**, unlike the other members, is the only **continental Asian power** in the Quad, which shares a contested land border with China and is vulnerable to the geopolitical changes in the Eurasian landmass.

- **Ending Endless Wars:** After the costly and prolonged military interventions in Afghanistan, the US has begun to see no more interest in resolving the conflict there.

India's Presence In Afghanistan

- Barring a brief pause in the 1990s, India has historically enjoyed good ties with Afghanistan, which go back to the **1950 Treaty of Friendship**.
- Indian interests and influence suffered when the Taliban, backed by Pakistan, captured Kabul in 1996.
- But India was back in action as soon as the Taliban were ousted from power after the US invasion in 2001.
- India has made huge investments and commitments ever since, which run into over USD 3 billion, and cultivated strong economic and defence ties with the Afghan government.
- Now, it is again staring at uncertainty with the US pullback having effectively changed the balance of power in Afghanistan and the Taliban making rapid territorial gains.



India's Options In Afghanistan

- **Talking with the Taliban:** Talking to Taliban would allow India to seek security guarantees from the insurgents in return for continued development assistance or other pledges as well as explore the possibility of the Taliban's autonomy from Pakistan.
 - At this point, **talking to the Taliban looks inevitable**. But India should not overlook the deep ties between Pakistan's security establishment and the Haqqani Network, a major faction within the Taliban.
 - The USA overlooked it while fighting the Taliban along with Pakistan, and it paid a heavy price for it.

- **Taking Afghan Government in Confidence:** There is no guarantee that India's quest for engagement with the Taliban would produce a desirable outcome. So India should broad-base its options.
 - While talking to the Taliban to protect its interests, India should also enhance aid to Afghanistan's legitimate government and security forces and work with other regional powers for long-term stability in the country.
- **Support Afghan Military Forces:** The Afghan military has some 200,000 battle-hardened soldiers, including the highly trained special forces. The only force that is standing up to the Taliban is the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces.
 - India should urgently step up training Afghan forces and provide military hardware, intelligence and logistical and financial support so that Afghan military can continue to defend the cities.
 - India should also coordinate with other regional powers to support the Afghan government because if the government forces crumble before the Taliban, the prospects for a political settlement would be narrowed.
- **Regional solution:** There is a convergence of interests between India and three key regional players — China, Russia and Iran — in seeing a political settlement in Afghanistan.
 - None of these countries would like to see the Taliban taking over Afghan militarily, which means there would be an isolated Sunni Islamist regime in a country with fractured ethnic equations.
 - Thus, there is a need for cooperation from like minded countries on this front.
- **Short Term and Long Term Goal:** India's **immediate goal should be the safety and security of its personnel** and investments.
 - The long-term goal should be finding a **political solution to the crisis**. None of this can be achieved unless it works together with the regional powers.
- **Russian Support:** Russia has cultivated links with the Taliban in recent years. India would need Russia's support in any form of direct engagement with the Taliban.
- **Significance of Iran:** Iran shares a long border with Afghanistan and has close resemblance of ethnic minorities.
 - The original objective of India's **Chabahar project** in Iran was to create a direct access to Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan.
 - This direct access is critical for India in all different scenarios — move supplies to Afghanistan in larger quantities, retain its presence in the event of a civil war or carry out covert operations if the Taliban take power by force.
 - However, the US's pressure on India is a roadblock in good relations between the two countries.
- **Bonhomie With China:** India should talk with China, with the objective of finding a political settlement and lasting stability in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

India, as would be impacted by the consequences of American withdrawal, has to work with Eurasian powers to protect its interests and stabilise Afghanistan. If India remains active and patient too, many opportunities could open up in the new Afghan phase.

Drishti Mains Question

After withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan, India has to work with regional powers to protect its interests and stabilise Afghanistan. Discuss.
