

India Tests Taliban's Autonomous Character: Implications for Central Asian Republics

Dr Raj Kumar Sharma[–]

Introduction

One year after the Taliban captured power in Afghanistan in August 2021; there has been a seismic change in India's policy towards them which has moved from 'calculated indifference' to 'cautious engagement without recognition'. The US and its Western allies are now preoccupied with the Russia-Ukraine crisis while Afghanistan seems to have lost immediate relevance for them. The Western withdrawal from Afghanistan heralds the beginning of the [post-American Central Asia](#) as observed by US academic Alexander Cooley. Which power fills the vacuum created by the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan is an important question from India's security point of view. The impact of Taliban's accession to power in Afghanistan would be felt most by the regional countries like India, Central Asian Republics (CARs), China, Russia and Iran. India slowly started to change its policy towards the Taliban since last year. This brings certain implications for the CARs with whom New Delhi enjoys good relations and both face similar security challenges that emanate from the Taliban ruled Afghanistan.

India's Policy towards Taliban 1.0

Taliban came to power for the first time in Afghanistan in September 1996 and established Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which sent shockwaves around the region and the world alike. One of the first moves made by the Taliban was to institute a strict interpretation of *Quranic* interpretation and jurisprudence. While in practice, it turned into merciless policies for women, political opponents and religious minorities devoid of any respect for [human rights](#). Taliban resorted to strict religious ideology mixing *Deobandi* traditionalism with *Wahhabi* puritanism with a conservative *Pashtun* social code known as *Pashtunwali* to create a brutal and [repressive regime](#). One of the well known Pakistani voices on Taliban, journalist Ahmed Rashid had [argued](#) that Taliban created a new radical model for Islamic revolution and as an ever expanding enterprise; it sought new markets like Central Asia. The regional countries were quite concerned regarding Taliban's intolerance and barbarism leading to anti-Taliban sentiment. Some elements in the Taliban tried to reach out to India but their brutal treatment of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus ended any such [possibility](#). Heavy influence of Pakistan on Taliban was another reason for India to stay away from Taliban. The Taliban ruled Afghanistan after 1996 emerged as a 'safe haven' for regional terrorist organisations which would use the Afghan territory as a sanctuary to launch terrorist attacks against the neighbouring countries. Like most of the countries, India had closed its embassy in Kabul after Taliban's accession to power in 1996 and supported the UNSC Resolution 1076 which proclaimed that continued conflict in Afghanistan was the reason behind terrorism and drug trafficking, the two issues that could [destabilise](#) the region.

[–] Maharishi Kanad Post-Doc Fellow, Delhi School of Transnational Affairs, Institution of Eminence, University of Delhi, India

The Taliban 1.0 had a direct impact on the situation in Kashmir as the circumstances in the valley began to change acquiring a [religious dimension](#), something which was absent earlier. Terror activities had increased in Kashmir and Pakistan sponsored anti-India terror outfits like *Harkat ul-Ansar* and *Lashkar-e-Taiba* had their [training camps](#) in Taliban controlled Afghanistan. Pakistan already had a lot of experience in managing an insurgency through the Afghan war against the Soviets and they were ready to use this experience against India in Kashmir by turning Kashmiri resistance into an [organised insurgency](#). Pakistan was paying the Taliban to take Kashmiri militants under its protection. At the same time, it also encouraged Bin Laden to join the Taliban since he was also sponsoring bases for Kashmiri terrorists in *Khost* province of Afghanistan which shares border with Pakistan along the Durand Line. Taliban leader Mullah Omar had openly supported *jihad* in Kashmir in 1998. It was clear to the Taliban that as long as they provide safe havens for Pakistani and Kashmiri militants, Pakistan would not refuse them [anything](#). Former CIA expert, Bruce Riedel has also supported this view that Pakistan's ISI had facilitated links between the Taliban and Al Qaeda while contending that the hijacking of India's IC-814 plane clearly established anti-India links between Osama Bin Laden, Al Qaeda, radical *Kashmiris*, the Taliban and [Pakistan's ISI](#).

The Northern Alliance headed by Ahmad Shah Massoud was strongly contesting the Taliban in northern Afghanistan and was annoyed with Pakistan for supporting the Taliban. They had also promised that all militant camps would be closed if they come to [power](#). These were enough reasons for countries like India, Russia, Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to support the Northern Alliance against the Taliban. This was also the wider regional consensus that since the Taliban is a mutual security threat, there should be regional cooperation to tackle this problem. India [provided](#) assistance to Northern Alliance like funds and non-lethal military equipment. New Delhi had also gifted two Mi-8 helicopters between 1996 and 1999 while a military hospital was also maintained at Farkhor near Afghan-Tajik border to treat wounded fighters of Northern Alliance. Indian military advisors also assisted Northern Alliance fighters with high-altitude warfare techniques, an experience they had gained from their counterinsurgency operations in [Kashmir](#). It can be concluded that India's response to Taliban 1.0 was [aligned](#) with the regional and international approach which was to isolate and contain them.

India's Response to Taliban from 2001 to 2021

After the US and its allies launched Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001, the Taliban was thrown out of power paving the way for establishment of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan until August 2021. Being a victim of terrorism, India had empathised with the US, supported its anti-terror operations in Afghanistan while both countries also agreed to cooperate against terrorist infrastructure in Afghanistan which was seen as a 'mutual threat'. The former fighters of the Northern Alliance played an important role in the post-Taliban administration putting India into a naturally [advantageous](#) position to strengthen its links with the new rulers in Kabul. India became biggest regional donor for Afghanistan with assistance of \$3 billion in areas like education, agriculture, food security, health, women empowerment

and heavy infrastructure like dams. India implemented over 400 development projects spread across 34 Afghan provinces.

It is noteworthy that unlike other major powers like the US, China, Russia and Iran, India did not hedge its bets in Afghanistan and remained a staunch supporter of the elected government in Kabul. India kept reiterating until the end that the peace process in Afghanistan should be ‘Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled’, a position that was favourable to the Ghani led government. New Delhi did not open any channel of communication with the Taliban while supporters of former Northern Alliance like Russia and Iran were already doing so. India’s former ambassador to Afghanistan; Vivek Katju had described India’s reluctance to engage with the Taliban as a state of ‘strategic paralysis’. He argued that India had boxed itself into a corner in Afghanistan and it was high time to engage with all stakeholders including the Taliban.

India and the Taliban 2.0



An Indian Official (3rd from left) meets Taliban officials during his Kabul visit in June 2022.

Source: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/indian-team-meets-taliban-in-kabul-a-first-in-new-afghan-regime-3032950>

India had closed its embassy and consulates in Afghanistan as the Taliban returned to power in August 2021. By the time the Taliban 2.0 captured power in Afghanistan, they were already ‘legitimised’ in political sense as most of the major powers like the US, Russia, China and Iran had already established communication with them despite the fact they are still designated as a terrorist organisation by the UN Security Council. India was very late in

this regard and contemplated of engaging the Taliban through direct communication only in July 2021, although interactions had taken place between the two sides even before this. There have been contacts between officials from both the sides but India has not recognised Taliban and has not normalised relations with them. New Delhi has been sending humanitarian assistance to Taliban ruled Afghanistan as it has always stood by the Afghans in their hour of need. After receiving firm assurance from the top leadership of Taliban that Indian diplomats and staff would be safe, New Delhi [reopened](#) its embassy in Kabul in June 2022, although it would not be headed by an ambassador as India has not recognised the Taliban. The following reasons explain India's change of stance on Taliban 2.0.

- **Lack of Credible Opposition to Taliban:** Unlike the 1990s, there has been no Northern Alliance this time to challenge the Taliban in Afghanistan. Most of the leaders of Northern Alliance have grown older and many have shifted out of Afghanistan due to which they do not have any direct impact on the situation on the ground. The northern Afghan provinces felt alienated from the Ghani government while these areas were beginning to be [more religious](#) in line with the approach of Taliban towards conservative Islam. These factors made sure that this time; there was no strong opposition to Taliban rule from northern Afghanistan. India had supported Northern Alliance in 1990s but this time, this option was almost absent.
- **Regional Consensus to Engage Taliban:** Until recently, India was the only member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which had not reopened its embassy in Kabul. Pakistan, Russia, China and Iran had not even closed their embassies during the chaos of Taliban takeover. India's continued reluctance to engage the Taliban would have also impacted its 'Connect Central Asia' policy as Afghanistan is an important factor of New Delhi's outreach to CARs. All the CARs have diplomatic [links](#) with the Taliban, a development that India could not have ignored. These developments signalled a regional desire to engage with the Taliban, something that was missing in 1990s.
- **Russia's Changed Approach to Taliban:** One of the factors that could have impacted India's response to Taliban 2.0 is Russia's cultivation of ties with the Taliban. When Taliban 1.0 came to power in 1996, former Security Council Secretary of Russia, Alexander Lebed had [stated](#) that the Taliban were eyeing the territory of CARs like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. However, Russia's view about Taliban 2.0 is totally different. Moscow now argues that the Taliban has learnt from its mistakes and the nature of their movement has [changed](#) over the years. According to Russia, the Taliban now is behaving like a [national](#) liberation movement defending their cultural and religious traditions against the Americans. Taliban also benefitted from rise of the Islamic State in Afghanistan as Russia now believes that a 'lesser evil' like Taliban is [acceptable](#) than a 'monster' like the Islamic State. There seems to be a belief that due to its nationalistic character, Taliban would remain limited to Afghanistan but the Islamic State has international designs and poses a serious security threat to Russia and the CARs. Given Russia's emerging clout with Taliban, its security profile in the

Central Asian region and history of India-Russia cooperation against Taliban 1.0, India may have reoriented its Afghanistan policy accordingly.

- **Prevent China-Pakistan-Taliban Nexus:** India's relations with Pakistan are an all time low following abrogation of Article 370 by Government of India in August 2019. At the same time, China has also upped the ante on the border with India and since the Galwan clash in June 2020; India-China relations have not seen much positive development. In such a scenario, it would have been detrimental to India's security interests if it continued its policy of non-engagement with the Taliban. This would have left enough room for China and Pakistan to act against India's interests in concert with the Taliban, effectively establishing Chinese hegemony in India's western neighbourhood without New Delhi even [contesting](#) it.
- **Explore Taliban's Autonomous Nature:** Role of Pakistan in creation of Taliban is an open secret around the world now. Pakistan's overwhelming influence on Taliban has been one of the reasons why New Delhi has kept away from the Taliban. However, there have been public instances of Pakistan-Taliban rift in recent months which offer an opening for India to engage certain elements within Taliban which want to act independent of Pakistan's influence. The rift has been over Durand Line issue, Afghan Taliban's support for the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and control over the Wakhan corridor. At the same time, the Taliban has been sending feelers to India about improving ties with New Delhi. From vowing to protect the TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India) gas pipeline, thanking India for sending humanitarian assistance, assurance to act against anti-India Pakistan based terror groups in Afghanistan to praising India for refusing to get militarily involved in Afghanistan under American pressure, the Taliban has been sending signals to India that they can *dehyphenate* India-Pakistan and are capable of acting independent of Pakistan on India's security concerns. Hence, India feels that it may be worth the effort to explore 'autonomous' nature of Taliban which could open up the possibility of a pragmatic relationship between the two sides in which 'values' like human rights and democracy could take a backseat. India's current engagement with the Taliban does not mean endorsement of their policies. The Taliban, on the other hand, know that India is the foremost regional country which can 'really' help improve Afghan economy amidst the current economic crisis while it would also balance out Pakistan's overbearing influence, a move that would cement Taliban's nationalist credentials in Afghanistan. Public opinion in Afghanistan is favourable to India as a survey had found in July 2021 that 69% of Afghans believed India was their best friend. Engagement with India also helps Taliban's efforts to enhance its legitimacy in Afghanistan. When India reopened its embassy in Kabul in June 2022, the Taliban [said](#) New Delhi's decision demonstrated that security was established in the country and all political and diplomatic rights were respected in the country.

Implications for CARs

Afghanistan is the critical link that connects Central and South Asia. India treats Afghanistan and Central Asia forming part of same geopolitical space since the security situation in Afghanistan has serious implications for the CARs. When Taliban captured power in 1996, India and CARs were similarly concerned about Taliban's conservative Islamic model of governance which was anti-thesis of their secular model. Afghanistan under Taliban 1.0 acted as a 'safe haven' for terrorist organisations that targeted India and CARs like Uzbekistan. Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) had close links with the Taliban and tried to assassinate former President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov in 1999. India, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan had supported the Northern Alliance to thwart Taliban's march towards Central Asia. When the Taliban came to power in 2022, CARs have not tried to isolate Taliban ruled Afghanistan but are engaging and accommodating it so that it does not emerge as a rogue state. Since there seemed an informal regional consensus this time to engage the Taliban 2.0, India similarly reoriented its policy towards Taliban ruled Afghanistan from estrangement to cautious engagement.

Keeping in view the importance of Afghan factor in India's Central Asia policy, New Delhi had already started to strategically cooperate with the CARs in recent years. India-Central Asia Dialogue was started in 2019 at the level of Foreign Ministers and there was special focus of the dialogue on the security and economic situation in Afghanistan. After Taliban declared victory in August 2021, India had invited the CARs to participate in the Delhi Regional Security Dialogue in November 2021 to review the security situation in Afghanistan and assess its impact on the region. Another important development happened in January 2022 when first India-Central Asia Summit took place which is expected to be a biennial event. This would be an institutionalised mechanism to deepen cooperation between India and CARs which also marks the beginning of India's Act Central Asia policy towards Eurasia in its north. In the last five-six years, India's political and security engagement has intensified with the CARs as the security situation kept on deteriorating in Afghanistan. At the first India-Central Asia summit, India and the CARs agreed to have a common approach while dealing with the Taliban. Leaders from the two sides also reaffirmed the importance of UNSC Resolution 2593 which demands that Afghan territory should not be used for sheltering, training, planning or financing terrorist acts. India and CARs also [agreed](#) that a truly representative and inclusive government, combating terrorism and drug trafficking was needed in Afghanistan.

It must be mentioned that engagement with the Taliban would pose certain challenges to India and CARs alike. In September 2021, Taliban had [said](#) that they would raise voice for Muslims in Kashmir. In June 2021, Taliban had handed over security of Tajik-Afghan border in five districts of Badakhshan to *Jamaat Ansarullah*, an organisation designated as terrorist entity by Tajikistan. Taliban have also found it hard to tackle the Islamic State which has [targeted](#) Central Asian countries recently. UN designated terrorists are part of Taliban cabinet while killing of Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri by the US on Afghan territory adds a layer of complexity to Taliban's promise of not allowing Afghan territory to be used for terror activities. These events suggest that mere engagement with the Taliban may not be

enough and the regional countries like India and the CARs need to ramp up their cooperation in areas like intelligence sharing, capacity building and de-radicalisation as both sides face similar threats that originate from Afghanistan. India-CARs cooperation is important for regional stability and it can become model of regional consensus to deal with the Taliban in coming years.

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