

**WITHDRAWAL OF UNITED STATES OF AMERICA FROM
AFGHANISTAN: INDIA'S NATIONAL SECURITY
CALCULUS AND TERRORISM IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR**

**A Dissertation submitted to the Panjab University, Chandigarh for the
award of degree of Master of Philosophy in Social Sciences, in partial
fulfilment of the requirement for the Advanced Professional
Programme in Public Administration (APPPA)**

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47th ADVANCED PROFESSIONAL PROGRAMME IN PUBLIC
ADMINISTRATION (2021-22)

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, NEW DELHI

CERTIFICATE

I hereby declare that this submission is my original piece of work and to best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by any other person. I am aware of the University's norms and regulations regarding the plagiarism including the disciplinary action that it may invite. Any use of the works by any another author, in any form, is adequately acknowledged at their point of use or in the Bibliography.

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I have the pleasure to certify that **Brigadier Niranjan Rajkumar Jakhar, SM**** has pursued his Research work and prepared the present dissertation titled “ **Withdrawal of the United States of America from Afghanistan: India’s National Security Calculus and Terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir**” under my guidance and supervision. The dissertation is result of his own research and to the best of my knowledge, no part of it has earlier been part of any monograph, dissertation or book. This is being submitted to the Panjab University, Chandigarh, for the purpose of Master of Philosophy in Social Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Advanced Professional Programme in Public Administration (APPPA) of Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA), New Delhi.

I recommend that the dissertation of **Brigadier Niranjan Rajkumar Jakhar, SM**** is worthy of consideration for the award of M. Phil degree of the Panjab University, Chandigarh.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my Guide and Mentor, **Dr Manan Dwivedi**, for the continuous mentoring, guidance, motivation, immense support and sharing his wealth of knowledge. The nuances of international relationship, of which Dr Manan Dwivedi is a master, were elucidated in most lucid manner which made the research process exciting and productive. The dissertation wouldn't have reached its logical conclusion without his depth of knowledge and grasp over the complexities of geo-politics which were a constant source of inspiration.

I would also like to thank the Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA) as an institute for providing me with the opportunity to choose this contemporary and relevant topic along with the requisite infrastructural support. I would like to express my gratitude to the IIPA Library Staff, who were ever supportive and always available to assist me notwithstanding the Covid compliant protocol restrictions and their busy schedule. I am grateful to all the Subject Matter Experts for giving their valuable advice and comments that aided me with the research work. I would also like to thank the Director General IIPA Shri SN Tripathi, Dr Suresh Mishra, Course Coordinator along with Dr Shyamli Singh and Dr Roma Debnath for being enablers in creating a very conducive environment for the scholarly pursuit. I would also like to thank the APPPA office staff Mr Anil Sharma, Mr Manish Rawat and Mr Rajesh for their support.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife and children, my pillars of strength for their encouragement and tremendous support during the research and writing of dissertation.

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ABBREVIATIONS

1. ANSF - Afghan National Security Forces
2. ANDSF - Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
3. BRI - Belt and Road Initiative
4. CAR - Central Asian Republic
5. CCS - Cabinet Committee on Security
6. CFR – Council of Foreign Relations
7. CPEC – China–Pakistan Economic Corridor
8. DMA – Department of Military Affairs
9. EAM – External Affairs Minister
10. ETIM – East Turkestan Islamic Movement
11. EU – European Union
12. FATA – Federally Administered Tribal Areas
13. FATF – Financial Action Task Force
14. GWOT – Global War On Terror
15. IMU – Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
16. IMF – International Monetary Fund
17. IRGC – Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

18. ISAF – International Security Assistance Force
19. ISI – Inter-Services Intelligence
20. ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
21. IS-K – Islamic State – Khorasan Province
22. ITEC – Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation
23. J & K – Jammu and Kashmir
24. MEA – Ministry of External Affairs
25. MJC – Military Jihadi Complex
26. NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
27. NSA – National Security Advisor
28. NWFP – North West Frontier Province
29. OIC – Organisation of Islamic Countries
30. PLA – People's Liberation Army
31. PTM – Pashtun Tahafuz Movement
32. SAARC – South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
33. SCO – Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
34. SIGAR – Special Inspector General For Afghanistan Reconstruction
35. TTP – Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan

36. UAE- United Arab Emirates
37. UN – United Nations
38. UNAMA - United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
39. UNICEF - United Nations International Children Education Fund
40. UNSC – United Nations Security Council
41. UNSG - United Nations Secretary General
42. USA – United States of America
43. XUAR – Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WITHDRAWAL OF UNITED STATES OF AMERICA FROM AFGHANISTAN: INDIA'S NATIONAL SECURITY CALCULUS AND TERRORISM IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR

Afghanistan historically has *geo-strategic significance for India* by virtue of its geographical location wherein it served as a gateway to India, on the ancient Silk Road and was the *centre piece in the Great Game* between British and the Soviets in early 20th Century. (Geo-strategic location on Silk Route and administrative divisions of Afghanistan given at appendix A). For centuries Afghanistan has resisted adverse foreign intervention with its multi-ethnic and multicultural composition with Pashtuns being the largest ethnic tribe. *The Durand Line* was a significant outcome of the classical Great Game era which was inherited by Pakistan at the time of partition in 1947. The Afghan Loya Jirga of 1949 had unanimously rejected the Durand line and it continues to have geo-political-security ramifications being a potential conflict area in Af-Pak region. The Soviet invasion in 1980 made Afghanistan a *strategic playground* for the two superpowers, both aiming to increase their sphere of influence in the region and *the next phase of the Great Game commenced*. The USA formed an anti-Soviet alliance with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan and armed the *Mujahedin* with sophisticated weaponry to oppose the Soviets. The withdrawal of Soviet Union from Afghanistan and its subsequent collapse ended the American rationale for intervention, thus strengthening influence of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan. The genesis of the current Taliban

preeminence can be attributed to the failure of the mujahideens to establish a stable government after the Soviet withdrawal and the collapse of subsequent governments. The lethal nexus of Taliban and Al Qaida, along with a never ending supply of fundamentalists from the madrassas of Pakistan, created a global security challenge and fueled terrorism in Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (J & K).

The discovery of vast hydro-carbon deposits in CAR nations, the terror attack on World Trade Centre and the resultant Global War on Terror (GWOT) lent a crucial geo-political importance to the area; significantly impacting the regional security in Asia. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) mandated an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in December 2001 to assist the Karzai administration thus paving the way for USA led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces intervention in Afghanistan and advent of *the New Great Game*. The intervention though ostensibly was launched to capture Osama bin Laden as part of GWOT, had a larger objective of having USA/ European Union (EU) influence in the resource rich region with Pakistan becoming a key regional player in GWOT. In such a milieu, Afghanistan once again becomes the battlefield of outside players with strategic designs and personal interests. The neutralization of Osama bin Laden and subsequent announcement of intent to withdraw the US forces by President Obama set in motion the re-calibration of geo-political dynamics with China emerging as a dominant factor. The 2020 peace talks between USA and Taliban and the resultant withdrawal of residual USA forces from Afghanistan in September 2021; without an enduring politico-economic-security solution acceptable to all the stake holders created a power vacuum which was rapidly filled by Taliban in surprisingly short time. Multiple nations and opposing forces are actively contesting the

strategic space created by withdrawal of USA for having influence with the dominant group in resource rich region to include China, Pakistan, India and Iran among others that is likely to have serious security ramifications for the Region.

Pakistan has traditionally been obsessed with the need to control Afghanistan seeking strategic depth and further its Kashmir agenda. India with its historical and traditionally strong linkages had invested heavily in Afghanistan's reconstruction since Op Enduring Freedom commenced in 2001. It is viewed as genuine well wisher by the Afghani populace in light of its support, developmental and capacity building projects through the crisis years. India has high stakes in ensuring stability and security in the region; specifically Afghanistan in consonance with its national interest. The Indian concern in the context of its politico-economic-security calculus emanates from Taliban led dispensation being influenced by Pakistan and supported by China against Indian interest. The adverse security ramifications of Taliban dominated Afghanistan government along with Sino-Pak collusive policies have already been experienced by India during the earlier period of Taliban governance. The complexities of the security situation has been further compounded with the Ukraine crisis taking centre stage with China providing tacit support to the Russians against the west and India walking the tightrope. The possibility of radicalization and boost to terrorism in J & K is another major concern for Indian policy makers. The politico-security scenario in the region remains fluid and uncertain even after more than six months of the Taliban rule, necessitating policy recalibration by New Delhi to safeguard India's national, economic and security interests. Indian security concerns involving Afghanistan are concrete and

tangible having serious implication for its endeavor to be stakeholder having say in global strategic affairs.

A stable and peaceful Afghanistan with a legitimate and preferably democratic government is imperative for India's national security calculus. Pakistan using Taliban to further its Kashmir agenda and give fresh lease of life to waning terrorism needs to be proactively negated by India from national security and counter terrorism operational perspective. The study deals with an ongoing issue related to dynamic ever evolving geo-political situation with multiple imponderables and inter related issues rooted in history, some that fall in the operationally classified domains. The study is limited in scope to macro policy issues along with aspects which are tangible, unclassified and available as open source information. There are numerous undercurrents in current regional dynamics which requires India to work on multiple thrust lines to evolve a denovo policy concerning Afghanistan. The strength of soft power and goodwill earned among the masses needs to evolve to smart power nuance with Afghan citizen centric approach. Taliban 2.0 has displayed independent thought process when it refused to tow the Pak - ISI line and expressed their reservations on legitimacy of Durand line. New Delhi needs to adopt a nuanced approach factoring in the ground realities so as to retain its relevance and influence in the resource rich region. India no longer enjoys the luxury of being averse or incommunicado with the Taliban and needs to engagement with them becoming a new normal. A holistic all encompassing, well calibrated, multi pronged and constructive approach would assist in achieving the Indian objective of ensuring that Afghanistan is not influenced or controlled by any power that is hostile to India. A pragmatic Indian policy in context of Indo-Taliban 2.0 relationship needs to factor in

all the variables and dynamics of ever evolving security, geo-politics and geo-economics situation working beyond a zero sum game thereby ensuring that Afghanistan does not relapse into a base for fundamentalist and global *jihadi* terrorism. The new Great Game in the region will ensure presence of multiple players with convergence and divergence of interests either in geo-political or geo-economic domain. It is imperative that the current Ukrainian crisis does not divert global and American attention from long term stability in the region which is of vital importance to ensure global as well as Indian strategic interests are secured. India enjoys convergence of some if not all interests with most of the stakeholders, both within Afghanistan and outside. There are those who, like India, understand the strategic implications of a radicalized and fundamentalist regime in Kabul. New Delhi has the requisite credentials to take lead in bringing together a coalition aimed at providing humanitarian assistance, work on regional security and contain radicalization. The Indian policy approach in current geo-political dynamics needs to leverage comprehensive national power, emphasizing on smart power while retaining hard power option in securing its national interests.

Chapter I: Introduction

“We want an Afghanistan that is shaped by the dreams of the great Afghan people, not by irrational fears and overreaching ambitions of others”

PM Narendra Modi

Geo-Strategic Location

The geo-strategic location of Afghanistan at the crossroads of Central Asia has played a significant role in shaping its destiny as a nation state and defined its relevance in the global geo-political dynamics. Afghanistan’s geographical location wherein it served as a gateway to India, on the ancient Silk Road not only made it *geo-strategically significant for India* but also resulted in it being the centre piece in the Great Game between British and the Soviets in early 20th Century. Menon, S. (2021) quotes British Foreign Secretary Palmerston who argued in 1840 that; *since the Russian and British armies were bound to meet one day, it was best to ensure that the meeting took place as far as possible from India, instead of staying at home to receive the visit.*¹ The exclusivity of Afghanistan lies not only in its geographical location as the hub of great empires but also in its topography, which in turn affects its populace. Afghanistan has been largely inhabited by fiercely proud tribes following a strict feudal system preferring death to being subjugated. Since the beginning of recorded history, Afghans have been engaged in conflict either with foreign intruders or amongst themselves aligned to their distinct tribal factions. The quote from William Dalrymple’s *Return of a King: The Battle*

for Afghanistan 1839-1842 remains relevant even today: “it is certainly no easy thing to invade or govern the Kingdom of Khurasan [Afghanistan]”.² The Afghans proudly claim that they have never been conquered and their nation is graveyard for empires. The checkered history of Afghanistan as a nation is a consequence of weak nationality, entrenched tribal and Islamic traditions, strong resistance to modernization and infinite series of conflicts. The nation continues to remain locked in a primeval time warp, decades behind the rest of the world.

Afghanistan is a landlocked country bordering Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan in the north, Iran in the west, Pakistan in the south-east and China in the east.



Fig 1: Afghanistan Physiographic Map

Source : CIA Maps

<https://www.cia.gov/resources/map/afghanistan/>

The Hindu Kush mountain ranges with elevation ranging from 6000 to 7000 metres, covering three-fourths of Afghanistan’s area acts as a natural buffer and affords

protection from military intervention besides creating habitation pockets with distinct ethnic and cultural identities. The country's rugged terrain and extreme climatic conditions have restricted Afghanistan to an agrarian society with agriculture and herding being the main occupation of the Afghans. Recent explorations in the resource rich region led to the discovery of huge reserves of hydrocarbons and minerals resources including rare-earth elements in Afghanistan. Additionally, being the underbelly of Central Asian Republic (CAR) nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the discovery of hydro-carbon deposits in the CARs also added crucial contemporary geo-political and economic significance to Afghanistan ensuring that it continues to remain the centre piece of global and regional chess boards.

Ethnic Tribes and Religious Beliefs

Afghanistan is an amalgamation of various tribes and ethnic groups, hence strong

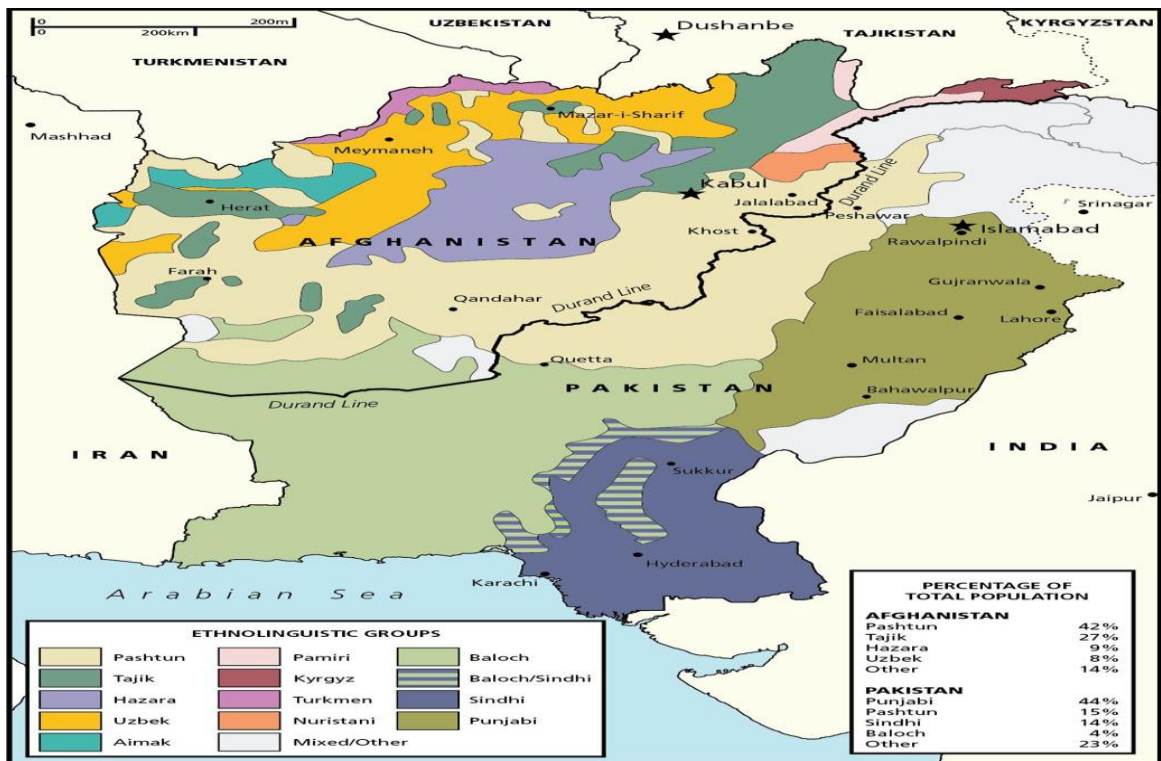


Fig 2: Afghanistan and Pakistan Ethnic Groups Map

Source : National Geographic

<https://media.nationalgeographic.org/assets/photos/000/329/32912.jpg>

tribal affiliations and integral tribal cultures direct affairs in this diverse country. Demographically the population of Afghanistan is approx 37 million including approximately 3-4 million Afghan refugees living outside the country. It is a heterogeneous, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society, with the various ethnic groups having overlapping boundaries. The Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group followed by Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Baluch and others. The term *Afghan*, historically is synonymous with *Pashtun* and forms the national identity of modern day Afghanistan. There are more than thirty languages spoken in Afghanistan with Dari (Persian) and Pashto being the two main languages used for education and administration. Persian is spoken by approximately half of the population and serves as a lingua franca for the majority. Uzbek and Turkmen are spoken in the northern areas while Pashto is widely spoken in the southern, eastern and south western part of the country including areas bordering neighboring western Pakistan.

Afghans traditionally have been organized into tribal and other kinship-based groups, which follow their own traditional customs with *Pashtunwali* being most prominent of them excluding few urban areas. Insofar as the religious beliefs of Afghanistan are concerned the tenets of Islam govern the affairs of state wherein its belief and core values emanate from Sunni –Islamic ideology. An estimated 80% of the population practice Sunni Islam, following the Hanafi school of jurisprudence; 19% is Shi'a and about 1% or less follow other religions. Despite attempts during the 1980s to secularize Afghan society, Islamic practices pervade all aspects of life. In fact, Islam served as the rallying point for masses to oppose the Soviet invasion. Similarly, Islamic religious tradition and codes, along with traditional practices, provide the principal means

of controlling personal conduct and resolving disputes. (Afghanistan detailed facts sheet given at appendix B)

Historical Perspective and the Great Games

From the historical perspective the genesis of nation state of Afghanistan can be attributed to Ahmad Shah Abdali (subsequently known as Ahmad Shah Durrani) who founded the Durrani Empire in 1747, after the death of the Persian king Nadir Shah thus laying foundation for modern day Afghanistan. However, to the Afghans, this sense of nationality was merely a compromise for peace rather than any patriotic awakening for their homeland. Amin Saikal in *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival*, identifies three primary factors which explain Afghanistan's weak nationality, these are : royal polygamy along with power rivalries, foreign intervention and fundamental extremism.³ Timur who succeeded Ahmad Shah Durrani, consolidated the Durrani empire and moved the capital from Kandahar to Kabul in 1776 to safeguard it from the turbulent Pashtun heartlands. Kabul till date continues as the capital city of the country, forming an important power hub along with the cities of Kandhar, Herat, Mazar – e Sharif, Kunduz and Jalalabad.

The Great Game between the British and Russian empires in the late 19th century witnessed Afghanistan emerging as a buffer state between these two empires. The Great Game is a British term attributed to Arthur Conolly, an intelligence officer of the British East India Company referring to what was perceived by the British to be strategic rivalry and conflict between the British and the Russian Empire for supremacy in Central Asia. It is a popular belief that in July 1840, in a mail to Major Henry Rawlinson, recently

appointed as the political agent in Kandahar, (Afghanistan) Conolly stated: “*You've a great game, a noble game, before you.*”⁴ The classical Great Game period is generally regarded as running approximately from the Russo-Persian Treaty of 1813 to the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 with reduction in its intensity following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Afghanistan gained its independence from the British following the third Anglo-Afghan war of 1919.

The Durand Line

The Durand Line was a significant outcome of the classical Great Game era which continues to have geo-political and security ramifications even today. The Durand line was created due to the British fear of a Russian invasion onto India through the Afghan frontiers. The British moved from the forward policy to the closed door policy in respect of Afghanistan after two successive failures in 1840 and 1880 in trying to subjugate the Afghans. A direct consequence of this policy was the demarcation of the borders between Afghanistan and British India. The main aim of this political manoeuvre was to take advantage of the weak hierarchy in Afghanistan and force a line as deep into the Afghan territory so that the major routes of invasion to India remain under the control of the British. Thus the Durand Line was drawn with the assent of the Emir of Afghanistan who had little or no control over this frontier regions ruled by the tribal's. The Durand Line Agreement or Durand Line Treaty resulted in the carving out of a new province called North West Frontier Province (NWFP) out of annexed areas from Afghanistan, which are currently part of Pakistan and includes Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Majority of the Afghans were unaware that their land was planned to be split in

half. According to Ghilzai S. (2016), *“the division cut part of Afghanistan’s territory, an amount which without made Afghanistan nearly half its former size; it cut off Afghanistan’s one and only access to a large body of water (the Arabian Sea, and ultimately the Indian Ocean). And that was just the start of the problems the line caused.”*⁵

The Durand Line triggered a long-running dispute between the governments of Afghanistan and British ruled India. Since the signing of the Durand Line Treaty, there were riots every few years, by the Pashtuns living along the Durand Line frontier, which anthropologist Louis Dupree highlights in his book, *Afghanistan*, *“[t]he major difficulty developed over the rights of the [Pashtun people] on the Indian side of the Durand Line, especially those who had fought against the British in the Third Anglo-Afghan War. The Afghans wanted loose suzerainty over the [Pashtun] on both sides of the Durand Line.”*⁶ The Pashtuns fought with the Afghans against the British hence, they feel greater affinity towards Afghanistan and did not give any credence to artificial boundary drawn by the British. Pakistan inherited the 1893 Durand Line after its partition from India in 1947 with no formal agreement between Islamabad and Kabul on its ratification till date. *Afghanistan’s Loya Jirga or Grand Assembly of 1949* unanimously passed a resolution nullifying the covenants signed between Afghanistan and British India and declared the Durand Line a *“bogus, fictitious and invalid border”* as they saw it exparte and the Taliban too hold similar stance. Pakistan has been dominating the Durand Line since 1947 and sees the ‘frontier’ as de-jure border.⁷ The Durand line thus continues to be a source of discord between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with potential as conflict area that can be leveraged by India.

The Soviet Invasion and Civil War

The *second phase of classical Great Game* commenced when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1980 thus making it a strategic playground for the two superpowers, both aiming to increase their sphere of influence in the region and. The United States of America (USA) began supporting diplomatic and military efforts in Afghanistan in early 1980s to contain Soviet expansionist designs. America colluded with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to form anti-Soviet alliance and armed the *Mujahideen (Islamic warriors engaged in jihad - holy war)* with sophisticated weaponry. The Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, leaving behind a weak government led by Dr Najibullah. The withdrawal of Soviet Union from Afghanistan and its subsequent collapse ended the American rationale for intervention, thus strengthening influence of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in turbulent Afghanistan. According to Menon, S. (2021), “*the collapse of Soviet Union had buttressed regional and ethnic identities in CAR and Afghanistan as well. Afghan ethnic groups, such as Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmen, now had their own supporters abroad and countries to look to for funding, bases and help.*”⁸

The *Civil War phase* of 1992-1996 commenced when the Dr. Najibullah led government was replaced by the Mujahideen in 1992. Afghanistan was declared an Islamic state for the first time in history as a direct consequence of the fundamentalism that had taken primacy during the jihad against the Soviets.⁹ While all tribal factions were glad to see the back of the Soviets and the removal of the communist rule of Najibullah, the largely Pashtun population was not willing to accept a Tajik in control of Kabul. The situation was akin to that which had existed when Amanullah was dethroned by a Tajik from the north in 1926. History had repeated itself but with a subtle difference; this time

Afghanistan would slump further into a civil war with no end in sight. As had been the case in the past, with the foreign intruders ousted, tribal and Islamic factions would prevent the country from breaking out of its primeval time warp.

The Taliban Ascent and the New Great Game

The genesis of the current Taliban preeminence can be attributed to the failure of the Mujahideens to establish a stable government after the Soviet withdrawal and the collapse of subsequent governments. The movement was led by Mullah Muhammad Umar with a group of 'madrassa' (religious school) teachers and students basically of the Durrani Pashtun clan. The mission was to end the tyrannical power of the various Mujahideen warlords and establish an exclusively Islamic regime. The movement succeeded largely because of the military aid provided by Pakistan and the financial backing given by Saudi Arabia. The capture of the capital city of Kabul in September 1996, and the subsequent control of Mazar-e-Sharif in August 1998, brought the Taliban to the fore and they became the predominant group controlling a major part of Afghanistan.

Radicalization or **Talibanization**, as it's colloquially referred to connect Afghanistan to the *jihadist archipelago* of Al-Qaida and Osama Bin Laden. The lethal nexus of Taliban and Al Qaida, along with a never ending supply of fundamentalists from the madrassas of Pakistan, created a security threat to the civilized world of mammoth proportions. The terror attack of 9/11 on World Trade Centre and the resultant GWOT combined with the discovery of vast hydro-carbon deposits in CAR nations lent a critical geo-political significance to Afghanistan impacting the regional security in Asia. The

UNSC authorization in December 2001 for creation of ISAF to assist the Karzai administration paved the way for USA led NATO forces intervention in Afghanistan and advent of the third phase of classical Great Game or *The New Great Game*. The intervention though ostensibly was launched to capture Osama bin Laden as part of GWOT, had a larger objective of having USA/ EU influence in the resource rich region. Pakistan became a key regional player aiming to gain a position of advantage due to its physical proximity and affiliations with the USA as a frontline state in the GWOT in the region. In such a milieu, Afghanistan once again becomes the battlefield of outside players with strategic designs and personal interests. India with its historical linkages traditionally had strong and friendly bilateral relations with Afghanistan. Since the creation of ISAF, India has invested heavily in Afghanistan's reconstruction with numerous projects costing in excess of USD 3 Billion.

President Barack Obama announced withdrawal of USA troops on 27th May 2014 in a phased manner with a timetable for withdrawing most of the troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2016. The first phase of his plan called for 9,800 U.S. troops to remain after the combat mission concludes at the end of 2014, limited to training Afghan forces and conducting operations against *the remnants of al-Qaeda*. The US led coalition forces formally concluded its combat mission in December 2014 and the ANDSF was put in charge of Afghanistan's security.¹⁰ The ANDSF, however, faced significant challenges in retaining position and protecting cities against the Taliban who continued to attack rural districts and carry out suicide attacks in major cities.¹¹ The war remained largely a stalemate despite a marginal increase in US troop deployment in 2017, execution of combat missions and a shift in USA military strategy to target Taliban revenue sources

by launching strikes against drug labs and opium production sites. Washington Post reported on 29 February 2020 that the United States and the Taliban had signed an agreement laying out a fourteen-month timetable for full U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in exchange for the prevention of attacks against the United States and its allies. Both sides pledged to support efforts to achieve a lasting cease-fire between the Taliban and the Afghan government.¹² The announcement of withdrawal without any firm solution or lowering in violence disturbed US allies and congressional lawmakers. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg warned that Afghanistan could become a terrorist haven and a home to the ISIS. He further stated that “*US withdrawal would adversely impact NATO operations in the country, as the United States provides the bulk of its military and logistical support.*”¹³

The withdrawal of residual USA forces from Afghanistan in September 2021; without an enduring politico-economic-security solution acceptable to all the stakeholders created a power vacuum which was rapidly filled by Taliban in surprisingly short time. Multiple nations and opposing forces are actively contesting the strategic space created by withdrawal of USA for having influence with the dominant group in resource rich region to include China, Pakistan and Iran among others that is likely to have serious security ramifications for the Region. Iran has greater affinity with Afghanistan due to a common religion, history and cultural ties the two nations have together so that the slightest socio- cultural or political development in either of these countries makes an inevitable impact on the other. The rise of mujahideen movement against the Soviet regime prompted Iran to channelise funds and military aid to the Shias of the Hazaras and was instrumental in the formation of the Hizh-e-Wahadat, a united party for all Shiite

groups. Pakistan has always been obsessed with the need to control Afghanistan seeking strategic depth against India besides furthering its Kashmir agenda. However, the front runner in the race to occupy the strategic space is China in close collaboration with Taliban and Pakistan. For close to two centuries Afghanistan has resisted adverse foreign intervention with its multi- ethnic and multicultural composition. The emergence of Taliban with its orthodox religious fundamentalist's philosophy post USA withdrawal in Afghanistan has serious ramifications for global and regional security scenario with potential as hub for global terrorism. While Taliban in its second innings is aiming to reinvent itself from being a terrorist organization into a legitimate government with global recognition, it must contend with complex governance challenges including armed resistance from Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Islamic State of Khorasan Province (IS-K), with whom it has long running feud. The emerging conflict scenario in post USA Afghanistan is dynamic, multi faceted and ever evolving characterized by inter tribal rivalries with resonance beyond its borders. A stable and progressive Afghanistan with a legitimate and preferably democratic government is critical for India's security. An unstable Afghanistan presents difficult security challenges for India at domestic as well as regional levels. India thus needs to recalibrate its foreign policy to safeguard its national, economic and security interests in view of current geo-political dynamics and governance dispensation in Afghanistan.

Statement of Problem

The withdrawal of USA led NATO troops from Afghanistan and Taliban government in Kabul supported by China and Pakistan has created instability in the resource rich region. The dynamic security situation in the neighbourhood necessitates a

responsive strategy by India which has invested heavily in the reconstruction and capacity building in Afghanistan. A turbulent radicalized Afghanistan with collusive support of its adversaries China and Pakistan is likely to pose national security challenges for India. There is also likelihood of radicalization and spread of terrorism in J & K. India's security concerns involving Afghanistan are concrete and tangible having serious implication for its endeavor to be stakeholder having say in global strategic affairs. A stable and peaceful Afghanistan with a legitimate and preferably democratic government is imperative for India's national security calculus. The impact of the Taliban's return on militant Islamic fundamentalism in the region in general and in India and Pakistan in particular is a cause for concern. Additionally, possible use of Taliban by Pakistan to further its Kashmir agenda and give fresh lease of life to waning terrorism needs to be proactively negated by India from national security and counter terrorism operational perspective. The dynamic situation in Afghanistan needs to be analyzed, assessed and a nuanced, proactive pragmatic policy evolved for safeguarding India's national interest and ensuring a say in global strategic affairs.

Research Objectives

The research aims to achieve the objectives of:-

- a. To analyse the current security situation in Afghanistan;
- b. To identify the strategic interests' of emerging players in Afghanistan;
- c. To explore plausible ramifications for India's national security including radicalization and spread of terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir; and
- d. To explore India's policy options in Afghanistan post USA withdrawal.

Research Strategy and Design

Research strategy adopted will be qualitative with an aim to provide insights into emerging geo-political dynamics in Afghanistan and implications for India's security calculus and terrorism. Endeavour would be to examine policy options and recommend a strategy to proactively address the dynamic geo-political situation in Afghanistan in consonance with India's national security interests. The research design would be Descriptive.

Justification / Rationale

Geo-strategic location of ethnically diverse Afghanistan with its close proximity to resource rich CAR nations necessitates a holistic review of dynamic security situation in the region. India traditionally enjoyed good relationship with Afghanistan and is viewed as genuine well wisher by the Afghani populace in light of its support, developmental and capacity building projects through the crisis years. India has high stakes in ensuring stability and security in the region; specifically Afghanistan in consonance with its national interest. The Taliban led dispensation influenced by Pakistan and supported by China is a cause of concern in the context of India's politico-economic-security calculus at the national level. The possibility of radicalization and boost to terrorism in state of J & K needs to be studied holistically. The adverse security ramifications of Taliban dominated Afghanistan government along with Sino-Pak collusive policies have already been experienced by India during the earlier period of Taliban governance. Hence, the emerging politico-security scenario in the region post

USA exit needs to be deliberated, policy options generated and response strategy evolved by India in consonance with its national interest.

Research Questions

The Research questions framed based on the research objectives set out are :-

- a. What is the geo-strategic significance of Afghanistan to the major players including India ?
- b. What is the genesis of current security situation in Afghanistan?
- c. What are the implications of Taliban dominated government on India's security?
- d. What are the areas for collusive association between China, Pakistan and Taliban? What are their connotations for India?
- e. What is likelihood of Taliban supported by Pakistan influencing radicalization and terrorism globally and within India?
- f. What will be the effect on terrorism in J & K ?
- g. What could be India's policy options and plausible counter strategy to safeguard its National Interest in backdrop of dynamic geo-political situation in Afghanistan?

Scope / Limitations/ Delimitations

The study deals with an ongoing issue related to dynamic ever evolving geo-political situation in the region that is manifestation of withdrawal of USA led forces from Afghanistan. Multiple nations, Taliban factions and ethnic Afghan tribal warlords are jostling to occupy the resultant strategic vacuum. There are multiple imponderables and inter related issues rooted in history. Additionally there are some issues that fall in the operationally classified domains. The study is limited in scope to those aspects which are tangible, unclassified and available as open source information. The research is also limited to macro policy issues and would not dwell on tactical aspects.

Research Methods and Data Sources

The research methods applied will be combination of analytical and exploratory relying on both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources will be by obtaining opinion of Subject Matter Experts with help of interviews and questionnaire. The secondary data source would consist of critical review of secondary literature, analysis of data available in public domain i.e. reports released by governments of major players in Afghanistan and non governmental agencies.

Chapterisation Scheme

The dissertation is proposed to be documented under following seven chapters:-

- a. **Chapter I - Introduction, Geo-Strategic Significance, Historical Perspective and the Great Games.** The chapter gives insight in the importance of geostrategic location of Afghanistan. It also highlights the

evolution of Afghanistan as a Nation and its strategic significance to world powers historically; popularly referred to as the Great Games.

b. **Chapter II - Literature Review & Research Methodology.** The chapter will elaborate on the survey of literatures, details of research methodology, methods of data collection and data analysis.

c. **Chapter III - Geo-political Dynamics and Key Players in the Region.** The chapter would endeavour to identify the key players in the region, their interests in Afghanistan and the geo-political dynamics at play. While analyzing the key players and their individual interests in Afghanistan emphasis would be to analyse the same with specific reference to India.

d. **Chapter IV - USA Withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Current security scenario in the Region.** This chapter will draw linkages between the USA foreign policy, GWOT in general with specific focus on its Af-Pak policy, rebalancing in Indo- pacific and withdrawal of USA led ISAF troops from Afghanistan. The evolutionary nature of the dynamic security situation in Afghanistan and its ramifications would be examined to draw relevant inferences for India's national security calculus.

e. **Chapter V - Taliban - Sino – Pak Collusive Actions: Implications for Radicalization and Terrorism.** The chapter would trace the escalation of jihadism, radicalization and terrorism globally, regionally and in India over the years drawing linkages with Taliban reign and Sino – Pak collusive support.

f. **Chapter VI - India's Traditional Linkages with Afghanistan and implication for India's National security arising due to current dispensation in Kabul.**

The chapter would examine the traditional bond that India enjoys with Afghanistan. The focus would be on India's Soft power, investment and developmental work during the crisis period. The implications of current turbulence in Afghanistan wherein Taliban is in control with backing of Pakistan on India's security calculus will be explored with specific reference to radicalization and terrorism.

g. **Chapter VII - India's Policy Options, Research Analysis, Recommendations and Conclusion.**

This chapter would analyse India's policy options and strategy to safeguard its national security interest in backdrop of US withdrawal, Taliban government and geo-political dynamics at play in Afghanistan. The study will conclude with the summary of findings and recommendations.

CHAPTER I: END NOTES

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- ¹ Menon, S. (2021). *India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present*. Brookings Institution Press.
- ² Dalrymple, W. (2014). *Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan, 1839–42* (Illustrated ed.). Vintage.
- ³ Saikal, A. (2012). *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (Revised ed.). I.B. Tauris.
- ⁴ J W Kaye, *Lives of Indian Officers*, 2 vols, (1867), ii, p.101. cited in the 2000 Lectures and Memoirs, by the British Academy, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/2491/111p179.pdf>
- ⁵ Ghilzai S. (2016). *The Durand Line*. <https://www.afghan-web.com/history/the-durand-line/#10>
- ⁶ Dupree, L. (2022). *Afghanistan Louis Dupree - 2012 Edition*. OUP Publishers----9780195776348-----2012
- ⁷ Omrani, B. (2009). THE DURAND LINE: HISTORY AND PROBLEMS OF THE AFGHAN-PAKISTAN BORDER. *Asian Affairs*, 40(2), 177–195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068370902871508>
- ⁸ Menon, S. (2021). *India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present*. Brookings Institution Press.Pp 158-159.
- ⁹ Saikal, A. (2004). *Modern Afghanistan A history of Struggle and Survival*. New York:IB Tauris and Co Ltd, 2004, p. 209
- ¹⁰ Margherita, S. (2014, December 28). U.S.-Led Forces Formally End Afghanistan Combat Mission. The Wall Street Journal. [U.S.-Led Forces Formally Ending Afghanistan Combat Mission - WSJ](https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-led-forces-formally-ending-afghanistan-combat-mission-2014-12-28)

¹¹ Ali, I. (2018, May 1). “Afghan Security Forces see drop in Numbers as Security Deteriorates.” *The Reuters*. [Afghan security forces see drop in numbers as security deteriorates | Reuters](#)

¹² Dadouch, S. George, S. and Lamothe D. (2020, February 29). “US, Taliban sign Afghanistan Peace Deal in Doha.” *The Washington Post*. [US, Taliban sign Afghanistan peace deal in Doha - The Washington Post](#)

¹³ Taylor, A. and Birnbaum, M. (2020, November 18). “NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg says Afghanistan could become Terrorist Haven if Troops Withdraw.” *The Washington Post*. [NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg says Afghanistan could become terrorist haven if troops withdraw - The Washington Post](#)

Chapter II - Literature Review

A detailed literature review was carried out to identify, evaluate and interpret the work produced by researchers and scholars on the subject matter of the research problem and identify the research gaps. The details of the literature survey carried out are enumerated as follows:-

a. **Shankar, J. (2020)** India's External Affairs Minister talks about the nuanced evolution of pragmatic foreign policy of the country in his book *The India way : Strategies for an Uncertain World*. He has analysed in detail the evolving geo-political dynamics and emerging challenges that need to be handled by India with a nuanced approach. Drawing extensively from his experience as India's ambassador to China he advocates a pragmatic and practical approach by the country to safeguard its national security interest. The book does not dwell on the impact of withdrawal of USA troops from Afghanistan, Taliban forming government and India's strategy post these events.

b. **Menon. S. (2021)** , a former National Security Advisor, Diplomat and Scholar, dwells upon changes in India's policy since independence and proposes future course for Indian foreign policy in his book *India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present*. Menon argues that in the current geopolitical scenario, Asia is central to world security and prosperity with territorial claims, rising power, naval build-ups along with increased contestation in maritime space resulting in rapid power shifts in the world. The book is gives insight and clear understanding on the geopolitical dynamics of Asia from the past till the present day. The book however

does not examine the *collusive support areas* of China's and Pakistan. Additionally their strategic interests and impact of Taliban and Haqqani network on India's national security have not been analysed in context of withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan.

c. **Brivati, Brian (2021)**, examines the multiple factors that resulted in dramatic collapse of President Ghani led government and rapid ascendance of Taliban even before the ISAF had completely withdrew in his book *Losing Afghanistan*; a collection of essays. The differing points of opinion in the essays underscoring the complexity of the challenges. *Losing Afghanistan* explores the arguments for and against intervention while highlighting the difficulty of establishing unity of purpose and effort in such severe circumstances. The insightful essays on Afghanistan from an outsider's perspective term it as unfortunate that the peace negotiations, lead to the inappropriate haste in withdrawal, seriously undermining the Afghan populations confidence, resulting in the untimely collapse of the Ghani government.

d. **Malone, D. (2011)**, elaborates in his book *Does the Elephant Dance* about India's International Relations; historical foundation and evolution of Indian Foreign Policy multilateralism based on Authors perspective as Canadian Ambassador in Delhi. He identifies historical aspects relevant to foreign policy by examining internal and external security challenges along with analyses of domestic and international economic factors. He evaluates India's policy towards its South Asian neighbours as well as explaining its multilateral diplomacy with respect to China, the USA, Europe, Russia and its look East policy. *The Research Gaps*

identified are implication of CAR nations on Indian security and foreign policy beside Sino - Pakistan collusive actions. The book forms a backgrounder for insight in India's Foreign Policy from a westerner's perspective.

e. **Abhankar (2015)** is Professor of Practice of Diplomacy and Public Affairs, School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Indiana University in his article *Afghanistan after the 2014 US drawdown : The transformation of India's policy* examines India's challenges and strategic options with intersecting interests. He analysis in detail the impact of the USA decision to draw down its forces by December 2014 on India to re-align its Afghanistan policy to safeguard its own interests in backdrop of India's investment and Pakistan backed radical elements dominating Afghanistan political landscape. The analysis carried out backdrop of Obama's Pivot to Asia strategy remains relevant in current Afghanistan scenario even though the article does not dwell on the impact of Taliban and Haqqani network on Counter Infiltration / Counter Terrorism operations in J & K.

f. **Schofield, Victoria. (2009)**, a leading regional expert, in her book *Afghan Frontier*, traces the history of borderlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan with its relevance in context of global conflict this region. These bordering areas now generally referred to as *Af-Pak* assume enhanced significance in international security calculus, thus it is imperative to comprehend historical and geopolitical perspective of the region. She describes the Afghan tribal culture in early 19th century as '*here every man is born soldier, every child has hid knife, and every man has three to four knives.*' She analyses the strong ethnic linkages between Pastuns and Pashtunwali in Af-Pak region. Schofield stresses that the creation of the

Durand Line, Taliban resurgence and later Taliban power politics established the strong security linkages of Afghanistan to the rest of South Asia. She reiterates today's Afghanistan can be related with the history, due to the personal, ethnic, cultural, and religious clashes of leaders. Afghans of every living generation saw how disorder, civil war, donor fatigue, and drugs paralyzed the country. From their perspective, modern Afghanistan had a semblance of peace under the initial rule of the Taliban 1.0.

g. **Boni (2021)** in his article *Afghanistan 2020: The US – Taliban peace deal, intra Afghan talks regional implications* carries out a holistic review of the implications of US – Taliban peace agreement and the intra Afghan negotiations in the Covid pandemic impacted year which severely affected the economy and citizens of Afghanistan. Boni examines the interests of the key players namely China, India and Pakistan in the country post USA's withdrawal. The author does not factor in the role and interest of other players to include Russia, Iran and CAR nations among others in the resource rich region.

h. **Fair, C. (2010)** in her article titled *India in Afghanistan and Beyond: Opportunities and Constraints* examines at length India's strategic interests in Afghanistan and the implications for Pakistan. She further argues that India's interests in Afghanistan are neither Pakistan centric nor restricted to regional security but linked to India's aspirations as global power. She holistically reviews India's security interests in Afghanistan and its extended strategic neighborhood. The author restricts herself to contextualizing India's interest in Afghanistan with

limited factoring of the other key players in the New Great Game including Russia and China.

i. **Havlik (2019)** in his paper *Key roles and interests of Pakistan and India in Afghanistan* analyses in detail the role of India and Pakistan in backdrop of security situation in Afghanistan post withdrawal of USA troops from the region. However during the analyses the author restricted himself to the two neighbours without factoring in the dynamics and role of other key players in the region particularly China.

j. **Kelly. Et.al. (2015)**, in a Rand Corporation research paper *The US Army in Asia 2030 – 2040*, examines the security challenges in Asia from US perspective in 2030–2040 wherein it develops concepts for USA and Chinese interests. The conflicting and often colluding interests of the two nations form the backdrop of USA national policies while examining USA national strategy in light of these policies. Specifically the paper examines security cooperation with regional states, the need for flexible capabilities and posture that supports allies along with US Army's capability to project forces in the region.

k. **Muni (2012)** in *Institute of South Asian Studies* article focuses on Obama Administration's Pivot to Asia strategy – a precursor to current exit of US troops from Afghanistan and findings include shaping of new regional security architecture in Indo-Pacific along with Impact of China and role of alliance. However it does not examines Impact of Taliban on regional security nor the role of India and China in the New Great Game.

- l. **Pandey (2021)**, in his research paper *A New Front against China: Review of Afghanistan Policy of India* focuses on multiple scenarios post the withdrawal of USA led NATO forces from Afghanistan. It further analyses role of China, Pakistan and Taliban in the resultant power vacuum. The research in its scenario building restricts itself to the power play in Afghanistan without carrying out holistic analysis on India's security calculus and counter terrorism operation in J & K.
- m. **Saud and Ahmad (2019)** in policy perspectives titled *China's engagement in Afghanistan: Implications for the region* dwells on the increasing economic and commercial investment of China in Afghanistan. The authors highlights the historical connect between the two nations and the contemporary issues of security concerns for Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) along with narco-terrorism emanating from Afghanistan. The authors restrict themselves only to China-Afghanistan relationship without considering the impact and role of other players in the game particularly India, Pakistan, Iran and the CAR nations.
- n. **Wang (2017)** in his article titled *India's policy towards Afghanistan: Implications to the Regional Security Governance* deliberates upon India-Afghanistan ties after 2001 and the challenges that India is likely face post USA withdrawal from Afghanistan. He further suggests adjustments in India's Afghanistan policy. However, he stops short of analyzing the China influence on Taliban government in Kabul and role of Pakistan.

Chapter III : Geo-political Dynamics and Key Players in the Region

The New Great Game: Key Players

The withdrawal of residual USA forces from Afghanistan in September 2021, without an enduring politico-economic-security solution acceptable to all the stakeholders created a power vacuum which was rapidly occupied by the Taliban in surprisingly short time. Multiple nations and opposing forces are actively contesting the strategic space created by withdrawal of USA for having influence with the dominant group in resource rich region. The nations competing for strategic influence include China, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, CAR nations, Russia, Qatar and Turkey among others that is likely to have serious security ramifications for the region and India. The national interests of these countries viewed through the prism of national security, religious and tribal affinity besides economic interests would be the defining factor for regional stability. The geo-political dynamics and power play would not only define the future of Afghanistan but also have enduring impact on the global and regional security calculus. India needs to adopt a nuanced approach to ensure its relevance in Afghanistan and the resource rich region. Additionally, India needs to recalibrate its foreign policy to safeguard its national, economic and security interests while leveraging its comprehensive national power in view of current geo-political dynamics and governance dispensation in Afghanistan. The Key players that need to be factored by India while re-calibrating its Afghan policy are enumerated in succeeding paragraphs.

China

China is emerging as one of the key strategic player in post USA withdrawal Afghanistan to secure both its economic and security interests. According to Pandey (2021), past few years have witnessed, China's economic and strategic interest in Afghanistan greatly enhanced.¹ Beijing has changed its approach towards Afghanistan from a cultivated indifference to growing engagement. China once believed that Washington's GWOT is more oriented towards controlling resource rich region and the strategic chokepoints *with aim to encircle China*.² The UN mandated, USA led ISAF deployment in Afghanistan necessitated, China to recalibrate its approach. The ramification of long-term US presence near its border resulted in Beijing adopting a more pro-active hedge policy, which led it to support both the Afghan government and Taliban. Beijing's security concerns vis-à-vis Afghanistan emanate from its apprehension of the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in its Muslim populated Xingjian province through the bordering Wakhan and the northern areas of Pakistan. Singh (2001),³ contend that historically, Xinjiang became part of China in the closing decades of the Ching dynasty and the province was known for frequent rebellions.⁴ The communists amalgamated the region in 1949, when it became one of the five autonomous regions and Xinjiang officially became the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The Uyghur Islamic militancy gained ascendancy in mid 1980's as a corollary to the mujahideens raised, educated and trained in the Pakistan madrassas to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. The Uyghur's have been opposing the Chinese religious suppression and changing demography by settling the Han population in Xinjiang.⁵ Emergence of the Taliban has serious security ramifications for China as it perceives the Taliban will strengthen the

Uyghur's and in complicity with Afghans, Tajiks, and Kyrgyz Islamists the separatists will become potent force. From the economic perspective China has major economic stakes in XUAR, as the two most promising oil basins, viz. Tarim and Turpan, are located in XUAR. As a precautionary measure, China had constructed a boundary fence along the Karakoram highway in 1997 to check infiltration of fundamentalists. Simultaneously, China adopted a multi pronged strategy to contain the Uyghur's which included indoctrination, banning religious activities in Xinjiang, engaging with Islamic nations and also engaging with Taliban leadership.

As reported by the Reuters in their news report dated 12 December 2000, the Chinese actively engaged with the Taliban 1.0 leader Mullah Omar with promises of military, training proposals and assistance against fresh sanctions by the UN.⁶ The Chinese were aiming to placate the Taliban to ensure that they do not support any Islamic movement in XUAR. The Taliban too were looking at maintaining close relations with China with motive of getting military and financial aid. China, as part of its strategy to contain the support for the Islamic militancy in the Xinjiang province, has been more than willing to assist. The drug trade also causes concerns in China as routes have been carved out, by the drug cartels with Taliban connivance, into XUAR. The Chinese are also concerned with the ramification of narco-terrorism and narco-dollars funding militancy in XUAR. The Chinese security interest assumed new dimension with USA in the neighbourhood in vicinity of Chinese borders, an area perceived by China as its backyard. Beijing perceived American presence in the region as a sequel to the New Great Game. Consequentially, Beijing protected its interest by maintaining relations with both the Karzai government and the Taliban. The Afghan government was keen on securing

alternate sources of funding and with China promising investment in developmental projects in war torn Afghanistan, it gained influence in Kabul. Chinese President Jiang Zemin met with Karzai in January 2002 and committed resources for rebuilding Afghanistan, providing \$150 million for this purpose.⁷ Post the agreement the Chinese companies began establishing telephone services and a pan nation fibre-optic cable network.

The Chinese also used the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to voice its concern with regards to the ISAF presence in the region and a call for a specific timetable for close draw down of US bases in Central Asia.⁸ As the Taliban started reasserting itself, Beijing commenced funding certain factions of the Taliban. According to the figures reported by prominent Taliban researcher Antonio Giustozzi, China remained the biggest funder and of the ISI-backed Peshawar Shura based in northeast Afghanistan in the 2005-2011 period.⁹ The Chinese funding and supply of military hardware to Peshawar Shura linked factions was in synchronization with the Chinese hedging policy and served twin purposes of nurturing the anti US insurgency in the area where ferocious resistance was taking place and secure political sway for the future with Taliban elements operating in vicinity of Badakhshan province.¹⁰

President Obama's announcement to withdraw ISAF forces in 2014 gave rise to denovo security threat with the fallout of a post-US withdrawal situation while negating the geo-political threat of encirclement by USA forces. Beijing actively pursued its hedging policy of engaging with Pakistan and Afghanistan government. Concurrently, as reported by New York Times, it held secret talks with Taliban in Urumqi in May 2015.¹¹ The Chinese policy culminated in the visit of the Taliban delegation led by Mullah

Baradar in July 2021 to meet with Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Tianjin.¹² The Chinese efforts towards a negotiated settlement were aimed at minimizing the threat emanating from political instability in Afghanistan. The reports of Uyghur fighters from XUAR fighting in northern Afghanistan are a matter of concern for China. According to Khanna S. (2021), the success of China's hedge policy has rested on the hostility of Islamic fundamentalist being directed against the West especially USA and India. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan will eliminate a major target for Islamic extremists in the region, which, coupled with the ongoing repression of Uyghur's, automatically degrades China's security environment in the region.¹³ Chinese strategist Major Li Dong contended that the CAR region as one of key flashpoints along with the Korean Peninsula and the South China seas.¹⁴ To counter this threat, China has maintained a functional security outpost with lookout towers on the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border manned by Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) troops from XUAR.¹⁵ It has also been reported that to safeguard its national interests the PLA has been entering the Afghanistan border through Tajikistan in garb of Joint Counter-Terrorism Operations.¹⁶ China also had signed a MoU on the BRI with Afghanistan. The changed dynamics in Afghanistan necessitated a stable pro Beijing government which would facilitate a conducive environment for the BRI projects. The Taliban-dominated government on its part would look at securing a no-strings attached infrastructure funding from Beijing in absence of other viable and credible options. This would facilitate the Chinese making operational the projects it had previously entered in agreement with the Karzai government. However, as Yun Sun puts it, *China has been burned badly in its previous investments in Afghanistan and will tread carefully in the future.*¹⁷

The Taliban victory will likely release foreign Islamists from al Qaida, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) from Afghanistan into Central and South Asia. According to the UN Sanctions Monitoring Team Report on the Afghan Taliban, the ETIM has several hundred members in Badakhshan and has established corridors to move its fighters between Syria and Afghanistan.¹⁸ It is also envisaged that the propaganda following the Taliban's victory would embolden and motivate the radicals and transnational terrorist groups impacting not only the security of Xinjiang but also the BRI and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects.

Iran

The predominantly Shia Iran shares a long border, a common religion, history and cultural affinity with Afghanistan. The developments in Afghanistan have always had significant bearing on the overall Iranian strategic perspective due to shared borders. Iran's policy in the region has basis in its geo-strategic interest and religious influence in Shia dominated areas. Movements like *Greater Baluchistan*, *Greater Afghanistan* and *Greater Pushunistan* directly impact Iran. The Afghanistan-Iran-Pakistan tri-junction was often referred as the Golden Crescent and over the years has been notorious as narcotic producing area. Iran provided refuge to a large population of Afghans during the period of Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The rise of mujahideen movement against the Soviet regime prompted Iran to channelize funds and military aid to the Shias of the Hazarajat. Iran united all the Shia groups in 1988 into Hizb-i- Wahadat and advocated their inclusion in the international negotiations dominated by Sunni groups supported by the USA, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Iran had envisaged that with the withdrawal of

Soviet forces the Afghan refugees would return to their homes. However, not only the refugees did not return due to the civil conflict amongst various tribes and ethnic groups, but the raging civil strife has resulted in more refugees flowing into Iran.¹⁹ The refugee influx had led to the spread of contagious diseases, gunrunning and drug smuggling. Iran also tried to play a mediator's role amongst the various groups after the Soviet withdrawal and even appointed a special representative in its foreign ministry as '*in-charge of the Afghan affairs*'.

The Taliban 1.0 coming to power in 1996 resulted in Iran hosting a regional conference, which was attended by Russia, India, Pakistan, China, CAR nations, the EU, the OIC and the representative of the UN.²⁰ Interestingly, the Sunni Taliban and Saudi Arabia did not send their representatives despite being invited by Shi'ite Iran. Tehran's foreign policy towards Afghanistan is dictated by a combination of factors to include solidarity with the Shia population in Af-Pak region, rivalry with Saudi Arabia for dominance in Islamic world and the USA. Iran has been deeply concerned with the future of the Shia population in Afghanistan especially after the Taliban atrocities in Herat, Hazarajat and Mazar-i-Sharif. The massacre of Iranian diplomats by the Taliban in 1998 further exacerbated the strained relations between the Taliban and Iran.²¹ Tehran's opposition to the Taliban was a product of both the ideological and strategic considerations. Iran's policy on the Afghan crisis has always been to limit Taliban influence in Southern Afghanistan, therefore involve the CAR, India, China and Russia to contain Talibanisation of Afghanistan and subsequently evolve a broad-based government as early as possible. Unlike Pakistan, where Afghan refugees were allowed to pursue economic activities, Iranian authorities never allowed the refugees to come out

of the camps and pursue any meaningful economic activity. Iran-Saudi relations which are less than cordial, made Teheran perceive that the Saudi-Pakistan-USA axis in Afghanistan poses a threat to Iran. The basis for this Iranian perception is the USA unwillingness to accept the Islamic Revolution in Iran; Saudi assistance along with others to dislodge Iran from the commanding position in Islamic world and Pakistan's Afghan policy. Khanna S. (2021) argues that despite their past hostility, Iran has collaborated closely with the Taliban, especially since 2005. Iran's primary motive to support the Taliban was to ensure the defeat of the USA and that no residual force is left behind after the US withdrawal.²² Countering the pro-Saudi and pro-ISI factions of the Taliban as well as containing the IS-K have been important elements of Tehran's engagement. Iran's strategic dependence on the Helmand River influenced it to develop friendly relations with the Taliban. Iran engaged in strategic partnership with Taliban with the disenfranchised Taliban of Helmand province after the ISI established the new Peshawar Shura in 2005 to counter the Quetta Shura's domination and establish an alternative power centre for the Taliban in the eastern Afghanistan.²³ It also started a liaison office between the Taliban and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Mashhad in 2007, which eventually became the regional command centre for the Taliban in Western Afghanistan in 2011 and declared its autonomy from Quetta Shura in 2014.²⁴ Once the Obama administration announced its intention for withdrawal of US forces from the region, Iran increased its funding to Taliban substantially to the tune of approximately \$ 200 million per annum. Iran also started providing advanced technology to the Taliban and permitted them to open training facility in Zahedan and Sistan. Tehran also reportedly provided funding and military equipment for the four new mobile fronts

created under Mulla Yaqoob's leadership and also supported a splinter group of the Afghan Taliban, Hezb-e-Walayate Islami, which had opposed the peace deal with the USA.²⁵

Iran – Taliban 2.0 ties were based on numerous mutual interests. The rise of IS-K in Afghanistan was one of the key reasons for a closer Iran - Taliban relationship aimed at countering the more extremist organization known to target Shias.²⁶ On the other hand Tehran was able to leverage its new found association and influence with Taliban to soften their anti-Shia propaganda. Notably, after the Taliban took Kabul, Iran was among the handful of nations that did not close its embassy in the city. It probably had its strategic interest in continued water flow from the Kajaki dam built upon the Helmand River. Incidentally, the Taliban's 1.0 decision to reduce the flow through the Kajaki dam after the drought of 2000 had caused significant discord between the two. Thus, when the ISAF made plans to upgrade the Kajaki Dam to provide electricity to southern Afghanistan, it caused serious concerns in Iran leading it to sponsor the Helmand Taliban groups to fight the ISAF and prevent the reconstruction of the dam.²⁷ The drug trade has been an important source of the Taliban's revenue with the Helmand area accounting for approximately 90% of Afghanistan's opium, necessitating requirement of safe passage that Taliban needed through Iran. Herat was considered an integral part of Iran, until 1857 and important for trade routes with Afghanistan. Iran has done considerable investments in infrastructure projects at the Islam Qala and Torghundi border crossings to support trade which significant economic interest for Tehran as it faces the brunt of US sanctions. Associated press reported that while Iran was hosting the first intra-Afghan talks in months in Tehran, where the delegations for the Afghan government and the

Taliban signed a joint declaration committing to seek peace, condemning civilian casualties during combat and pledging to continue talks, fighting surged in Afghanistan's western Badghis Province.²⁸ Iran is closely monitoring the development as Taliban completes six months in power. India can leverage the Chabahar port in Iran to safeguard its strategic interests.

Pakistan

Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan emanates from its perception as strategic depth against war with India or ensuring peace along its FATA frontiers since the time of partition. The concept of strategic depth has been defined as a way of securing *Islamic Depth* in the west and counterbalancing the conventionally superior *Hindu India*.²⁹ It's also among the primary reasons that it had become a frontline state for the USA during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan as also its requirement for basing terrorist training camps in its FATA and Afghanistan for training terrorists meant for J & K. The objective of Pakistan investing in a friendly government in Kabul, besides seeking strategic depth in the event of a war with India is also to marginalize India and Iran from any meaningful role in the CAR region. Pakistan was actively involved in the creation of the Taliban which came in being through the Pakistan based madrassas and has had political, financial and military support. The Taliban 1.0 government was propped by the Benazir Bhutto government to create a pliant regime in Afghanistan. Pakistan has always been strategically concerned with Afghanistan and the challenges posed by an ethnically similar population of Pashtuns spanning the border province of NWFP and adjoining areas in Afghanistan, making demands of separate *Pakhtunistan*. The tensions related to Pashtunistan between Pakistan and Afghanistan can be traced back to the Durand Line,

which Islamabad inherited at the time of partition and the Afghans rejected. Mohd Daoud Khan too rejected the Durand line both when he became Prime Minister of Afghanistan in 1953 and President in 1973. He championed the cause of a unified Pashtunistan, for which he had enlisted the support of the Soviet Union and twice attempted the invasion of Bajaur Agency in FATA.³⁰ The Z A Bhutto led Pakistani government in 1970s formulated policies oriented to destabilize Afghanistan soon after he was elected. The Pashtunistan issue was re-ignited resulting in anxieties in Islamabad and start of a covert campaign to undermine Daoud's rule and negate threat of Pashtun nationalism. As the former Pakistan army chief, General Kayani said in 2010, *strategic depth isn't about controlling Afghanistan but about ensuring Pakistan doesn't have a long-term security problem on its western border.*³¹

Singh V.K. (2001) further elucidates that the involvement of Pakistan in the resistance movement and as the conduit for military and financial aid for the mujahideen from the USA, also assisted the Pakistani Pashtuns joining ranks of political elite enabling them to exercise control and influence over Pashtun groups in Afghanistan. In leveraging for a pliant regime in Afghanistan, Islamabad also saw the opening up of CAR nations as a major source of economic and diplomatic gain. The proposal for laying pipelines through Afghanistan for oil and gas from CAR and the revenue generation has been a major consideration. Though primarily benefitting Pakistan, Saudi Arabia extended the financial support due to involvement of its oil company in collaboration with the USA company. The Taliban has strong links with the Pakistani fundamentalist political party Jamait-ul-ulema-e-Islam. The trucking and drug smuggling mafia has also closely supported the Taliban for their own vested interests. The result of these and the

war in Afghanistan has manifested in an increased flow of arms, drugs and easy money in Pakistan. The Taliban phenomenon has also given a fillip to conservative and fundamentalist forces and created internal tensions in Pakistan. The Sunni and Shia rivalry, separatist aspirations of Baluch and Sindhi populations along with the urge of Islamists to imitate the Taliban vision of society creates a criticality for Pakistan. As aptly summarized by Rashid *"the threat of an Islamic revolution in Pakistan has never been greater."* The association with Taliban has brought gun culture, increased involvement in drug trade and religious fundamentalism with extremist overtones in the society. Thus, *"it appears that instead of Afghanistan providing the strategic depth to Pakistan, it is Pakistan, which is now providing the strategic back up to the Taliban."*³² In the interim the fundamentalist in Pakistan were eulogizing the Taliban code for women. It was in light of these circumstances that Pakistan became the epicenter of Islamic militancy. The fundamentalist organizations nurturing these madrassas with Saudi finances sought greater role by internationalizing the spread of their brand of Islam through Pakistan trained terrorists.

Pakistan faced a catch 22 situation with the arrival of US troops in Afghanistan in 2001 as part of the GWOT against Taliban thus leading to rapid deterioration of fragile security situation in the region. Pakistan was caught in a unique dilemma of supporting USA against their own creation ie Taliban as part of the policy of seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan. Importantly, US presence had created a advantageous environment for Indian investments in infrastructure projects and boosted New Delhi's influence in Afghanistan. Pakistan perceived the increasing Indian official presence as an outflanking maneuver by the Indian security forces particularly its Intelligence agencies to conduct

operations against Pakistan. As the Indo-US strategic partnership developed in the 21st century, Islamabad's apprehension grew manifold and the withdrawal of US forces is a welcome development for Pakistan. The Taliban 2.0 victory can be directly attributed to Pakistan's support, however, which faction of Taliban assumes absolute power subsequently, is going to be a key factor in Islamabad-Kabul relations. The nationalist faction of the Taliban would be another deciding factor given the fact that its leaders faced consistent repression in Pakistan and both the important Taliban leaders Mullah Baradar and Mullah Ibrahim Sadar, have served years in Pakistani jails.³³

The consolidation of *Loy Kandahar* - a historical and cultural region of Afghanistan, comprising the modern Afghan provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Farah, Zabul and Uruzgan is likely to reignite the fire of Pashtun nationalism in the region. The re-emergence of the Afghan Taliban to power in Kabul, is unlikely to resolve Islamabad's Pashtunistan issue. While, Pakistan has succeeded in quashing the desire of majority of its Pashtun population to support the cause of Pashtunistan, the same, is not true in case Pashtuns of Afghanistan who have refused to recognise the Durand line as Af-Pak border. Hence, while Pakistan may believe that it has gained its desired strategic depth in Afghanistan, the rise of anti-Pakistan Pashtun nationalism in Afghanistan will likely complicate the situation for Islamabad. Already, Pakistan is facing a domestic Pashtun nationalist movement in the form of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM), which is fighting against the atrocities of the Punjabi state on Pashtuns.³⁴

The Afghan Taliban's consolidation over the government is also likely to result in the re-emergence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Pakistan which has re-absorbed a number of splinter radical groups including Taliban factions which had

previously defected to IS-K. In order to gain popular support, the TTP has also issued restrictions on targeting of civilians and supported the grievances of the PTM.³⁵ The main reason for the Afghan Taliban to circumvent support to the TTP was the domination of the ISI in the policy making of Quetta Shura. However, with the changed circumstances, the Taliban at helm of affairs in Afghanistan can be expected to support the TTP. During their recent march to Kabul, the Taliban freed thousands of captives from Afghanistan's jails which included TTP militants, whose release was celebrated in FATA region.³⁶ The most prominent among such returnees is Maulvi Faqir Mohammad, the former deputy chief of the TTP who has already called for unification of all mujahideen factions for formation of the Emirate in Pakistan. Concerned with the development, Islamabad's Foreign Office spokesman Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri, issued a statement asking *the Afghan Taliban to ensure that the TTP is not provided any space in Afghanistan to operate against Pakistan.*³⁷ Islamabad in all probability would rely on the Haqqani Network to safeguard its interests in Afghanistan. However, the consolidation of the Loy Kandahar in Afghanistan could impose restriction on ISI and its allies to safeguard Islamabad's interests. The revival of the TTP's legitimacy in Pakistan will make it possible for Pakistan's Military-Jihadi complex (MJC) to facilitate the resurgence of TTP in Pakistan.³⁸ The recent increase in TTP attacks on Chinese personnel working on CPEC and BRI projects is another matter of concern for Islamabad which would like to take advantage of the current situation to pursue its geo-economic objectives.

CAR

The CAR nations that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union; *Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan* collectively have a

major stake in events of Afghanistan. These nations did not exist prior to the drawing of the Soviet republican boundaries and hence, in the centuries before the Russian conquests there has been substantial transmigration of multiple ethnic groups in the region. Singh V. K. (2020) postulates that the groups were identified by the clan they belonged to or by their language either being Turkic speaking or Persian speaking. The redrawing of boundaries post break up of erstwhile Soviet Union resulted in presence of diverse ethnic groups in each of the newly created nation states. Tajikistan has Uzbeks in Khojent province; Kyrgyzstan has Uzbeks in the Osh area of the Fergana valley; Chimekant region of Kazakhstan also has Uzbeks. Tajiks are a substantial group in Bukhara and Samarkand areas of Uzbekistan as also are a large number of Kazakhs. Kazakhstan has a large population of Russians, Ukrainians and Germans in its northern part. Hence, CAR is a complicated region with strong affinity to Russia and is quite susceptible to the events in Afghanistan, especially the rise of fundamentalist forces. As individual states, the threat faced is in terms of spill over of fundamentalist forces to trigger anti regime Islamic movements, drug trafficking and the migration of refugees from Afghanistan. The threat perception gets magnified due to clan loyalties as a result of similar ethnic composition along the border areas.³⁹ The narcotics trade poses a major challenge due to its impact on spread of narco-terrorism, corruption and anti national activities. The civil war in Afghanistan has also affected the region economically and financially. Discovery of hydro carbons along with other mineral resources including rare earth material have lend new geo-political significance to the area with Russia seeking to retain its hold and other nations including India, China, EU competing to gain influence. The CAR nations are constantly striving to improve their economies by reducing dependence on Russia and

enhancing trade with other nations through Afghanistan. The Iranian route was accorded a very low priority because of USA sanctions against Iran and its limited links to other nations.

Singh further suggests that individually these nation states have a unique equation and security threat perception vis-à-vis Afghanistan. *Tajikistan* perceives a direct threat owing to the fact that Tajik opposition had functioned from Afghanistan and had safe sanctuaries there. *Uzbekistan* is concerned about the stability of the border region it shares with both Afghanistan and Tajikistan due to the ethnic composition of the population. The migration of Uzbeks and Tajiks from Afghanistan, due to non tolerance exhibited by the Taliban towards other ethnic groups, is also an area of concern as it upsets the delicate ethnic balance in these two states. *Turkmenistan* faces a direct security threat, but economic considerations have outweighed security considerations in light of its compulsion to use trade route through Afghanistan, it is likely to oppose isolation of the Taliban. Turkmenistan had earlier entered into agreement with Iran for shipping its oil while, Iran had also agreed to create suitable railroad infrastructure for this purpose. *Kyrgyzstan* is also impacted by narcotics trade and the overflow of refugees coming from Tajikistan. *Kazakhstan* is likely to be the least affected by the Afghan situation so far. In general, the region is increasingly concerned about the prospect of the rise of fundamentalist forces influenced by the Taliban.⁴⁰

However, to the CAR nations, the border with Afghanistan brings destabilizing events on account of presence of transnational terrorist networks, Islamic fundamentalism and the ethnic conflicts. Most of the CAR prefer to preserve a broadly secular order in their societies but are confronting growing religious extremist movements within.

Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan share common borders with Afghanistan. The other two countries of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, though relatively distant, have reason to worry on the prospect of the prolonged conflict in Afghanistan creating a large influx of refugees into their country and their economic progress getting de-railed due to the ethnic clashes problem compounded by the narcotics trade. Turkmenistan has maintained its stance of neutrality, and is eager to export natural gas through Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Arabian Sea. Uzbekistan hopes to open a gateway to the Indian Ocean provided peace prevails in Afghanistan and it has a say in any Pashtu - Uzbek - Tajik and other ethnic groups settlement for peace. Further the CARs are keen to see a diminished Russian influence over their state affairs to provide an impetus to the present fledgling economy. Closer interaction between Afghanistan and CAR, particularly the exchange of students, media persons, cultural delegations, etc., is being encouraged. Mazar-e-Sharif may become the main centre of economic exchanges as it is well connected by roads with Central Asia. The economic integration of CAR with the world markets, and hence economic development of this region would depend to a great extent on the events that unfold in Afghanistan. The Associated Press reported that the CAR leaders at Uzbekistan conference stressed importance of Afghan peace at two-day international conference that was originally intended to focus on regional trade and connectivity. While Dawn quoted the Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan saying that Pakistan will join Iran, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan in trying to facilitate an Afghan peace process.⁴¹ India enjoys a good relationship with the CAR nations and needs to leverage it fully to ensure stability in the region impacting India's national interests.

Russia

Afghanistan continues to be in Russia's traditional sphere of influence as an inherited legacy of Soviet Union era. The Russians main focus in evolving geo-political situation in Afghanistan is to ensure its economic security and influence in the resource rich CAR nations. Primarily, the region is serves as a transit route for energy exports from Central Asia to Europe. This necessitates Russia to ensure regional stability and prevent the Tajik, Uzbek, and IS-K to assert their influence. Since 2016, Russia has supported the Northern Shura and Mashhad Shura in close coordination with the Iranians.⁴² The close Russia-Iran coordination resulted from the rise of the IS-K, which both saw as a Saudi-Pakistan project designed to undermine the influence of their allies in the region. Nonetheless, concerns with regard to security threats in CAR have also led to Russia undertaking joint military exercises with Uzbekistan and a trilateral exercise with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan at the Harb-Maidon training ground, located in near vicinity of Afghan-Tajik border in August 2021.⁴³ It is envisaged that Russia will benefit from the current situation in Afghanistan, with CAR nations expected to seek closer security cooperation with Russia to counter Beijing's influence in the region. NY Times quoting some Russian analysts reported that the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan would allow Russia to re-establish itself as net security provider in the region by placing *its security umbrella up in place of the disappearing American umbrella*.⁴⁴

Curbing the menace narco-terrorism has been major area of concern for Moscow. Russia has officially listed narcotics as a security threat rather than a health problem or a law enforcement issue. The concern was highlighted by Russian premier Putin when he accused the ISAF of *sitting back and watching caravans haul drugs across Afghanistan*

*to the former Soviet Union and Europe.*⁴⁵ Thus, ensuring that the Taliban fulfill its promise of cracking down upon poppy cultivation and drug production would be a vital Russian interest in Afghanistan. Though Moscow is not indicating any overt inclination to interfere in the Afghan affairs, or become a player in the New Great Game, yet it is opposed to any foreign interference in Afghanistan. Talibanisation of the country is against Russian national security interests as it affects the fragile geo-strategic balance in the region and emboldens Islamic fundamentalists in the CARs. Russia is concerned about the USA and western powers attempt at influencing CAR nations moving out of Moscows influence. Besides the traditional linkages with CARs, Russia is keen on controlling the resource rich region vital for its economic prosperity and Super Power status. In the current fluid situation, Russia is likely to adopt a nuanced approach hedging its bet in Afghanistan. However, its role in Afghanistan in future cannot be negated considering the fact that if situation is detrimental to her national interests which is likely to reduce their sphere of influence in countries like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan posing a threat to Russian control in the predominately Muslim regions of the Caucasus. The Russians hedged their bets for future by actively supporting the Taliban against the USA. Hence, Russia will in all probability support the Taliban government and aim to secure its assurance national economic and security interests particularly in preventing rise of Islamic fundamentalism aided by the Taliban. Asserting itself as a stakeholder, Russia hosted a meeting with Taliban and the regional powers, wherein delegates from the Taliban and countries including China, India, Iran and Pakistan met in Moscow to discuss terrorism and aid to Afghanistan.⁴⁶ Russia's approach towards the Afghan situation will

also depend on the way things evolve in its ongoing standoff with the USA and NATO over the Ukraine.

The Arab Nations: Saudi Arabia, Qatar and UAE

The approach of Arab countries towards turmoil in Afghanistan is quite different from that of the international community. These nations are primarily interested in ensuring avoidance of economic collapse of Afghanistan with cascading impact on their economies. The Gulf Arab countries response to the ongoing situation in Afghanistan will be governed by their individual interests based on their proximity with the key Islamic countries viewed in light of historical connect and current realities. The Arab countries of the Gulf are likely to be more actively involved in the developments in Afghanistan when compared with the other Arab league nations.

Saudi Arabia perceives Afghanistan as part of the Kingdom's immediate neighbourhood directly and indirectly impacting its national interests. Saudi Arabia became a key player in Afghanistan as part of the Washington-Riyadh-Islamabad triangle, which supported the Afghan resistance in its fight against the Soviets in the 1980s. The Kingdom's policy towards Afghanistan during the 1980s was mainly driven by its desire to portray itself as defender of Islam by supporting the mujahideens, contain its main ideological rival, Iran and strengthen its the relationship with USA. Saudi Arabia became the main financier of the mujahideen besides the USA and remained involved even after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. During the 1990s, Saudi Arabia supported the Taliban and was one of the only three countries along with Pakistan and the UAE which recognised the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The relations with the Taliban cooled after Mullah Omar led Taliban refused to hand Osama Bin Laden to Saudi

Arabia in 1998. The GWOT post 9/11 resulted in Saudi Arabia re-calibrating its Afghan policy by diplomatically supporting USA and cooperated in retaliatory strikes in the fight against terrorism. The Saudi clergy openly condemned the terror attacks and distanced itself from the ideology of the perpetrators.⁴⁷ President Karzai chose Saudi Arabia for his first state visit after assuming office in late December 2001. The visit revived Saudi-Afghan bilateral relations and witnessed substantial contribution by the Kingdom to international reconstruction efforts in war shattered Afghanistan. Riyadh supported the Karzai government with foreign aid but generally maintained a low profile until it mediated two rounds of secret talks in the autumn of 2008 and early 2009. The secret mediation marked the increased involvement of Saudi Arabia in affairs concerning Afghanistan escalating rivalry with Iran. Saudi Arabia also committed to constructing a Sunni mosque and Islamic Centre in Kabul in 2012 as response to the Iran constructing Khatm an-Nabiyin (the Seal of the Prophets) Mosque and Islamic University in 2006.⁴⁸ These religious cultural measures reflect a policy shift in Riyadh towards events in Afghanistan. Since the Obama's decision to withdraw American troops from Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia is increasingly pursuing its aim to support government of the day, keeping Iran out of Kabul and isolating al-Qaida in Pakistan. The Saudi Kingdom is also concerned about Afghanistan becoming hub of violent extremist organizations particularly the ISIS-K.

Mathews Sean reports in Middle East Eye that Riyadh is seeking to remain relevant in Afghanistan after the Taliban's takeover of the country. The Crown Prince Mohd Bin Salman is seeking to renew contacts among Taliban leaders particularly Mullah Yaqoob, the son of Taliban co-founder Mullah Omar and Mullah Baradar, the

Taliban's political chief and group's primary negotiator in talks with the USA.⁴⁹ Qatar, a rival of Saudi Kingdom has emerged as a key powerbroker in the war-ravaged country. According to Middle East Eye while direct ties between the kingdom and the Taliban were currently believed to be limited, Saudi Arabia could use its regional ally Pakistan to build ties with the Taliban. Saudi Arabia closed its embassy in Afghanistan as the Taliban overran the capital and Riyadh has since remained muted about events in the region. Saudi Arabia retains a strong interest in an Afghanistan specifically for limiting Iranian influence.

Emirates of Qatar has emerged as a key interlocutor with the Taliban over the past decade, specifically when Doha became the Washington's choice for a political office for the Taliban. The rise in Qatari influence coincided with the waning of Pakistan's and Saudi Arabia's influence with the Taliban. The Doha office was opened in 2013 as means of communication, after failure of direct negotiations between the Taliban and the former Afghan and NATO representatives.⁵⁰ Dr Mohd Salami, a specialist in Middle Eastern policy, particularly in Syria, Iran, Yemen, and the Persian Gulf region contends that though the Taliban has announced that they were seeking good relations with their neighbors; China, India, Iran, Russia, Pakistan, and the Gulf Arab states, yet given Pakistan and Qatar's extant relations with the Taliban, the two countries appear to be the main winners in this shifted balance. America's support for Qatar as a mediator in peace talks with the Taliban has provided it a platform for a wider role in Afghanistan's future developments. Even though the 2020 Doha talks between the Taliban and the former Afghan government had collapsed, western governments and international organizations have accepted Qatar's legitimacy as a point of contact with the Taliban. The

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas while in Qatar for consultations lauded Qatar's role in keeping Kabul Airport open. Similarly, the British, Dutch, and Italian Foreign Ministries along with the USA Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Qatar to highlight the importance of Qatar as a mediator in Afghanistan in comparison with Pakistan, China, or Russia. It is pertinent to note that Taliban 2.0 is seeking international recognition and legitimate rulers of Afghanistan. Thus, in all probability it is envisaged that Taliban will have to resort to Qatari diplomatic influence and mediation power in the international arena. Taliban in its new Avatar desires to be recognized by the international community and do not want to repeat the folly of 1996 to 2001 period and be isolated. Additionally with the US leading the freeze on Afghanistan's assets and funds they are in urgent need of investment from Qatar.⁵¹

UAE had keenly competed with Qatar to host the Taliban political office. Notwithstanding the opening of Taliban's Doha Office, Abu Dhabi hosted a round of talks between the Taliban and USA in 2018. Abu Dhabi also hosted hundreds of Afghan refugees after the Taliban captured Kabul and took an active role within Afghanistan by sending humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. Beyond Afghanistan, the UAE rivals Qatar in the Persian Gulf and has likewise criticized Qatar for its financial and political support for Muslim Brotherhood groups in the region. Significantly, UAE has relatively closer ties to Russia and China, it may support Pakistani influence in the Af-Pak theatre.

The defining dynamics of a collective response from the Arab countries perspective to Afghanistan crisis are fairly complex. It is envisaged that given the current geo-political dynamics most Arab nations likely to support Qatar over Pakistan. However, when it comes to Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, viewing Qatar as the prime

mediator is more complicated. Dr Salami contends that the sensitivity of the Arab countries toward Afghanistan and its developments is closely related to the sensitivities of the international community regarding their country. In line with these concerns, they fear a rise in political Islam and the strengthening of terrorist groups in Afghanistan. They are also concern about the influx of refugees to Arab countries and emerging competition between China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia closed its embassy after the Taliban occupied Kabul and has not expressed a desire to reopen it and recognize the new government. Yet Riyadh cannot remain indifferent to developments in Afghanistan for long, especially given its prior history of relations with the Taliban. Taliban and Iran relations are complicated and allowing Afghanistan to move into Iran's zone of political influence would be an unacceptable outcome for Riyadh. Notably, both Saudi Arabia and UAE previously emerged as direct competitors to Qatar's mediating role with the Taliban. Saudi Arabia repeatedly tried to convince the Taliban to continue negotiations on Saudi soil, but the Taliban were pessimistic about the neutrality of Saudi rulers and preferred the Qataris. Qatar is also being considered for the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list and has made new overtures offering to sell crude and natural gas on favorable terms to India besides trying to improving relations with Saudi Arabia. India has to contend with complexities of inter Arab nation dynamics while formulating a strategy for securing India's national interests in Taliban ruled Afghanistan.

Turkey

Turkey had aspired to be the new caliphate and a key regional player in the resource rich region. It had formed a banking troika also with Malaysia and Pakistan designed to wean away Sunni Islamic authority from Saudi Arabia towards Turkey which

proved to be a non event. However, with Turkey's failing economy and being named along with Pakistan on FATF grey list owing to its own support of terrorism, President Erdogan had to make a policy shift. Turkey has since adopted a more reconciliatory approach towards India. Turkey now has not only stopped talking about sponsoring a jihad in Kashmir but has also offered NATO grade drones to India for sale with a joint venture agreement for future.

USA

USA is the principal non-regional key player having strategic interests in Afghanistan. The historical ties between the two nations date back to 1934 when the diplomatic relations were established as part of USA policy to assist developing nations. Washington extended an economic assistance program aimed at Afghanistan's infrastructural development in the 1950s. Subsequently, the aid extended to capacity-building and technical assistance programs to make Afghanistan self-reliant and help the country to build a modern economy. In three decades from 1950 to 1979, the US gave Afghanistan more than \$500 million in soft loans, grants and surplus agricultural commodities to build its transportation facilities, increase agricultural production, promote education, stimulate industrial growth, and improve basic governance. The 1978 Saur Revolution, which brought the Communist's to power in Afghanistan, was a major blow to US-Afghan relations. The bilateral relations hit a new low with the kidnapping and murder of Adolph Dubs, the US Ambassador to Afghanistan.⁵² The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 ended all assistance agreements with Afghanistan which became a strategic playground in the New Great Game between the two superpowers, both aiming to increase their sphere of influence in the region. The USA actively supported

diplomatic-military endeavour to achieve a Soviet withdrawal. America formed an anti-Soviet alliance with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to counter Soviet ambition of obtaining direct access to the Indian Ocean for Russian Navy with its attendant security implications. The alliance armed the *mujahedin* with sophisticated weaponry including hundreds of shoulder-fired US Stinger missiles. It also made generous contributions to the Afghan refugee program in Pakistan. This cross-border humanitarian assistance program was aimed at increasing Afghan self-sufficiency and helping resist Soviet attempts to drive Afghan civilians out of the rebel-dominated countryside. Between 1980 and 1989, the US provided about \$3 billion in military and economic assistance to *mujahedin* groups operating from the Pakistani side of the Durand line eventually forcing the Soviet Red Army to withdraw. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, USA lost interest and left Pakistan and its ISI to resolve the Afghan war as best as it could. However, the Americans were keen to see a stable and favorable government in Afghanistan because of its strategic interest in the CARs as also to check the rise in narcotics trade in Afghanistan and the spread of Islamic fundamentalism.

The decade of the 90s was an era of total instability and turmoil in Afghanistan with power shifting hands between various mujahedin factions till the final takeover of the country by the radical Taliban, in 1996. Because of the US fixation with Iraq during this time, Afghanistan was neglected by the western nations and the country further slipped into anarchy, becoming a safe haven for terror groups such as Al Qaeda and their more radicalized leaders like Osama bin Laden. Though Pakistan attempted to project Taliban favourably, but the same did not find traction with the USA who could not embrace Taliban due to its oppressive treatment of women, support for opium cultivation

and support to international terrorism by sheltering Osama Bin Laden. USA was vehemently against Iranian efforts to offer trade and oil outflows to Central Asia. Subsequently, indicating policy shift Washington decided not to oppose the \$ 160 million pipeline project from Turkmenistan via Iran to Turkey. The 9/11 attack and resultant USA led GWOT changed the geo-political dynamics in Afghanistan and is being covered in detail in the next chapter.

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Chapter IV - USA Withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Current security scenario in the Region

The GWOT

The then US President George W. Bush declared a GWOT with his now famous statement; *“The United States of America will use all our resources to conquer this enemy. We will rally the world. We will be patient. We’ll be focused, and we will be steadfast in our determination. This battle will take time and resolve, but make no mistake about it, we will win.”*¹ The ensuing Operation Enduring Freedom heralded the arrival of US led NATO forces deployment in Afghanistan in October 2001.

NATO		OTAN		International Security Assistance Force				ISAF
Troop Contributing Nations								
	Albania	199		Georgia	1,561		Norway	97
	Armenia	126		Germany	4,318		Poland	1,770
	Australia	1,094		Greece	10		Portugal	141
	Austria	3		Hungary	582		Romania	1,549
	Azerbaijan	94		Iceland	2		Singapore	39
	Bahrain	95		Ireland	7		Slovakia	234
	Belgium	265		Italy	4,000		Slovenia	38
	Bosnia & Herzegovina	53		Jordan	0		Spain	1,606
	Bulgaria	581		Republic of Korea	350		Sweden	413
	Canada	950		Latvia	27		The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia *	157
	Croatia	242		Lithuania	240		Tonga	55
	Czech Republic	416		Luxembourg	10		Turkey	998
	Denmark	567		Malaysia	4		Ukraine	24
	El Salvador	12		Mongolia	46		United Arab Emirates	35
	Estonia	150		Montenegro	40		United Kingdom	9,500
	Finland	112		Netherlands	500		United States	68,000
	France	543		New Zealand	156		Total	102,011

Fig 3: ISAF Troops Contributing Countries

Source: NATO HQ Media Operations Centre – Afghanistan

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69366.htm

The mission objective ostensibly was to capture Osama bin Laden, the perpetrator of 9/11 attack, however the larger aim of the NATO forces was to have influence in the resource rich region. The UNSC mandated deployment of ISAF to supervise the security and train the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) *also referred to as the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF)*. The effect of the US sponsored capacity building along with capability development of ANDSF and government has been minimal. The elected Afghan government controlled only the big cities with backing of US troops while the Taliban retained control over the smaller towns and villages. American phased withdrawal resulted in reducing troop levels to approximately 3,000 with their role limited to training, advising and supporting the Afghan forces. The reduced US forces presence was not only an anchor for troops from allied countries but also a military and moral support for the Afghan government. The swift fall of Kabul resulted in multiple consequences from the humanitarian as well as security perspective with widespread reprisals, harsh subjugation of women and refugee exodus. The abrupt withdrawal of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan without a lasting solution have long term consequence maintain global security balance with questions about US reliability. The current security situation is a direct consequence of the manner in which the ISAF deployed in Afghanistan, international community established Afghan government and the events that unfolded as elucidated in subsequent paragraphs.

The International Conference on Afghanistan in Bonn in December 2001² resulted in Hamid Karzai being made head of the Afghan Interim Administration which became Afghan Transitional Administration after the 2002 Kabul Loya Jirga. In the interim USA re-established diplomatic relations with Afghanistan. Interestingly, while NATO assumed

leadership of ISAF, a portion of the USA troops in Afghanistan operated under NATO command while the balance remained under direct American command. Taliban leader Mullah Omar reorganized the Taliban movement for launching offensive against the Afghan government and ISAF. Karzai was elected president in the 2004 elections of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Washington continued its support to the President Karzai government by deploying NATO led ISAF troops throughout the country to establish the authority of his government as well as combat Taliban insurgency.



Fig 4: ISAF Troops Deployment

Source: NATO HQ Media Operations Centre – Afghanistan

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69366.htm

The Karzai government might have had international backing and legitimacy with US backing but did not find popular acceptance and recognition among the Afghans divided on ethnic lines who were prone to *the traditional Shura based Loya Jirga system of*

governance. United States also assumed the leading role in Afghan reconstruction by providing billions of dollars for infrastructure development. In 2005, the two countries signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) cementing a long-term relationship.³

Af-Pak is a neologism that was coined in 2009, which is used within USA foreign policy circles to designate Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single theatre of operations. The policy is fallout of a realisation that the USA's national security interests are best addressed by negating the extremist elements in Af-Pak. Osama Bin Laden's elimination by the US Special Forces on 2nd May 2011 ended the reason for US intervention and set the stage for withdrawal of US Forces.⁴ Consequently, the Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement (ESPA) was signed between the USA and Afghanistan in 2012 aimed at ensuring stability of Afghanistan. Both the nations also agreed to enhance the regional security environment, foster economic and social development, strengthening of institutions, promotion of democracy and enhancement of long-term security.⁵ Chalk and Hanauer (2012) argued that as precursor to US withdrawal and enduring stability in the region, Washington must endorse enhanced Indian role in Afghanistan. They based their argument on New Delhi's objective of anti-fundamentalism in Afghanistan, securing new trade routes through Afghanistan and power projection being compatible to the US objectives as compared to Pakistan. They believed that Islamabad and New Delhi are among the two key players in Afghanistan. Notwithstanding the endeavour of other regional players to have influence with Kabul, the future of resource rich region and by extension Afghanistan would be decided in accordance with the role played by India and Pakistan.⁶ Washington too was looking at enhanced Indian role in Afghanistan in the diplomatic, economic, capability development and capacity building domain. Washington

and New Delhi envisaged achieving multiple objectives, primary among them being a common strategic objective wherein Washington continues to exert its influence in Afghanistan after the drawdown. Additionally, both had objective of ensuring stable Afghanistan and facilitate US to monitor China's engagement in Afghanistan. USA was clearly looking at a favorable dispensation and a strategic alignment of objective to continue its influence in the region. Efforts of the US regarding installing democracy and strengthening institutions did not prove to be fruitful and in the wake of US drawdown the task was speculated to be assigned to India eventually. ⁷

Zia M. (2020) in his article *Indo- US Strategic Objectives in Afghanistan: Security Calculus of Pakistan* visualizes the consequences of US withdrawal as complex inter-related issues. He envisaged that Afghanistan, as a nation would encounter three interconnected challenges, that include a weaker nation state, rise of fundamentalism and zero- sum regional power equation, particularly in the context of Islamabad and New Delhi.⁸ It was also envisaged that other NATO forces would also withdraw resulting in reduction in international civilian and humanitarian presence. The external economic and security assistance would diminish and the democratically elected government in Kabul would begin to lose whatever influence and legitimacy it had gained with backing of western powers. The security situation would in all probability deteriorate rapidly with intra Afghan power play among local warlords with a new great game in offing among the regional nation states backing rival claimants to national power. Afghanistan in all probability will descend into a chaos civil war in the aftermath of a precipitous US and NATO withdrawal. Extremist groups, including Al Qaeda and the ISIS / IS-K would gain additional scope to organize, recruit and initiate terrorist attacks against US regional and

homeland targets. The IS-K is active in Afghanistan, along with numerous designated terrorist groups in the Af-Pak region. In all the scenarios it was anticipated that civilian deaths would rise sharply and refugee exodus would be new normal exacerbating the global refugee crisis.⁹ All the strategists including US officials were unanimous in their assessment that complete US drawdown from Afghanistan would be detrimental to US interests as well as global security calculus and might lead collapse of the Afghan Government with resurrection of Taliban in Afghanistan. However, the US Presidents starting from Obama, Trump to Biden were steadfast in their resolve for complete withdrawal of troops from the region.

The Peace Talks and US-Taliban Agreement

A reversal in USA strategy vis-à-vis peace talks with Taliban occurred when during his address to the nation on 21 August 2017, President Trump announced a new strategy for Afghanistan, the core principle of which was *a shift from a time-based approach to one based on conditions*. He further elaborated that *US would act according to the conditions on the ground rather than the arbitrary timetable. Enemies of the US must not be aware of our plans.*¹⁰ As a follow up of these core principles, Trump administration embarked direct peace talks with Taliban in July 2018, which previously *was considered unlikely as US had the claim of Afghan led and Afghan owned negotiations.*¹¹ In spite of the peace talks the Taliban continued to contest territory, including provincial capitals, across the country. It even succeeded in capturing the Ghazni, holding the city for nearly a week before USA and Afghan troops' regained control. USA's Special Inspector General for Afghanistan (SIGAR) Mar 2019 edition

report had predicted that the country in all likelihood continue to struggle with *multiple violent-extremist organizations*, regardless of a possible peace deal. The report also warned that the United States' \$132 billion reconstruction effort faces threats from corruption and weak institutions, among other issues.¹² The American and Taliban representatives continued to discuss confidence-building measures to include prisoner exchange or a cease-fire with the aim of reviving peace talks that President Trump had called off in September 2019. Trump reportedly gave conditional approval to sign a deal with the Taliban if they demonstrate commitment to reducing violence. Consequently, the Taliban presented a violence reduction proposal in January 2020 which became focus of the subsequent negotiations for crystallizing the modalities of the proposal.¹³ With the negotiators from both sides set to meet in Doha and to keep the Afghan government in Kabul in loop the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo shared progress in US-Taliban peace talks with President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah.¹⁴

The US – Taliban Agreement was signed on 29 February 2020 and termed as a historic agreement establishing the foundation for ending America's forever war in Afghanistan. (Details of US –Taliban Agreement given at appendix C). The agreement, negotiated by the Trump administration, focused on reducing violence, withdrawing U.S. combat forces, kick starting Intra-Afghan talks, and counterterrorism efforts by the Taliban.¹⁵ The deal set the stage for the United States to withdraw from its longest foreign war with a partial drawdown of five thousand troops in the first 135 days. In return, the Taliban pledged to prevent territory under its control from being used by terrorist groups and enter into negotiations with the Afghan government. However, no official cease-fire was put into place.¹⁶ The fragile nature of the Peace deal was evident

from the fact that within hours of the Agreement being signed, President Ghani publicly objected to one of its proposals, saying Washington did not have the authority to commit to an Afghan-Taliban prisoner exchange that would occur by March 10, when intra-Afghan talks were set to begin. His statement in criticism of the deal predicting that *an agreement that is signed behind closed doors will have basic problems in its implementation tomorrow*¹⁷ was to prove to be prophetic.

The Intra-Afghan negotiations began in September 2020 with the aim of establishing a comprehensive peace settlement among Afghans. However, the resistance from both sides was such that it took months for both parties to agree on the procedures for the talks, with incompatible conditions and priorities impeding substantive progress. Major issues that need resolution including reducing violence and establishing a future governance structure were accorded differing priorities. While the Afghan government insisted on ending violence and ceasefire be given priority, the Taliban remained steadfast on securing power prior to ceasefire discussions and ending violence.¹⁸ Taliban continued with attacks against Afghan government and ANDSF across Afghanistan throughout 2020 and 2021 with retaliatory strikes by US forces. Washington apparently was focused on following the withdrawal calendar even though the Taliban have failed to meet several key conditions thereby losing leverage with the Taliban, who were well aware of US intent and willing to play the waiting game. According to the agreement, the Taliban will *not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qaeda to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies*,¹⁹ but they have failed to break ties with al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Although the Taliban have technically participated in the Intra-Afghan

Negotiations, their sincerity in reaching a political compromise with the Afghan government remains unclear. Civilian casualties across Afghanistan continued to remain high with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documenting a record high number of civilian casualties in the first half of 2021 as the Taliban stepped up its military offensive in face of impending withdrawal of US and NATO troops.²⁰ In addition to the Taliban's offensive, Afghanistan faces a threat from the IS-K, which had consolidated its presence in several eastern provinces, attacked Kabul University, targeted civilians with suicide attacks and also claimed responsibility for an attack on a Gurudwara in Kabul that killed twenty-five people.²¹

Soon after assuming office on 14 Apr 2021, President Biden confirmed his commitment to US – Taliban Agreement; however, he shifted the original 1st May 21 withdrawal deadline of the agreement by announcing the US would withdraw all remaining troops from Afghanistan by 9/11 of 2021 i.e the 20th anniversary of World Trade Centre attack. The NATO forces also announced that all troops from the Resolute Support Mission (RSM) would be withdrawn within a few months of 1st May 21.²² Biden asserted that the United States *would not conduct a hasty rush to the exit* from Afghanistan and would instead depart *responsibly, deliberately..... in full coordination with our allies and partners.*²³ In part, Biden's decision is a conditions-based response to the Taliban's failed compliance with the agreement's conditions. However, what was evident was that America's new deadline was absolute and withdrawal was no longer contingent on the Taliban's adherence to conditions outlined in the U.S-Taliban Agreement. The Biden administration gave assurance that it will put *full weight* into diplomatic effort to reach a peace agreement between the Afghan government and the

Taliban. The diplomatic efforts made little progress and Taliban refused to participate in any negotiations until the withdrawal of foreign forces is complete. The refusal to participate in talks and increasing assertiveness of the Taliban was probably caused by the realization that they have the advantage and need not resort to a compromise or power-sharing formula. The imminent withdrawal of troops has also weakened the Afghan government's leverage in negotiations and the Taliban have carried out successful military operations in rural areas, systematically encroached on large cities, and overtaken military bases.²⁴

The Taliban Offensive and Withdrawal of US led NATO Forces

The Taliban launched a major offensive after the missed US deadline to withdraw troops on 1st May 21. It intensified attacks ANDSF bases and continued to capture territory across the country. The US meanwhile speeded up its withdrawal and by the end of July 2021, it had completed most of its withdrawal, leaving behind minimal troops to protect the US embassy in Kabul. *NATO too announced withdrawal from Afghanistan* coinciding with President Biden's announcement of a complete US withdrawal by 11 September 2021. The Australian PM Scott Morrison also announced closure of its embassy and withdrawal of Australian troops in Afghanistan by September.²⁵

Displaying astute awareness of the geo-political dynamics at play, the Taliban delegation met with representatives of the Russian government prior to their advance to Kabul assuring Moscow that Taliban's operational maneuvers would not threaten Russia or its Central Asian allies.²⁶ Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen had also made Taliban's intentions clear before hand when he confirmed that they will not cease combat until

President Ghani is removed and a new negotiated government is installed. Separately, the US House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed a bill to allow eight thousand extra visas for Afghans who aided the American mission and were at risk for retaliation amid withdrawal.²⁷ Fears of humanitarian catastrophe once Taliban completes takeover prompted envoys from countries that met in Doha, including China, EU, Pakistan and the United States, to announce that they will not recognize any government in Afghanistan that is imposed through the use of military force.

Ghani Capitulates: Taliban Assumes Absolute Control

The Taliban continued to capture territory in Afghanistan as the withdrawal of troops continued and by early August, the Taliban began attacks on multiple strategically important cities, including Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif and Jalalabad which finally culminated with the Taliban fighters entering the capital Kabul, leading President Ghani to flee the country and the Afghan government to collapse. The same day Taliban announced to the world that they had entered the presidential palace, taken control of the city and were establishing checkpoints to maintain security, causing widespread panic and chaos.²⁸ Ghani released a message acknowledging the Taliban's military victory, while his interior minister said an agreement had been made for a peaceful transfer of power. Taliban's swift takeover of the country triggered chaotic evacuation efforts at the Kabul airport. As panicked crowds swarmed planes on the tarmac, the NATO countries became mute spectators merely pledging to support the exit of Afghans who aided the nearly twenty-year NATO mission in Afghanistan.

The speed of the Taliban's territorial gains and collapse of both the ANDSF and Afghan government surprised everyone and if reports are to be believed even the Taliban were not expecting such speedy victory. The international community was overwhelmed by this abject failure of intelligence bringing in to question the achievements of GWOT and capacity building efforts of ANDSF in preceding 20 years. The security situation on ground had become so critical that Biden administration had to authorize deployment of an additional six thousand troops to assist with the evacuation of US and allied personnel along with thousands of Afghans who worked with the United States and were seeking to escape the Taliban backlash. Amid the US withdrawal, Taliban forces gained control over a key border crossing with Iran. The Wall Street Journal attributes this swift downfall of Ghani government to the undercover Taliban agents who had infiltrated government ministries, businesses and aid organizations.²⁹

Associated Press reported that in an indication of what Taliban rule in Afghanistan could look like in the twenty-first century, a member of the group's cultural commission promised amnesty for those who opposed the Taliban and said women will still be allowed to work and study. However, the Afghans doubted the sincerity of the Taliban and continued in their efforts to leave the country as evacuation flights recommenced at Kabul's airport. President Joe Biden defended the US military drawdown in an address at the White House, acknowledging that the *withdrawal was "messy"* but saying that he stood by the decision to end US involvement in the war. Biden also said Afghan troops had shown a lack of willingness to fight despite years of US support.³⁰ A Pentagon official confirmed that the USA remains committed to evacuate approximately twenty-two thousand applicants for

special visas for Afghans who aided the US war effort. India continued in its humanitarian endeavours and introduced an emergency e-visa for Afghans subject to a security screening.³¹

The Chaos

The security situation immediately after the Taliban took over power remained chaotic with evacuations in Kabul and Afghans protesting against the Taliban at multiple locations across Afghanistan, including in Kabul. Reuters reported several protesters were killed in eastern Kunar Province while the USA and its NATO allies continuing evacuation. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced it will block a transfer of \$450 million in funds to Afghanistan in the wake of the Taliban's takeover.³² Taliban political leader Mullah Baradar, arrived in Afghanistan from Qatar and assured that peaceful transition of power and evacuation. Aimed at assuaging western fears, a Taliban spokesperson said in a news conference that the group aims for regular relations with other countries and *will allow women to participate in society within the bounds of Islamic law*. However, the situation on ground continued to be tense with Taliban fighters reportedly beating protesters in Jalalabad and blowing up a statue of a Hazara political enemy killed by the group in the 1990s. UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet had gone on record stating at an emergency session of the Human Rights Council held at the request of Pakistan and the OIC that *“she had received credible reports of summary executions by the Taliban* and called for a mechanism to monitor the group's actions. *The Taliban treatment of women and girls would be a fundamental red line.*” Pakistan's ambassador Khalil Hashmi said the

resolution voiced grave concern over reports of violations and sent a "message of solidarity to the people of Afghanistan". Speaking at the same emergency session, Austria's ambassador, Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger, speaking on behalf of the EU, said it was joining the consensus even though the resolution "falls short". The bloc had sought to launch an international investigation, she said.³³

The USA ended its 21 years deployment in Afghanistan when last of its military personnel left on 31 August 2021 bring down curtains on the drawdown process and the first phase of New Great Game leaving Afghanistan fully in Taliban's control. The US led military campaign against Al Qaeda has come to an end in Afghanistan after 22,000 casualties (2,400 fatalities) and an investment of approximately \$ 144 Billion for reconstruction and security forces.³⁴ Kabul's airport closed after the USA departure and intense diplomatic parleys ensued to facilitate its reopening. The Taliban made public assurances that Afghans who wish to leave the country can do so and the **UNSC passed a resolution that called for the Taliban to facilitate safe passage for people wanting to leave Afghanistan, allow humanitarians to access the country and uphold human rights, including for women and children.**³⁵ It is pertinent to note that while 13 of the 15 ambassadors voted in favour of the resolution, which demands that Afghanistan should not become a shelter for terrorism, *two notable nations that abstained were the permanent members China and Russia* indicative of the jostling for influence with Taliban. Surging prices and packed lines at banks underscored the potential for the country's economic collapse as countries and international organizations weigh how to approach financial ties with a Taliban-led Afghanistan. The UN announced that its humanitarian operations in Afghanistan will continue with approximately eighteen

million Afghans in dire need of humanitarian assistance. The UN Secretary-General (UNSG) Antonio Guterres called on UN member states to support ongoing humanitarian work in the country.³⁶ Meanwhile, in an indication that New Delhi has softened its stance on the Taliban, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) announced that its Ambassador to Qatar Deepak Mittal met with the head of the Taliban's political office, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai. Though it was known that Indian security officials and diplomats were engaging with Taliban representatives for several months, this was *the first time the Indian government has publicly acknowledged such a meeting* which, the MEA said, came at the request of the Taliban. Discussions focused on safety, security and early return of Indian nationals stranded in Afghanistan. The travel of Afghan nationals, especially minorities, who wish to visit to India along with Delhi's concern that *Afghanistan's soil, should not be used for anti-Indian activities and terrorism in any manner.*³⁷

Taliban Government

The Taliban announced the formation of a new government in Afghanistan with Mawlawi Hibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban's supreme commander, leading the government which was largely made up of hard-liners. The regime was rechristened as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in line with the Taliban's stated vision that the government will be led by a religious leader and draw its legitimacy from clerics.³⁸ Holding of elections was conspicuous by its absence and did not find any of the announcements by the Taliban hierarchy or spokesperson. It is pertinent to note that under the previous governance module, Afghanistan was a democratic Islamic republic

headed by a President and supported by council of ministers. No women or officials from the preceding government and only a few representatives from ethnic minority communities were included in the Taliban's cabinet. The Wall Street Journal quoting experts opined that it is unlikely that the Taliban will meaningfully share power with any former government officials. The already turbulent internal security situation in Afghanistan was further aggravated with the neighbouring countries closing their borders to people attempting to flee the Taliban, preventing tens of thousands of people eligible to relocate to other countries from evacuating via land.³⁹

The Taliban meanwhile have sought to boost diplomacy with countries in the region, particularly with China, Pakistan, and Russia. They have also requested countries to keep their embassies open and foreign businesses to continue work in Afghanistan. However, the USA and other Western countries have not yet recognized the Taliban as Afghanistan's government nor have they defined what kind of relationship they will have with the Taliban. In a joint statement with visiting German Foreign Minister, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the United States will judge *the Taliban's cabinet by its actions*.⁴⁰ Chinese officials on the other hand continued with their hedging policy and said that China's support for Afghanistan will partly depend on the Taliban preventing terrorist activities in the region. The security situation remains precarious with Intra Afghan rivalry threaten to descend into civil war. Various terrorist organizations like Al- Qaeda and ISIS are regrouping to regain their former status. Taliban government is facing serious opposition from IS-K which continues to target Afghans and claimed responsibility for Kabul hospital attack after Taliban takeover. Even after nearly six months of Taliban rule thousands of Afghans continue to explore avenues to exit

Afghanistan with approximately twenty-eight thousand Afghans applying for US visa on humanitarian grounds. Displaying scant regard for remaining committed to its assurances about human and women rights, it is reported that the Taliban had killed, summarily executed or orchestrated disappearance of over a hundred former Afghan security officers since they took over Afghanistan.⁴¹ They have also issued decree that women cannot be forced to marry by coercion or pressure but does not mention underage marriage, work or education rights. The drug menace also continues unabated with Opium production in Afghanistan rising. According to *UN data Opium production in the country exceeded six thousand tons, for the fifth straight year.*⁴²

New Great Game: Next Phase commences

The power play in ongoing attempts to occupy strategic space vacated by U S and in first indication that the Taliban government might gain some sort of acceptance or legitimacy despite reports of atrocities and extrajudicial killings was given when BBC quoted the French President Emmanuel Macron as saying *that several European countries are considering opening a joint mission in Afghanistan that would not amount to political recognition of the Taliban.*⁴³ It is pertinent to mention that since the Taliban took over Afghanistan, more than two hundred media outlets have been closed and majority of the female journalists have lost their jobs. The Taliban also continued with its agenda of dismantling democratic institutions when it dissolved two election commissions and government ministries for peace and parliamentary affairs.

The Humanitarian crisis got further compounded with the deportations of more than one million Afghan refugees by Iran amidst dynamic security situation in face of US

withdrawal and Taliban coming to power as reported by International Organization for Migration. To tide over the emerging humanitarian catastrophe, the UNSC adopted a resolution to allow aid to reach Afghanistan for one year without violating international sanctions designed to isolate the Taliban. Washington sponsored the resolution and issued its own sanctions exemptions for US and international aid groups. Donors to the World Bank-administered Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, which was frozen after the Taliban's takeover in August, agreed to transfer a combined \$280 million to the World Food Program and UN International Children's Education Fund (UNICEF) to support food security and health care in Afghanistan.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, protesters in Kabul and USA Congress members called on Washington to unfreeze more than \$9 billion in Afghanistan's foreign reserves as a humanitarian measure. The White House responded by showing their inability to unfreeze assets due to procedural issues.⁴⁵ In the interim the OIC announced its plans to open the fund through the Islamic Development Bank by the first quarter of 2022. The UN has sought in excess of USD 5 Billion to prevent humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan. The UNSG Antonio Guterres has also called for unfreezing of Afghan assets and drawing a roadmap for the conditional release of Afghanistan's foreign currency reserves to improve the country's humanitarian situation.⁴⁶

Six Months Taliban Rule: Security Situation

The security situation after six months of Taliban control continues to remain precarious. The UNSG António Guterres remarks to UNSC on 26 January 2022 aptly sums up the current security situation, to quote "*Afghanistan is hanging by a thread.*

Afghans are now in the grips of a brutal winter, many huddling in makeshift tents under plastic sheets. Ambulances and hospital power generators are running dry because of skyrocketing fuel prices, while civilians are suffering from COVID-19 alongside preventable diseases such as measles and polio. Education and social services are on the brink of collapse and millions of children — especially girls — are out of school. Over half of all Afghans also face extreme hunger as the country experiences its worst drought in two decades, pushing nine million people closer to famine.” He further adds that “The Afghan economy is enduring a bitter winter of its own,” citing the danger that the currency could go into freefall and Afghanistan could lose 30 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) within the year. As the economy spirals downward, human rights are also losing ground, with women and girls once again shut out of offices and classrooms, and years of steady progress lost in the blink of an eye. Expressing deep concern about reports of arbitrary arrests and abductions of women activists, and strongly appealing for their release, he added that terrorism remains a constant threat.”⁴⁷

Remaining impervious to the concerns of international comity, the Taliban sees the current fluid security and humanitarian calamity situation as an opportunity and wants to capitalize on their gains so that they do not have to compromise on the negotiating table. It aims to control entire Afghan land mass with control over strategic locations along the key transportation routes which link provincial capitals. On the other hand Afghan civil society is under constant stress due to uncertain future, tension of assassinations, threats and no clear picture of women rights. The civil society leaders emphasize that their priority is achieving harmony and violence reduction within their

community and not just the controversial aspects of political power-sharing at the national level.

Geo-political dynamics and the next phase of the New Great Game are already in play further compounding the already complex and tumultuous security situation in Afghanistan. The sudden collapse of the US-backed Afghan government also has repercussions for Ukraine, which viewed the US as a key ally in its undeclared seven-year war with Russia. The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan represents a particularly *worrying scenario for Ukrainians* who witnessed withdrawal of US forces, in face of catastrophic consequences and humanitarian crisis.⁴⁸ The Americans retain interest in the region in their attempt at face saving and preserving the political, human rights, women rights and security gains that have been achieved in Afghanistan since 2001. The Taliban takeover of the country in all probability would turn Afghanistan into a terrorist safe haven for terrorist groups having global security ramifications especially in light of IS-K activities in recent months. The escalating internal instability, mass exodus of refugees and a growing humanitarian predicament have serious regional security ramifications. India, China, Russia and the CAR nations are likely to be seriously impacted by radical Talibanisation in absence of a viable unified counter action plan. Taliban 2.0 is leveraging its control of a geo-strategically significant and resource rich area along with the current humanitarian crisis situation to again international recognition. Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, Qatar and the EU nations are all advocating engaging with Taliban and un-freezing of Afghanistan assets. Taliban's recent efforts to engage with all stake holders including India are pointers towards a more nuanced and calibrating Taliban 2.0 with greater grasp of geo-political dynamics of Afghanistan post US withdrawal.

CHAPTER IV: END NOTES

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Chapter V - Taliban - Sino – Pak Collusive Actions: Implications for Radicalization and Terrorism

Sino-Pak: Enduring Friendship

China and Pakistan share a long history of cooperation and collaboration with a aligned policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan with both poised to benefit strategically from the Taliban's success. Jointly they aim to limit the influence of other regional players particularly India to occupy the strategic space vacated by USA. Beijing is keen on synchronizing its Afghan policies with Islamabad owing to the enduring friendship and strong strategic ties that the two nations enjoy. China wants to benefit from the Pakistan's experience of dealing with the Taliban and navigating the complex ethno-religious politics of the region. Sino- Pak equation has strengthened not only due to aligning of their economic interests but also owing to the fact that both have mutual rival in India. Hatef, A. and Luqiu, R. (2017), in their analysis contend that; *“In China’s quest for regional dominance, Afghanistan’s relationship with India presents many challenges to China’s grand plan. As a result, there is increased interest on the part of China in Afghanistan to overpower India’s regional dominance.”*¹ Malone, David (2011), contends that, *“India would be loser in Geostrategic tug-of-war post US withdrawal, Kabul submitting to combined influence of China and Pakistan, with Taliban firmly at helm of affairs and India marginalized in Afghanistan’s reconstruction.”*² Pakistan undoubtedly would prefer Chinese preeminence in Afghan affairs viz-viz other regional players, while Chinese would want regional cooperation predominantly with Pakistan

with negligible role for other players including India. A key consideration in collusive Sino-Pak policy is the strained relations of both these nations with India due to events in Galwan and along the Northern borders particularly in J & K.³ Thus the possibility of China and Pakistan working in tandem to counter India's influence in Afghanistan cannot be negated by the Indian policy makers.

China's Hedging Policy: Bonding with Taliban

The Chinese ostensibly oppose religious fundamentalism and extremism, perceiving it as a threat to its own internal security; however, the same has not affected its ties either with Pakistan or with Taliban in pursuance of its national interests. To Pakistan's credit it has managed to prevail on Taliban and other radicals to desist from carrying out any activity that would harm China's interests. It is pertinent to note that during the Taliban 1.0 rule, Islamabad facilitated China's direct contact with the aim of ensuring Uyghur separatists do not get support and safe haven from Taliban. Thus, Pakistan finds itself in unique position to persist with its role of a catalyst between China and the Taliban relationship. In the current scenario with the Taliban back in power it can be safely deduced that Chinese interests will continue to remain protected. Although China has developed good relations with the Taliban, Islamabad retains its relevance in facilitating furtherance of the BRI, CPEC and infrastructure development projects in Afghanistan. Connectivity through Pakistan offers several advantages to the Chinese to include shorter distance and strong strategic partnership between the two countries.⁴ *Gwadar Port* developed by the Chinese facilitating Beijing's access to the strategic Indian Ocean is another major consideration in Sino-Pak collusive policies.⁵ The

possibilities of using Gwadar port for trade with Afghanistan have already been explored and enhanced connectivity using CPEC would overcome other infrastructural and logistical challenges. In Chinese national security and economic calculus a pliable government in Afghanistan with strong Pakistani ties is advantageous for BRI, thereby assisting China's connectivity to Iran and Turkey.⁶

Collusive Policy: Convergence of Interests

A collusive, collaborative, synchronized Beijing and Islamabad policy supporting Taliban have serious ramifications for radicalization and terrorism impacting global security in general and India in particular. Beijing and Pakistan have been working in perfect tandem to take initiative in Afghan affairs ever since President Obama announced his intention of withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan in 2014. Even prior to the Taliban assuming control of Kabul, China and Pakistan have been working in concert to not only ensure a pliant ruler in Kabul but also ease the path for Taliban to gain legitimacy. While Pakistan's security concerns regarding Afghanistan are primarily India-centric, Chinese interests are more oriented towards negating Taliban support to its Uyghur population and ensure its economic interests are secured. China would endeavour to create multi-front criticalities for India either in a standalone mode or in collusive policy with Pakistan and by extension the Taliban regime to keep India focused on internal security matters. The close coordination between the three viz China, Pakistan and Taliban to keep India contained was in evidence even before the withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan.

Pakistan's India centric obsession and anxieties will keep on increasing in proportion to India's involvement and acceptance in Taliban governed Afghanistan. Islamabad's thought process was in evidence when Shah Mehmood Qureshi, the Pakistani Foreign Minister while talking to Bruce Wallace about Indian presence in Afghanistan said that; *"if any one expects Pakistan to have more focus on its western border, our eastern front should be secured. He further elaborated that no massive reconstruction is observed, no long queues can be seen in New Delhi waiting for visas for Afghanistan, then why India has huge presence in Afghanistan."*⁷ Pakistan has been unwavering in its focus in marginalizing Indian role in the region. According to a leaked US embassy cable Pakistan had asked US that New Delhi will have to reduce its footprints in Afghanistan and stop operating subversive activities in Baluchistan if Pakistan was to continue in its support of GWOT. Pakistani officials advocated that the issue of Baluchistan is linked to the Afghan issue as any attacks in Baluchistan are invariably planned in Afghanistan.

Sino-Pak: Facilitators in Talks. Taliban Leaders have been meeting with the Chinese officials regularly and when the peace negotiations with Washington stalled in 2019 they sought Beijing's intervention. Two weeks after President Trump had abruptly called off his administration's months long peace talks, citing ongoing Taliban deadly attacks in Afghanistan, Mullah Baradar led delegation reached Beijing seeking Chinese assistance. The Chinese Foreign Ministry obliged the Taliban by calling for immediate resumption of the peace process.⁸ Moving in absolute accord, the Pakistan's PM Imran Khan, while speaking at Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) at New York, said that; *"there is no military solution to the war in Afghanistan and called for the USA to resume*

peace talks with the Taliban.” He also emphasized on need to resume talks in his meeting with President Trump at the UNO.⁹ Subsequently a Taliban delegation met with Qureshi in Islamabad in first week of October 2019, where both parties voiced support for resuming stalled USA-Taliban peace talks.¹⁰ Immediately following the US visit, Imran Khan and Chinese President Xi Jinping issued a joint statement endorsing an Afghan-led peace process in the country and confirmed that it will soon host delegations from the Afghan government and Taliban to discuss a peace agreement.¹¹ The professed support for resumption of peace dialogue helped Beijing-Islamabad gain credence with Taliban when the Doha talks gained traction. Concurrent to Doha talks between USA and Taliban, the Sino-Pak officials met with Taliban leaders about Afghan peace in talks hosted by Pakistan, followed by a meeting with China’s special envoy for Afghanistan. A Taliban spokesperson confirmed the meeting stating that the group’s leaders will also discuss movement of people, including refugees.¹² A delegation of Taliban leaders also travelled to China to meet with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and other officials in July 2021 with a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman calling the Taliban “*a pivotal military and political force* and added that the group would play *an important role in the process of peaceful reconciliation and reconstruction in Afghanistan.*”¹³

China-Pakistan working in tandem for securing Taliban’s legitimacy. The Chinese and Pakistanis see eye to eye on the Taliban was quite evident when both were among the first countries to welcome the Taliban back to power. Since the fall of Kabul, Beijing's statements have been cautious yet friendly. A day after Kabul fell, Chinese spokesperson said; “*We hope the Afghan Taliban can form solidarity with all factions and ethnic groups in Afghanistan and build a broad-based and inclusive political*

structure.” Similarly, Chinese UN envoy Geng Shuang echoed the sentiment while noting that *“Afghanistan must never again become heaven for terrorists.... We hope that the Taliban in Afghanistan will earnestly deliver on their commitments and make a clean break with the terrorist organizations.”* Chinese indication towards recognition of Taliban government was evident from 18th August 21 statement, *“It is a customary international practice that the recognition of a government comes after its formation,”* Beijing also confirmed in a meeting with Taliban on 28th August that it *stands ready to continue to develop good-neighborliness, friendship, and cooperation with Afghanistan and play a constructive role in Afghanistan's peace and reconstruction.*¹⁴ A day after Taliban’s march into Kabul, echoing China’s stand, PM Imran Khan said that *“Afghanistan has broken the shackles of slavery”.*¹⁵

China’s Nuanced Approach: Pragmatic & Leveraging Strength

In Beijing’s appreciation of India’s successful military standoff along the northern borders in the Himalayas was feasible only due to Indian Armed Forces commitment only on a single front with China as opposed to the two and a half front that India would have to contend with on its western front with Pakistan and terrorists within its territory. The USA backed former Afghan government was favourable to India, whereas the Pakistan supported Taliban, especially if they align with China also are likely to be detrimental to India's national security interest. A collusive troika of Sino - Pak - Taliban working in concert would significantly impact India's economic and security interests in CAR region which is being increasingly dominated by China economically. The Chinese influence in also increasing in the military domain with reports of Beijing unofficially establishing

base in Tajikistan, a neighbor of Afghanistan strategic security partner for India. Ostensibly, Beijing's presence in Tajikistan is intended to conduct counterterrorism activities, i.e., preventing ethnic Uyghur forming part of ETIM from destabilizing China's XUAR. However, the same is more oriented towards asserting itself in resource rich area besides limiting New Delhi's influence. Beijing is also leveraging its dominance in SCO to further its agenda of getting Taliban led Afghanistan legitimacy. Immediately after the US withdrawal, in September 2021, SCO summit, Chinese President Xi Jinping while addressing the summit called on the other members to guide Afghanistan, an observer in the group, to a smooth political transition and inclusive political structure.¹⁶ Pakistan, too as an SCO member, supported the Chinese viewpoint and stated that Afghanistan cannot be *controlled from outside*; a statement more oriented towards USA and India. What will be of interest from global and regional perspective is to see if Beijing aims to give legitimacy to Taliban ruled Afghanistan by sponsoring its elevation to full membership of SCO.

Regional players are recalibrating their policies to take the new geostrategic reality of Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan into account. Pakistan views the Taliban's return to Afghanistan as an opportunity to gain strategic depth against India. Islamabad's Islamist extremist and terrorist proxies, including not only the Taliban but also the Haqqani network, JeM, LeT, ISIS along other groups will in all probability focus on capability building to strengthen and perpetuate terrorist attacks internationally. Haqqani official working with the Taliban has offered "positive" relations with India. However, the Taliban spokesperson, Suhail Shaheen told the BBC's Hindi service; "*as Muslims, we also have a right to raise our voice for Muslims in Kashmir, India or any other*

country.”¹⁷ The statement that does not augur well for peace and security in the region. Post Taliban taking control of Afghanistan, JeM representatives reportedly met with the Taliban to solicit their assistance for operations in J & K. The Indian strategic security thinkers need to take into account a less than cooperative new government under the Taliban that is aligned and supported by its adversaries China and Pakistan.

Infrastructure development and economic cooperation is a major area of policy convergence between China, Pakistan and Taliban. Beijing's flagship infrastructure and investment programs, the BRI and CPEC are spearheading numerous rail, highways, oil pipelines, infrastructure and energy projects in the region. Beijing has been seeking to leverage BRI to connect Kabul to Peshawar in northwestern Pakistan even prior to the Taliban controlling Kabul. China's ultimate aim in the country being to exploit the minerals and rare-earth material from resource rich Afghanistan which according to a 2014 report could be worth nearly \$1 trillion. In consonance with the intent Beijing provided an initial \$31 million economic assistance during Covid times to Taliban immediately on government formation in early September 2021. The Taliban too expressed their intent to join the CPEC adding to India's security complexities as reported by the Hindustan Times.¹⁸ The Taliban also described China as its *most important partner*, saying Afghanistan looks to Beijing to rebuild the country and exploit its rich copper deposits as the war-ravaged country faces widespread hunger and fears of an economic collapse. Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid had said that “*the group supports China's One Belt, One Road initiative*” that seeks to link China with Africa, Asia and Europe through an enormous network of ports, railways, roads and industrial parks. The Dawn also quoted Pakistan's Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed

response to the Taliban intent as *encouraging and good*. He also underscored that “*Pakistan is proud of its friendship with China, and if the Taliban hold similar views, then it is really good.*”¹⁹ During the third round of China-Pakistan strategic dialogue on July, both sides agreed to *develop and extend the CPEC and promote regional connectivity*, suggesting that China and Pakistan share high hopes for the corridor's expansion.

Unfreezing of Afghan Assets and lifting Sanctions. China took lead in calling for end to sanctions on Afghanistan ‘*as soon as possible*’ and unfreezing of the Afghan assets and funds. The Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called for the measures during virtual talks with his Group of Twenty (G20) counterparts. He also stated that foreign exchange reserves should not be used as a bargaining chip to exert political pressure. He also urged the World Bank, IMF and others to release Afghan government accounts and provide economic aid to the country, citing humanitarian concerns.²⁰ China also pledged to help rebuild Afghanistan and called for the lifting of sanctions on the country during the first high-level meeting between Chinese officials and Taliban representatives since the Taliban formed a government. Pakistan on the other hand announced that it will provide more than \$28 million in humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and relax restrictions on trade and cross-border travel.

Peace talks *was another arena for Sino-Pak collusivity, power play and geo-political dynamics* in Afghanistan as was quite evident in the various Afghan Peace talks. Noticeably, the troika talks in Pakistan were hosted the day after India held its own multilateral meeting centered on the situation in Afghanistan. India’s NSA Ajit Doval hosted security chiefs from Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan,

Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in New Delhi on Wednesday. While Afghanistan's Taliban representatives were not invited, both China and Pakistan were invited but did not participate in the New Delhi-led talks. Incidentally, the New Delhi meeting was the third round of the Regional Security Dialogue and China had attended both previous meetings in Tehran in 2018 and 2019. India's foreign ministry officials said Pakistan's refusal to attend the meeting was "unfortunate, but not surprising" and "reflects its mindset of viewing Afghanistan as its protectorate." Indian officials, by contrast, downplayed China's non-participation, saying that bilateral consultations between China and India on Afghan issues were ongoing. A joint statement known as "*Delhi Declaration on Afghanistan*" was released which stated that the participants of the meeting paid special attention to the current political situation in Afghanistan and threats arising from terrorism, radicalisation, drug trafficking as well as the need for humanitarian assistance. The statement also expressed concerns *about deteriorating socio-economic and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan and underlined the need to provide urgent humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan.*" It also emphasized the need for "*an open and truly inclusive government in Afghanistan.*"²¹

In apparent show of solidarity and policy alignment with Islamabad while snubbing India, China bowed out of security talks on Afghan in New Delhi, but confirmed that it will take part in "extended troika" talks to be hosted by Pakistan and to be held the very next day, as officials from China, Russia and the USA assembled in Pakistan to discuss Afghan issues. Notably, Afghanistan's Taliban foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, also attended the meeting, making him the first minister from the Taliban's interim government to visit Pakistan. The extended troika meeting was also the

first to bring together all the parties since the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August. A previous meeting, hosted by Russia in October, was not attended by the USA. The extended troika talks in Pakistan covered similar grounds as New Delhi talks, but with a different set of nations. Russia was the only common attendee to take part in both dialogues.²²

The Elusive Legitimacy

Taliban ruled Afghanistan government is yet to get recognition and legitimacy with hardly any country recognizing it and China too adopting a much nuanced approach. The OIC has also not pledged any support to Afghanistan despite active lobbying and appeal for engagement by Imran Khan at OIC meeting. Josep Borrell, the EU's foreign policy chief, puts it eloquently at the informal meeting of EU Foreign Affairs Ministers (Gymnich) when he says *“What is clear is that the future of Afghanistan remains a key issue for us. It affects us, it affects the region, international stability and it has a direct impact on European security. At the same time, the Ministers strongly insisted on the idea that we remain committed to supporting the Afghan population. In order to support the Afghan population, we will have to engage with the new government in Afghanistan, which does not mean recognition, it is an operational engagement.... will increase depending on the behaviour of Afghan power-holders following the Taliban takeover.”*²³

The Fault Lines in Sino-Pak-Taliban Policy Convergence

Radicalization and Terrorism. A major fault line in the Sino-Pak collusive policy alignment is in the critical policy arena of countering Islamic radicalization and

security threats originating from terrorists, separatists and those labeled as such by China especially the Uyghur separatists. While Pakistan has been using the terrorism as a tool of state policy to bleed India, Beijing's concern originates from its prospective use in XUAR. The issue is a potential flash point in an otherwise close Sino-Pak relationship which can be leveraged by India to counter adverse effects of the alliance. Talibs and Imams have been a part of the regions Islamic socio-cultural traditions for the better part of the history of Islam itself.²⁴ The concept of the Talib has long been known in NWFP and FATA areas on both side of Durand Line, which was recorded as such by Sir Winston Churchill in 1898. He mentioned them as wandering Talib-ul-ilm's, corresponding to the theological students in Turkey and living free at the expense of the people. Thus the Mullah, Imam and the Talib have been an integral part of the historic religious culture with specific roles in the social fabric of region. The Taliban movement owes its genesis to a large number of resistance groups that participated in the anti-Soviet campaign organized and financed by the USA, through Pakistan with Islam as a rallying point. A similar analogy can be drawn for the current situation; hence it won't be feasible for Taliban to totally deny space to the proponents of radical Islam using religion to further their radical agenda. The Mullahs, Imams and the Talibs became an important part of the mujahideen movement and were prominent in the 'Harkat-e-Inqalabi-e-Islami' (Movement of the Islamic Uprising). This ultra-orthodox Sunni Islamic militia of radicals from both sides of the Durand Line, would lead continue to promote their Islamic fundamentalist rule. Taliban is not known for adhering to their assurances, a fact that was quite in evidence during their taking control of Kabul and the resultant chaos. Hence, if Taliban rescind on their often repeated guarantee of not allowing Afghanistan to be safe

sanctuary to terrorists and separatists particularly Uyghur's Sino-Pak *all-weather friendship* will be severely tested.

Narco-Terrorism is another major fault line with Beijing concerned about the fact whether Taliban will continue to resort to illicit narcotics trafficking in the region, which they used as a source of funding since their inception. Pakistan too relies heavily on narco-dollars to fund its proxy war with India and a decision not to back Chinese counternarcotics efforts would strain bilateral ties. Any emerging tensions on the narco-terrorism question are likely to be managed as how China and Pakistan prioritize their relationship and geostrategic concerns particularly those concerned with India. Taliban's resurrection definitely adds stress to an otherwise positive and productive bilateral partnership.

Islamabad's quandary emanates from the fact that it has supported Taliban since the Soviet invasion of 1980s and the generations of mujahideens / Taliban members have been indoctrinated in its madrassas. However, it's contentious point whether it can retain its influence over Taliban in changed dynamics that Islamabad would undoubtedly like to use as a proxy for creating pan India trouble in general and within J & K in particular. Pakistan is also conscious of the implications of radical Taliban rule on Pakistan's internal security threats from the TTP and situation in FATA along with demands for an independent Baluch and Pashutun nations. Perhaps in a sign of things to come, Islamabad was initially reluctant to blame terrorism for a suicide attack on buses carrying Chinese workers to BRI projects in July 21. Islamabad's selective pursuit of some terrorists and their enablers and not others may misalign with Beijing's relentless pursuit of all terrorists who seek to harm Chinese economic interests in Pakistan and

separatists who could destabilize Xinjiang. Beijing is particularly concerned that the ETIM could potentially receive endorsement and support from the Taliban and other Islamist extremist groups.

Economic considerations and financial drain would be an important factor that China might consider. The benefit of Afghanistan's mineral resources and its inclusion in BRI is undoubtedly in Beijing's interest, but it cannot negate the clear and present danger of Sunni Uighurs in Xinjiang teaming up with the Taliban. China also needs to weigh in the burden on its strategic interests of supporting both Afghanistan and Pakistan financially through development funds. Any conflict in the Himalayan region will severely impact the geo-strategic dynamics and economic growth of all the stakeholders. While Pakistan may consider adopting an aggressive stance in collusive support with China and Taliban but the Chinese have to factor in long term ramifications of such an aggressive collusive policy. The impact of a conflict along the northern borders with a strong battle hardened Indian Armed Forces with opportunity for India to reclaim Gilgit-Baltistan areas would be felt by CPEC. This reclaiming of Indian territory would strategically and economically render \$60 billion CPEC investment as a non event. The Taliban and Pakistan have given assurances to Beijing, the value of which China will look through the prism of similar commitments by Pakistan to the USA during GWOT. The reports about the presence of LeT militants in northeast Afghanistan indicate that ISI may have used the Punjabi Taliban to ensure the security of the Chinese border. Nonetheless, ISI retains the capability to control anti China activity through LeT and Haqqani Network and will potentially use it as leverage against China.²⁵

5.1 **Counterterrorism operations** against security threats from terrorists and separatists is a major discord area on which the troika of Taliban – China – Pakistan have deeply ingrained divergent views as a policy matter with possible fallouts on other area of cooperation and collaboration. In a recent indication of its stand on the issue, Beijing conveyed through state-run media, that “*the Taliban would have to commit to no training, no fundraising and no recruitment centers for terrorists within Afghanistan, where the definition of “terrorist” will no doubt be Beijing’s.*”²⁶ China had welcomed the earlier commitment of Taliban that while it would promote Muslim rights around the world, it would also not “*interfere in China’s internal affairs.*” However, if a breach of this pledge occurs with continued incidences of TTP attacks on Chinese interests in Pakistan, or additional assistance to groups in Xinjiang then China is likely insist Pakistan to use its leverage on the Taliban and manage the problem. Depending on an evaluation of its own national security interests at the time. However, Islamabad may not be inclined to support every Chinese counterterrorism request and same can be leveraged by New Delhi to drive a wedge between the two adversaries of India.

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Chapter VI - India's Traditional Linkages with Afghanistan and implication for India's National security arising due to current dispensation in Kabul

The Indo-Afghan Relations

Traditionally, India and Afghanistan have enjoyed strong bilateral relations dating back to the *Indus Valley Civilisation*. The historical origins of these strong socio-cultural ties have been aptly summed up by the then Ambassador of Afghanistan in USA, wherein Ambassador Roya Rahmani while speaking on 21st November 2019 at the Hudson Institute conference on the India-Afghanistan Relationship: Examining Historical, Political, Economic and Cultural Ties remarks;

*“Our connection with India runs very deep and crosses all aspects of society.....
...Indians and Afghans have lived side by side, sharing music, poetry, and food for
generations..... our historical and cultural ties date back much further, to the Indus
Valley Civilization during the Bronze Age. Afghanistan was deeply influenced by
Buddhist, Hindu and Zoroastrian cultures and influences which can still be observed in
the timeless Buddhist symbols of Aynak and Bamyán in Afghanistan.”*¹

Afghanistan's geographical location on the ancient Silk Road made it *geo-strategically significant as a gateway to India* and the centre piece in the Great Game between British India and the Soviets in early 20th century. The Indian Independence movement against the British brought the two countries closer as a result of shared vision of Mahatma Gandhi and a similar nationalist movement in Pashtun dominated NWFP or

FATA under Frontier Gandhi - Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, which translated into close relations in the post-independence era. The Afghan and Pakistan dispute owing to the split Pashtun population across the Durand Line strengthened the New Delhi - Kabul relations.² India got automatic membership of UN at time of independence while Pakistan had to apply for the same and significantly Afghanistan had voted against Islamabad's inclusion in UN. Indo-Afghan relationship post independence can be viewed through distinct phases. During the Cold War era or popularly referred as the second phase of the Great Games, India maintained good relations with Afghanistan. The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program since its inception in 1964 has been aiding and assisting in developmental activities in Afghanistan. During the Soviets presences in Afghanistan, New Delhi took led in recognizing the USSR backed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Subsequently, post the withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989, India supported the coalition government that was formed and was forthcoming with assistance. The 1990s and Taliban 1.0 rule supported by Pakistan witnessed relations between the two becoming glacial and India temporarily broke diplomatic ties with Kabul. However, India continued to provide humanitarian and developmental aid to Afghanistan along besides supporting UN humanitarian organizations in delivering food grains and relief material to the war torn country.³ This was also the time when influx of battle hardened mujahideens took place in J & K, resulting in giving traction to terrorism and creating internal security issues for Indian security establishment. The GWOT and the discovery of the hydrocarbons in the resource rich CAR region ushered in fresh set of players in the New Great Game. The changed geo-political dynamics in Afghanistan has strategic significance for the Indian national

interest and security calculus necessitating recalibration in Indian policy approach vis-à-vis Afghanistan. The Indian ties in 21st century, in post 9/11 era Afghanistan metamorphosed yet again. The developments after 9/11 attack and ensuing defeat of Taliban by US led forces provided an opportunity for India to re-establish itself in Afghanistan in a radically different regional and international framework.⁴ This particular phase of Indo-Afghan relationship can be divided into two distinct periods, the first period comprising of time since arrival of ISAF in 2001 up to neutralization of Osama – bin Laden in 2011 and the second period comprising of time post Osama – bin Laden neutralization up to withdrawal of USA forces till date.

Indo- Afghan Relations: ISAF Deployment to Osama Elimination

The period since arrival of ISAF in 2001 up to neutralization of Osama – bin Laden in 2011 witnessed New Delhi re-establishing its diplomatic relations with Afghanistan and upgrading its liaison office to a fully fledged embassy in Kabul. India also managed to attain requisite weight in the post-Taliban era Afghanistan by leveraging its soft power, regaining its influence and emerging as a major player regarding the Afghan issue at Bonn Conference.⁵ Consequent to the Bonn Agreement, President Karzai, sought enhanced Indian role in the country and embarked on a series of visits to India in order to seek economic assistance, military support and capability development.⁶ The Indian government responded positively to these overtures by making investments, infrastructure development, providing economic aid and humanitarian assistance. It also actively participated in various regional and international forums supporting Afghan government. The visits of the President Karzai fructified in number of bilateral

agreements and Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) being signed which also included a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA). The MoU for construction of strategic road from Delaram to Zaranj linking Afghanistan and Iran was signed in 2003 signifying India's strategic interest in the region. In excess of 100 Indian companies had invested in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2011.⁷ Javid and Javid contend that India was quite forthcoming in its support for all the stake holders and multiple ethnic groups of Afghanistan which included among others the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras. However, it was general perception that New Delhi was not as supportive of the Pashtuns because the ethnic origin of Taliban is predominantly Pashtun with close affiliation to Pakistan.⁸ India also ensured that Afghanistan became the 8th member of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) at the 14th SAARC summit held at New Delhi in April 2007.⁹ However, the situation commenced deteriorating since 2006 when the rising spectre of Taliban led terrorism and violence started targeted Indian developmental projects in Afghanistan. It took further down trend when India witnessed a series of attacks on its embassy in 2008, followed by car bomb attack of 2009. Pakistan was working persistently towards marginalizing India while conveying its concerns regarding the increasing Indian role in Afghanistan to Washington. Islamabad correlated attack within Pakistan in 2006-7 to India's involvement in Afghanistan and orchestrated proofs of linking these incidents to India's presence. It was eventually successful in convincing US and other stakeholders in marginalizing India.¹⁰ As a harbinger of the emerging geopolitical dynamics and as a wakeup call for Indian Policy makers, the 2010 London Conference on Afghanistan called for the *demarcation of the Taliban as the good Taliban and the bad Taliban*. The consequence of this demarcation of Taliban on India's security

calculus was not only damaging but signaled India's shrinking diplomatic role in Afghanistan.¹¹ Exclusion of India from International Conference on Afghanistan held in Istanbul in 2010 further reinforced the reduced Indian involvement in Afghanistan.¹² New Delhi needed to take corrective policy measures on priority to retain its relevance if not predominance in Afghanistan. It was imperative that the Indian leaders recalibrate their policy in a scenario wherein the US led NATO cease to be present in Afghanistan in varying timeframe while factoring in the governance dispensation favourable to its adversary. The scenario of Taliban gaining power with Islamabad having substantial influence in Afghanistan and its impact on regional security dynamics particularly on terrorism in J & K was quite realistic calling for pro-active engagement of all stakeholders ensuring Indian national interests is secured.

Indo- Afghan Relations: Osama Elimination to Withdrawal of US Forces

The period post Osama – bin Laden neutralization up to withdrawal of USA forces saw India regaining its influence to some extent and leveraging its soft power. The signing of bilateral Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) during Karzai's October 2011 visit was a landmark agreement in further strengthening the bilateral ties. It was the first of its kind collaboration that the Kabul government had signed with any country. The SPA provides for assistance to help rebuild Afghanistan's infrastructure and institutions, education and technical assistance to re-build indigenous Afghan capacity in different areas, encouraging investment in Afghanistan's natural resources, providing duty free access to the Indian market for Afghanistan's exports *support for an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, broad-based and inclusive process of peace and reconciliation* besides advocating the need for a sustained and long-term commitment to Afghanistan by the

international community.¹³ It also provided for India to train Afghan security forces units as the US seeks to withdraw its forces from the country in 2014. Not surprisingly, the formalization of this strategic relationship has triggered concerns in Pakistan.

The Indian PM, Manmohan Singh visited to Kabul soon after Osama Bin Laden was eliminated by the US Special Forces was indicative of the Indian appreciation of the emerging situation in the region. During this visit India also announced an economic package worth US \$ 500 million for Kabul in addition to the previous Indian assistance amounting to US \$ 1.5 billion. During his address to the Afghanistan Parliament, PM Manmohan Singh focused on further strengthening of the Indo-Afghan ties with the objective to curb extremism. India reasserted itself and enhanced its commitments towards Afghanistan, while making its objectives compatible with those of the US, concerning Pakistan.¹⁴ India organized a Delhi Investment Summit in which Indian corporate houses and businessmen were encouraged to invest in Afghanistan. Primarily, India was keen on continued investment in minerals and hydrocarbon sector of Afghanistan.¹⁵ The re-vitalization of Indo-Afghan ties saw contraction in Afghan-Pak relations, particularly when President Karzai took anti Taliban stance. US kept on signaling Pakistan that soft handed treatment of Taliban and other radicals would not be tolerated. Mike Mullen, Joint Chief of Staff of the US (2007- 2011), *termed Haqqani Network as the veritable arm of Pakistan.* As India's involvement in Afghanistan increased, Pakistan's strategic thinkers, most notably its dominant military establishment, have voiced frequent questions about India's position and intentions within the region. On more than one occasion, they have obscurely hinted at India's intent to encircle Pakistan by establishing a strategic bridgehead in Afghanistan.¹⁶ India's interests in Afghanistan

have been typically perceived in terms of a strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan for power and influence in the country. India has committed a large capital into various developmental projects in Afghanistan. India's larger interests in Afghanistan extend beyond Pakistan and concern geo-economics of retaining influence in the resource rich CAR region. Afghanistan holds strategic importance for India as New Delhi seeks friendly allies in the neighbourhood and because it is a gateway to energy-rich nations such as Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan.¹⁷ India also got involved in a trilateral initiative with Iran – whom it had assisted in constructing Chahbahar port as a precursor to reviving Afghanistan's traditional role as the crossroads between South and Central Asia.

The year 2014 was to prove to be the watershed year for multiple reasons. President Obama announced his intention of withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, PM Modi led government was sworn in Delhi and the elections in Afghanistan were to change the geo-political landscape of the region in times to come. Washington had already made it clear that they will engage with all stakeholders to ensure timely withdrawal of US troops. The willingness to engage with Taliban was quite evident when the Doha office of Taliban was established. PM Modi displayed his *regional priority - neighbourhood first policy* when he invited the SAARC Head of States for his swearing in ceremony and President Karzai was among the first one to accept. In a speech at the 2014 BRICS Summit, PM Modi once again reaffirmed India's commitment to Afghanistan when he said, "*India will continue to assist Afghanistan in building its capacity; in governance, security and economic development.*"¹⁸ 2014 Afghanistan Presidential elections resulted the National Unity Government led by Ashraf Ghani as President and Abdullah Abdullah as Chief Executive Officer coming to power.

Signaling reprioritization in its foreign policy calculus, President Ghani made his first official visit to India almost after seven months of him assuming power in September 2014, while he visited China in October 2014 followed by Pakistan in November of the same year. PM Modi made trip to Kabul on 25th December 2015, on his way back from Moscow, where he jointly inaugurated the National Assembly building constructed under India-Afghanistan development cooperation and also handed over four MI- 25 attack helicopters, denoting a policy shift in providing military aid /hardware.¹⁹ This visit was followed by another visit in June 2016 where PM Modi and President Ghani jointly inaugurated the Afghan-India Friendship Dam, earlier known as Salma Dam. The mutual exchange visits at the highest levels became a regular affair in ensuing years. India thus continued with the tradition of close friendship with successive Afghan governments, spending heavily in the war-ravaged country's growth and infrastructure, with total assistance of nearly \$3 billion since 2001, the largest that New Delhi has donated to any nation.²⁰ (Details India's assistance to Afghanistan is given at appendix D).

India: Doha Peace Talks and Taliban Engagement

The US - Taliban peace talks in Doha preceded the final signing on 29 Feb 2020 by numerous parleys and hectic discussion primarily at Doha. It is noteworthy that the four-page deal signed by US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban political leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar was between the *"Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan which the United States does not recognize as a state and is recognized as the Taliban"* and the United States.²¹ Significantly while Pakistan occupied centre-stage in brokering the US - Taliban peace agreement, India's

Ambassador to Qatar witnessed the signing of the US-Taliban pact February 2020 from the sidelines, primarily because of its aversion to engaging with the Taliban. Former Indian diplomat, Vivek Katju has been critical of India's policy concerning Taliban and of engaging only with Ghani government when he says that;

*“Indian diplomacy was truly flat-footed on openly holding talks with the Taliban, even when the group was gaining global legitimacy. It is also known that it [Taliban] was signaling its interest in contact with India but at that stage, Delhi was rigidly glued to President Ashraf Ghani. A cruel price has always to be paid for diplomatic obduracy.”*²²

India has already lagged behind other regional players such as Russia, China and Iran in establishing contacts with the Taliban. Indian External Affairs Minister (EAM), S Jaishankar, virtual participation in the intra-Afghan talks in Doha, which began in September 2020, was a welcome step with the possibility of India's willingness to engage with the Taliban.²³ India-Taliban engagement marks a major policy shift, but India made policy course correction only when it became clear that the Taliban would be calling the shots in the future. India has since opened a direct channel of communication with the Taliban. This diplomatic outreach is said to be limited to the Taliban factions that are considered 'nationalist' in their worldview and not under the influence of Pakistan's security establishment.²⁴ The first official confirmation of India's direct talks with the Taliban in Doha came from Mutlaq bin Majed Al Qahtani, the Special Envoy of the Foreign Minister of the State of Qatar for Counterterrorism and Mediation of Conflict Resolution, who remarked, *“I understand that there has been a quiet visit by Indian officials to speak to the Taliban.”*²⁵ EAM Jaishankar had made a brief stopover at Doha between 9 and 15 June 2021 during his travels to Kuwait and Kenya. He met with Qatar's

Foreign Minister and the National Security Advisor (NSA), as well as US Special Representative on Afghanistan reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, who was also there, and discussed Afghan developments.²⁶

Taliban Rule: Indian Concerns

India has been intimately involved in assisting the Afghan government in capability development and capacity building, infrastructure projects and providing humanitarian assistance since 2001. However sudden capitulation and subsequent flight of President Ashraf Ghani from Kabul while the western countries evacuation process was ongoing transformed the entire geo-political dynamics of Afghanistan. Once the Taliban gained control of Kabul, India decided to close its embassy and withdrew all officials from Afghanistan thus, facilitating convergence of Sino-Pak interests of influencing Taliban and having predominant role in global policy formulation post US withdrawal. The implications of current turbulence in Afghanistan wherein Taliban is in control with backing of Pakistan on India's security calculus needs to be examined holistically by the Indian policy makers in light of Indian national interests with specific reference to radicalization and terrorism. India's security concerns involving Afghanistan are concrete and tangible. The prospect of radical Taliban elements dominating Kabul government for extended period will seriously impact militant Islamic fundamentalism in the region in general and in India in particular. Taliban's symbiotic relationship with Pakistan's MJC poses numerous security challenges for India and J&K. The geo-strategic complexities of US withdrawal without an enduring governance system in place have compounded the regional security calculus creating criticalities for all the stakeholders.

India has a lasting interest in containing and if possible reversing the tide of Islamic fundamentalism and militancy in the region. An independent, united, peaceful, multiethnic, non-extremist and self sustaining Afghanistan is in New Delhi's interest. Stronger economic relations and cooperation in the region on trade, transit, energy and infrastructure development along with continued long-term international engagement in Afghanistan is the way forward for India.²⁷

Radicalisation and Terrorism in J & K including proliferation of US/ NATO left arms and ammunition left behind in Afghanistan. Indian concerns in emerging situation in Afghanistan are several, primary being the threat of enhanced terrorism in J & K, a major internal security threat since early 1990s with influx of foreign fighters from Afghanistan. The militant strain of the Deobandi philosophy changed the composition of the J & K insurgency during Taliban 1.0 period. The *radicalized Islamist jihadi rhetoric of the azadi notion* propagated by Pakistan significantly transformed the nature of the terrorism along religious lines replacing the *Kashmiriyat* concept of peaceful coexistence. A similar threat of influx of foreign radicalised fighters from Afghanistan is likely with the return of the Taliban to power in Kabul. However, unlike the past the willingness of the MJC to push foreign fighters across the LoC could likely be checked by the re-emergence of TTP on Pakistan's western border. The Taliban 2.0 will in all probability be more pragmatic and practical in its approach considering India's politico-economic-military capabilities and its desire for international acceptance as de-facto rulers of Afghanistan. The Taliban would have also taken cues from their previous short lived tenure at helm of affairs and likely to be more balanced while supporting the fundamentalist narrative which will have global ramifications. The

fundamentalist ideology and radicalization would not only impact India but would also have far reaching consequences for China's Uyghur's and impact on internal security situation in Pakistan. Iran, Saudi Arabia, OIC and the CAR nation's security interests would also be adversely affected by radicalization. Hence, India needs to pro-actively engage with multiple stakeholders to prevent influx of radicals in the valley and threatening stability.

Safeguarding Indian Investments. Infrastructure and capacity building was the key in cooperation area between India and Afghanistan under the Karzai and Ghani administrations. Prior to the Taliban takeover, India had become Afghanistan's biggest regional donor over the past two decades, having committed in excess of \$ 3 billion toward humanitarian assistance, infrastructure development and capacity building of various state institutions.²⁸ India's assistance in critical infrastructure development projects included the Afghan Parliament building, the India-Afghan Friendship Dam, the Zaranj-Delaram highway as part of around 4000 km of roadways in Afghanistan, electricity transmission lines, schools and hospitals. As Indian EAM Jaishankar states, *"No part of Afghanistan today is untouched by the 400- plus projects that India has undertaken in all 34 of the country's provinces."*²⁹

Sino – Pak – Taliban Collusive policies. China and Pakistan policies working in tandem in Taliban ruled Afghanistan will be detrimental to India's national interest. The current Taliban leadership has deep cultural, religious, economic and political ties with Pakistan. Islamabad is constantly placing obstructions in India path to ensure that it has no role in deciding the political future of Afghanistan. While Pakistan will to frustrate India-led initiatives in Afghanistan, the silver-lining is that the Taliban 2.0 regime

appears more receptive to the idea of New Delhi normalizing ties with Kabul. However, in light of the Pashtun-dominated Taliban openly stating that Islam will be the organizing framework of Afghanistan's governance framework, the Indian policy makers need to be pro-active in their approach to restore the warmth in Indo-Afghan relations to pre Taliban 2.0 era.

Security Concerns. The global, regional and Indian security dynamics have undergone major cataclysm since the US withdrawal and Taliban assuming power. India's concern emanates from the security ramifications of a politically unstable Afghanistan leading to strife in conflict prone volatile region. India's national interests are likely to be impacted with the absence of an amenable administration in Afghanistan, thereby curtailing its role and influence in the country. USA is currently engaged with Russia on Ukraine and China on economic front with minimal commitments in the CAR region. Thus India's interests are best served by recalibration of its policy and aligning with key players in Afghanistan with convergent policies. India took lead in organizing the Afghan regional security dialogue at a time when most of Afghanistan's neighbors are recalibrating their positions on the Taliban regime. However, both China and Pakistan continue to be obstructionist, pursuing their personal agenda with scant regard for regional security.

6.1 **Humanitarian Concerns.** Maintaining continuity in humanitarian aid to Afghans in these turbulent humanitarian crisis times with Pakistan maintaining its spoilsport attitude is a major concern. While the in humanitarian aid impacts Afghan populace, Islamabad is more worried about its positive ramifications on maintaining India's goodwill impact on Indian national interests and global leadership aspirations. Currently,

Islamabad only allows the export of goods from Afghanistan to India, but refuses to permit Indian exports from reaching Afghanistan through its border crossing. New Delhi has maintained that it cannot provide aid to Afghanistan if unnecessary conditions are imposed. Moving 50,000 metric tons of wheat to Afghanistan necessitating 5,000 trucks with Pakistan's on the wheat to be unloaded from Indian trucks at the India-Pakistan border at Wagah before being reloaded onto Afghan ones is neither feasible nor viable option. Pakistan did not publicly acknowledge India's formal request regarding the dispatch of wheat for humanitarian reasons in early October. The Indian delegation used the opportunity during Moscow parley by asking the Taliban representatives to persuade Pakistan in permitting passage of Indian wheat through the land route to Afghanistan. The Taliban government readily accepted the Indian assistance and agreed to convince Pakistan. Thus Islamabad was in a catch-22 situation when Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi raised the issue during his visit to Islamabad in November; Imran Khan had no option but to assured him that Pakistan would consider the request favourably.³⁰ It took additional three months and involvement of UN World Food Programme for the first batch of wheat aid trucks to move from India to Kabul via Pakistan on 23 February 2022.³¹

Re-calibrating **Indian foreign policy options** while ensuring friendly Indo-Afghan relations post US withdrawal with Taliban in power as the new normal **are being discussed in next chapter.**

CHAPTER VI: END NOTES

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Chapter VII - India's Policy Options, Research Analysis, Recommendations and Conclusion

India's Policy Options

The Indian policy options and strategy to safeguard its national security interest in backdrop of US withdrawal, Taliban assuming power and geo-political dynamics at play in Afghanistan necessitate recalibration. There are numerous hidden undercurrents in current regional dynamics which requires Indian think tank and policy framers to work on multiple thrust lines to evolve a denovo policy concerning Afghanistan. The strength of soft power and goodwill earned among the masses needs to evolve to smart power nuance with Afghan citizen centric approach. Taliban 2.0 has displayed independent thought process when it refused to tow the Pak - ISI line and expressed their reservations on legitimacy of Durand line.¹ The dilemma posed by the new great game dynamics and current Ukraine crisis will also challenge the diplomatic skills of Indian policy makers who need to adopt a nuanced approach factoring in the ground realities so as to retain its relevance and influence in the resource rich region. India cannot ignore the reality of Taliban being in full control of Afghanistan with virtually no opposition to its rule. New Delhi no longer enjoys the luxury of being averse or incommunicado with the Taliban.²

A holistic all encompassing, well calibrated, multi pronged and constructive approach would assist in achieving the Indian objective of ensuring that Afghanistan is not influenced or controlled by any power that is hostile to India. The Afghans view India

as a friend who has been supportive and concerned about the welfare of the Afghan people. Taliban 1.0 rule also witnessed India retaining some influence and connect with the common populace. Afghans perceive India as their genuine well wisher who can help in the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan. A domestic poll in 2010 commissioned by international agencies found that 71 % Afghans believe that India is playing the most active and constructive role in Afghanistan among all the nations operating in their country. The poll was carried out in all 45 provinces of Afghanistan, held across ethnic and geographical divides.³ India must leverage the advantages accrued by its development assistance program and the favourable public opinion by taking initiative and seizing opportunities. A pragmatic Indian policy in context of Indo-Taliban 2.0 relationship needs to factor in all the variables and dynamics of ever evolving security, geo-politics and geo-economics situation to ensure safeguarding of its national interest. The policy options for considerations by the Indian strategic thinkers and policy makers in furtherance of India's national and security interest in the current security scenario are given in succeeding paragraphs.

Advancing beyond Zero Sum Game. Historically, the Afghans have displayed greater affinity towards traditional governance system of Loya Jirga or Shura norms relying on the wisdom of engage elders and council members. The stance of taking a moral high ground of dealing with only democratically elected Afghan government is likely to be counterproductive for India given the current geo-political scenario. China, Pakistan and Qatar are actively lobbying for international recognition of Taliban and acceptance of global community of dealing with Taliban 2.0. New Delhi needs to de-hyphenate from any previous bilateral and multilateral policy. Our own bilateralism

given the current situation should focus only on our national interests and humanitarian considerations. Waiting for an elected government to come to power for meaningful engagement should not result in ceding ground irreversibly. India needs an independent foreign policy for Afghanistan; it may align with other like minded powers, but should not be unduly swayed or dictated by their considerations. India might consider the Afghan Taliban as Pakistan's proxy; however advancing beyond zero sum game has been in the works ever since the beginning of the Doha peace talks, we need to take it further. The policy considerations should strikes a balance between geo-political realities of the day, leverage India's soft power, focus on ameliorating hardships of Afghans and prevent the country's descent into a failed state. Among key confidence building measure with the Taliban would be a well calibrated investment and developmental work during the crisis period with culmination in reopening of Indian embassy in Kabul.

Establishing a functional equation with Taliban. India should consider engaging with current Taliban regime as a new normal and an inescapable requirement in our national interest. While establishing functional relationship with Taliban, the dynamics of multiple tribal and Taliban factions should also be kept into consideration by keeping channels of communication for engagements with all stake holders open. A number of Afghan nationals are stuck in India in wake of the withdrawal of US troops and Taliban assuming power which could be utilised for maintaining connect and keeping our interests alive in Afghanistan. Considering the regional dynamics, New Delhi should be pragmatic in its approach; engage with Taliban while continuing to work towards installing a government of its choice. Dr Kaura, an Assistant Professor at the Department of International Affairs and Security Studies, Sardar Patel University of

Police, Rajasthan, quotes Ayesha Siddiqa and Karan Thapar, who contend that “*due to constraints of Indo-Pak rivalry, the Taliban can neither emerge as India’s partner nor can they provide India with any kind of leverage over Afghanistan’s future. Moreover, there is no unanimity in the Taliban ranks on how to deal with India as the predominantly Pashtun insurgent group is not a monolith. It is believed that the Quetta Shura and the notorious Haqqani Network are still hostile towards India, and those keen to build a mutually beneficial relationship with India “are sitting in Doha or some of the low or mid-tier fighters in Kabul.”*”⁴ The Taliban have also given indications that they are amenable to working with India. Hence, establishing contact with the Taliban is seen as crucial to securing India’s existing economic interests in Afghanistan as well as to ensure that the Afghan land is not used for exporting terrorism and extremism.

Capitalise on the Pashtun solidarity across Durand Line. India needs to explore the option of supporting the Pashtunistan cause and legality of Durand line as a counter to Islamabad sponsored proxy war in J&K. The Pashtun solidarity and anti-Pakistan sentiment among Afghanistan’s tribal population particularly in FATA can be suitably exploited to prevent Pakistan from carrying out anti India policy. Considering *the Taliban only as an anti-India supporting terrorism in J & K* would certainly *constrict India’s strategic choices*. While the Pak- ISI has been successful in ensuring Taliban 2.0 rules Afghanistan, the situation is quite distinct from Taliban 1.0 rule in 1996. The resentment among common Afghan citizen or among various Taliban factions makes it difficult for the hardliners to achieve durable political stability. Thus, India’s pragmatic engagement with the common citizens as well as the opposing factions of the Taliban will assist New Delhi benefitting in all possible future political scenarios in Afghanistan.

Establishing such a hedging equation with all the stake holders and opposing faction of Taliban would ensure New Delhi friendly government in Kabul and also counter the threat emanating from anti-India JeM and LeT operating from Afghanistan.⁵

Assurances on Counter-Terrorism and anti - Radicalisation. Similar to the assurances that the Taliban has given to China, India too can engage and extract guarantees that Taliban “*will not allow the soil of Afghanistan to be used for anti-India activities.*” Any future Indian assistance or aid can be made contingent to it. The radical elements in Kashmiri youth following the happenings in Afghanistan are likely to be radicalized by the Taliban victory and nurture dreams of Taliban assistance in their cause. India’s engagement with the Taliban and MoUs would help New Delhi safeguard its strategic security interests and counter-terrorism proliferation in the region. Additionally, India must remain steadfast in adopting counter-radicalisation methods to constrict the charm of the jihadist narrative in J & K.

Capitalise on commonality of Indo - Russia - China Interests. India, Russia and China share a common interest in the political stability of Afghanistan. These shared interests are primarily in arena of restricting narco-terrorism, drug trafficking, radicalization and ensuring regional stability. Moscow is as concerned about adverse effects of drugs and radicalization on its youths as is Beijing about impact in the XUAR. Chinese concerns of Uyghur Muslims being trained by the Taliban echo Indian concerns of similar nature with regards to Kashmiri youth. Keeping the long term objective in mind China may reach a level of understanding with Russia who is also busy fighting Islamic resurgence in its backyard and India who is facing challenges in J &K. Coming together of Russia and China, combined with the Indian readiness to make common cause

against fundamentalism, would be a welcome development in reducing tension and promoting stability along with development in the region. A key factor in the convergence of interests in Afghanistan would hinge on the Indian stand and approach during the evolving Ukrainian situation. The Chinese influence among the Taliban leadership, coordination with Islamabad and recent bonhomie with Moscow, is likely to emerge as a significant factor in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Hence, New Delhi must use all the leverage that is available to encourage both China and Moscow to adopt a more responsible and holistic role in Afghanistan.

Leveraging Indo – Iran Ties. Iran has the potential to emerge as India's most crucial partner in Afghanistan. New Delhi could imbibe the best practices of how Iran has strengthened its relationship with the Taliban following the dictum of *having no permanent friends or enemies but only permanent national interests*. Iran's relations with Taliban 1.0 were strained due to their ideological differences, massacred Iranian diplomats at the Iranian consulate in Mazar-e Sharif in 1998.⁶ However, following the American invasion of Afghanistan, Taliban- Iranian relationship improved dramatically in 2005 to counter the common threat from the US. Iran's relationship with Taliban could help India's equation with nationalist Taliban and enable India to regain its trade access to Afghanistan. Both Iran and India have a common interest in containing the influence of pro-ISI Taliban groups. However, India needs to continue playing a fine balancing act where cooperation with Iran would have to be balanced against its relationship with US and Saudi Arabia. India's EAM Jaishankar followed up his July 2021 visit to Tehran by another one in August to attend the swearing-in ceremony of Iranian President Ebrahim

Raisi on 5th August 21, indicating New Delhi's keenness to leverage Iranian relationship in furtherance of its national interest in Afghanistan.⁷

Keep USA and Western Powers engaged in the region. India needs to ensure that USA and western powers continue to remain involved in the region while leveraging the strategic importance of QUAD and Indo-Pacific. Much of how India is able to achieve the objective would depend on the stance New Delhi adopts vis-à-vis Ukraine. It is imperative that India works closely with the USA and western powers to avert humanitarian crisis, safeguard human, women and children rights, highlighting its importance as a reliable and responsible player in Afghanistan. Despite its military exit, the US still has substantial sway in Afghanistan's political, economic and diplomatic circles, which cannot be negated by the players in the new Great Game. Convergence of views between Washington and New Delhi is reflected in US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's statements post meeting with India's NSA, Ajit Doval and EAM Jaishankar when he remarked "*that [an] Afghanistan that does not respect the rights of its people, an Afghanistan that commits atrocities against its own people, would become a pariah state.*"⁸ New Delhi must leverage its role in QUAD as a policy option being maritime security provider in the Indo-Pacific as countervail strategy for reduced influence in Afghanistan.

Humanitarian Aid, Capacity Building and Re-construction. India has been the largest regional provider of humanitarian and reconstruction aid to Afghanistan. As part of New Delhi's rebuilding efforts in Afghanistan, it has undertaken numerous construction projects in excess of \$ 3 Billion which include highways, parliament building, power plants, telephone exchange, electrical transmission lines, etc. besides

providing support in healthcare, sports and education sectors. Key to India's strategy in Afghanistan is to further progress reconstruction projects, protect its own economic interests, build logistical networks that bypass Pakistan thereby reducing the Afghan economic dependence on Pakistan. *Humanitarian assistance* is a vital tool for producing a negotiated settlement with Taliban and ensuring that at least basic rights of people are safeguarded.⁹ India can provide humanitarian aid to the Taliban political leadership to strengthen the group's resolve against ISI domination. Restarting Indian aid to Afghanistan signals a pragmatic approach to the Taliban regime, which is yet to develop an independently formed foreign policy. While it is true that we have been examining the Afghan conflict mainly through the prism of geopolitics and national security while relegating other factors as irrelevant, India needs to play smart in providing developmental assistance and humanitarian aid to a Taliban-led regime which is likely to exploit current humanitarian crisis situation to consolidate its power.¹⁰

Hard power Options. New Delhi should retain the option of using *comprehensive national power including its military might* while furthering its national interests in the region and preserving its security. Leveraging military might, need not translate into military intervention and should not be perceived as such. Focus should be on calibrating *its hybrid warfare strategy* involving establishing of a real time intelligence and surveillance grid with matching response strategy to secure Indian interest. India needs to create an ability to influence outcomes in the region and back it up with hard power in term of air and missile strikes. Though India has ruled out military involvement in Afghanistan, but the possibility of expanding its role should not be ruled out for providing security to the ongoing projects in Afghanistan.

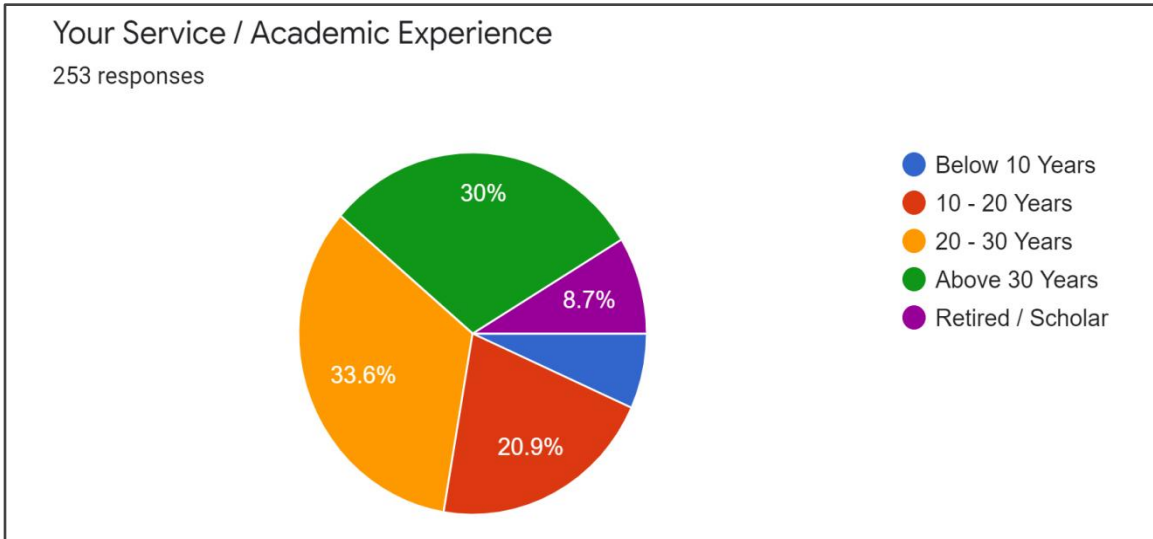
Research Data Analysis

A research survey was undertaken for arriving at realistic analysis by seeking opinion of Strategic Thinkers, Operational Commanders from the Armed Forces and Security Forces. Salient aspects of the survey are as follows;

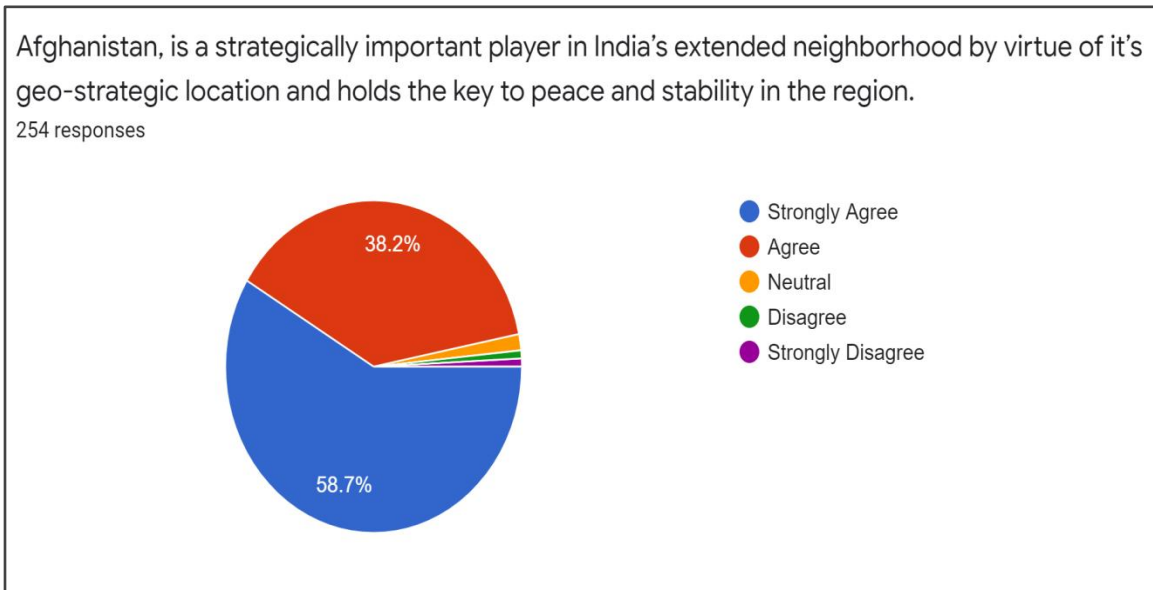
- a. **Target Sample Size.** Representative sample of Veterans, Scholars, strategic thinkers, NDC and APPPA Participants of varying service bracket.
- b. **Data Collection.** Aspects highlighted in numerous articles on the subject of US withdrawal and implications for Indian security calculus including terrorism in J & K were analyzed and a questionnaire was framed.
- c. **Questionnaire.** The questionnaire comprised of 21 statements pertaining to strategic geo-political environment, security scenario, Sino-Pak collusive equation, Indo-Afghan relations and policy options.

Factor Analysis.

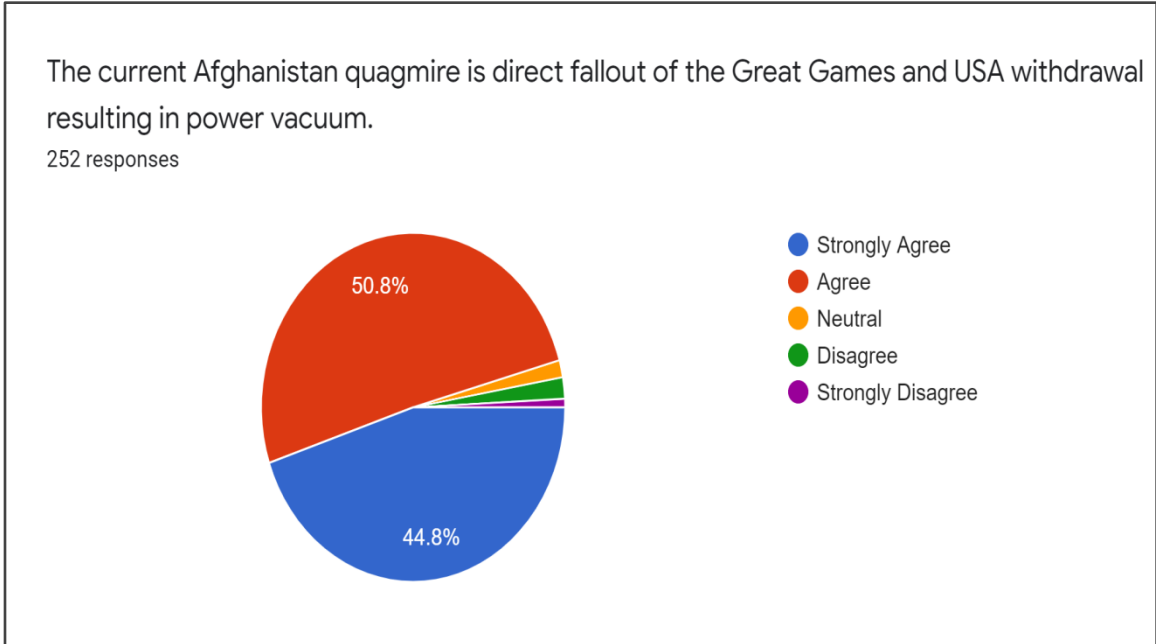
- a. Geo-strategic significance of Afghanistan (Genesis current security scenario and New Great Game): **Q 2, Q 3, Q 11 & Q 15.**
- b. Sino-Pak collusivity & India **Q 10, Q 12, Q 17 & Q 18.**
- c. Afghanistan Significance and Indo-Afghan relations: **Q 4 & Q 5.**
- d. Implications of Taliban Rule on Radicalisation and terrorism: **Q 14, Q 19 & Q 22.**
- e. Indian Policy Options including Hard power options: **Q 6, Q 7, Q 8, Q 9, Q 13, Q 16, Q 20 & Q 21.**



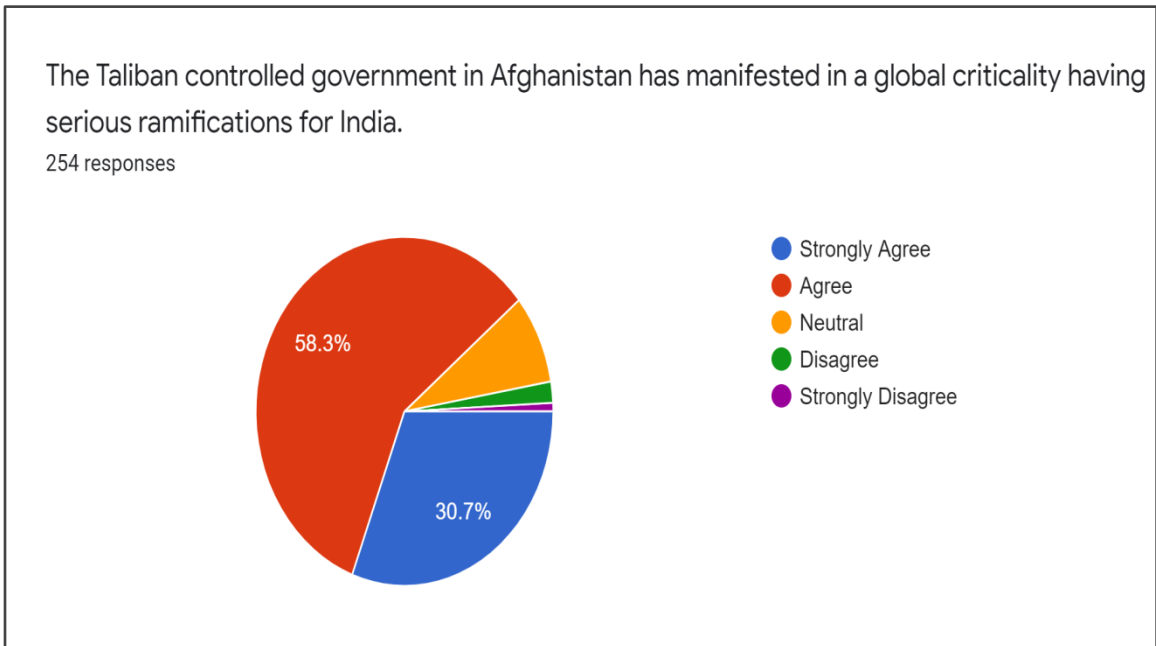
The balanced experience oriented research survey sample comprising 22 Veterans / Scholars (8.7 %), 76 respondents above 30 years experience (30%), 85 respondents having between 20-30 years experience (33.6%), 53 respondents having between 10-20 years experience (20.9%) & 17 respondents below 10 years experience (6.7%).



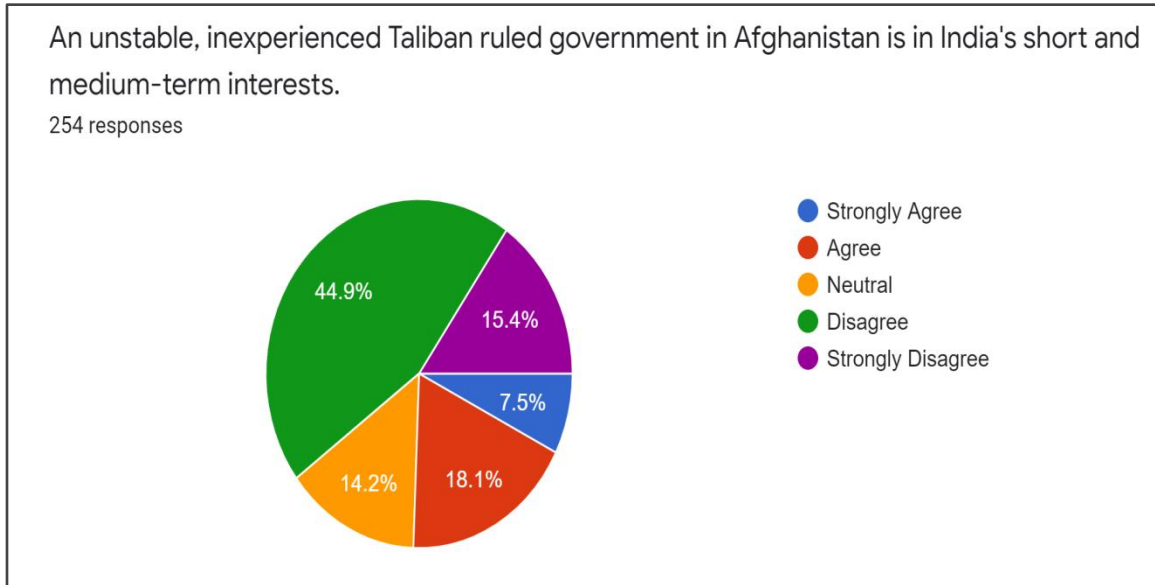
There was near unanimity among the respondents with **97% agreeing** that Afghanistan is geo-strategically significant holding the key to regional stability.



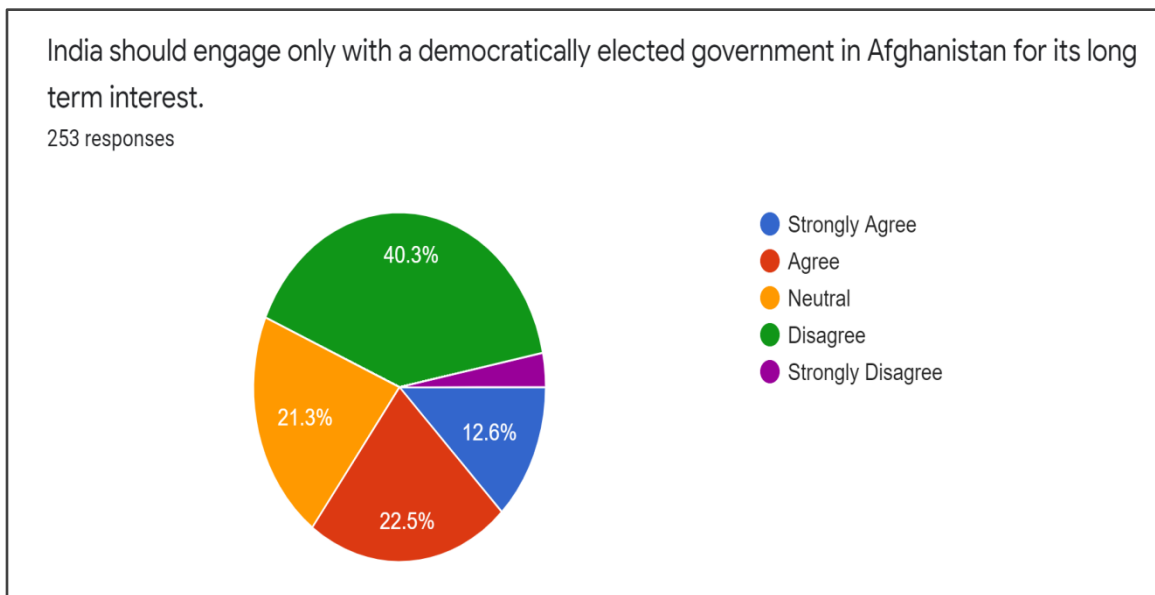
95.6 % of the respondents agree that the current Afghanistan geo-political situation is direct fallout of the multiple players trying to occupy strategic space vacated by the USA.



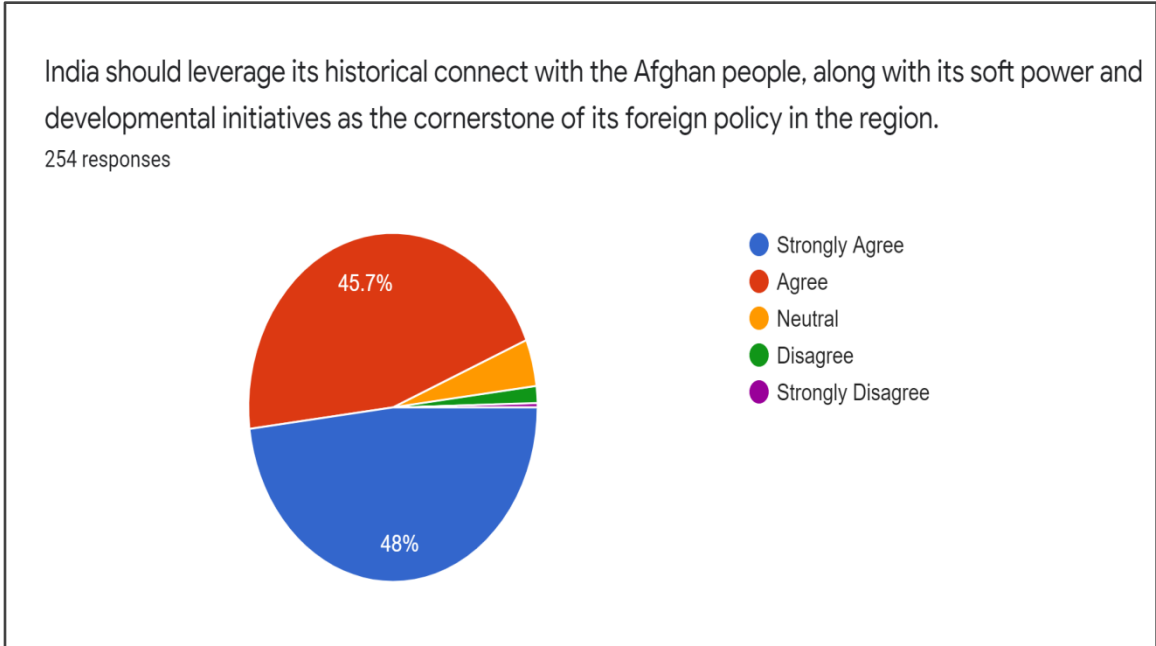
89 % of the respondents agree that the Taliban rule in Kabul has created a global security criticality having serious implications for India.



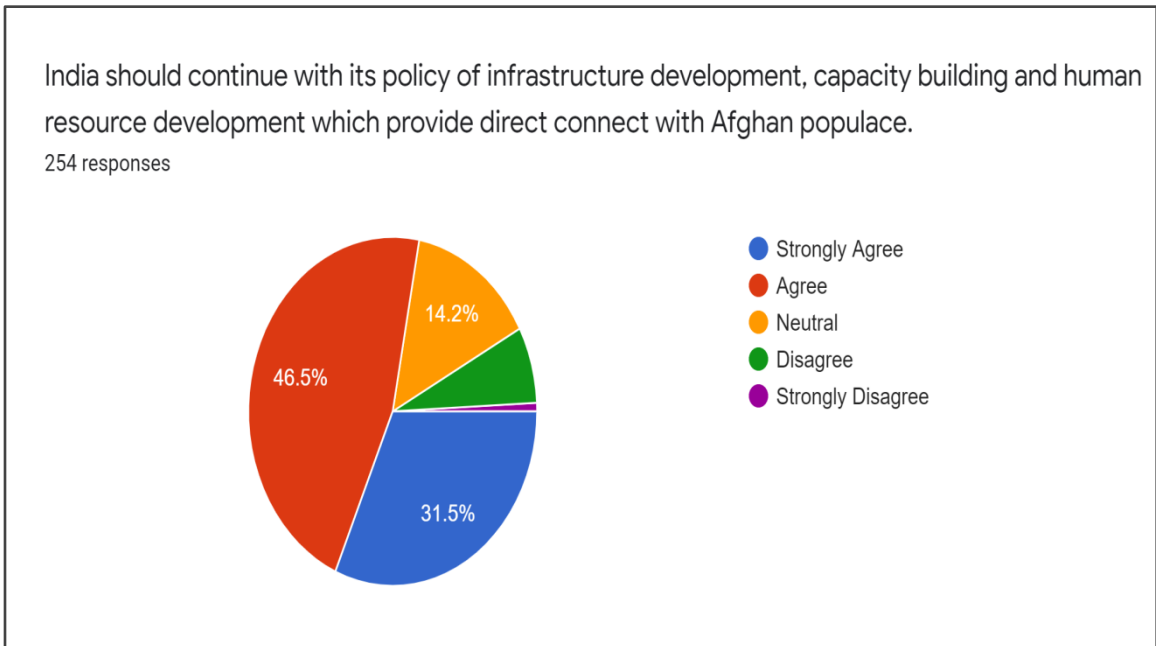
60 % of the respondents disagreed that an inexperienced Taliban government is in India's interest while *23 % agreed it favours Indian interest.*



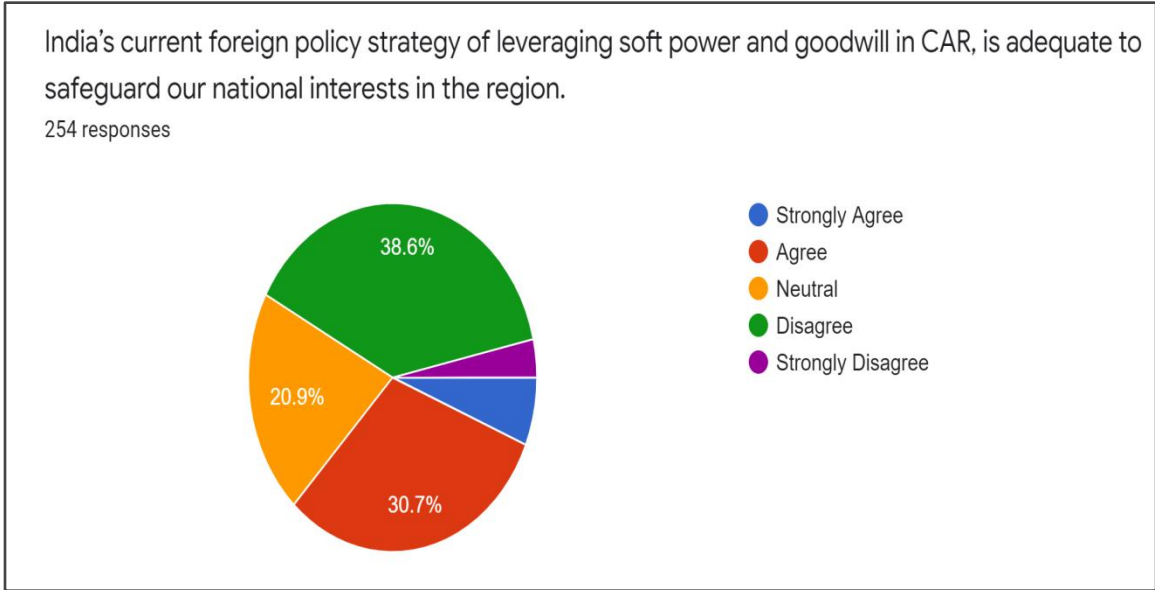
There was **divided opinion** among the respondents about India's engagement with Taliban government with **35 % agreeing** that India should **engage only with democratically elected** government while **43 % were in favour of engaging with Taliban.**



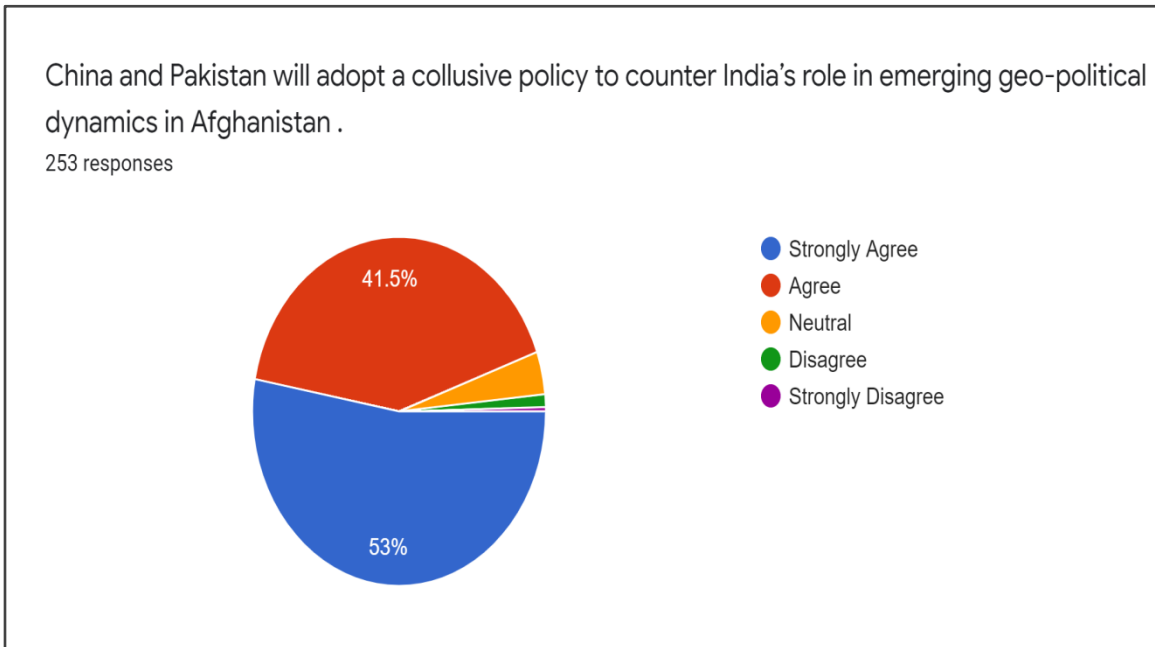
93.7 % of the respondents agree that India should leverage its soft power and historically strong relationship with the Afghanistan.



78 % of the respondents agree that India should continue with its Capability development and capacity building initiatives even under the present circumstances.



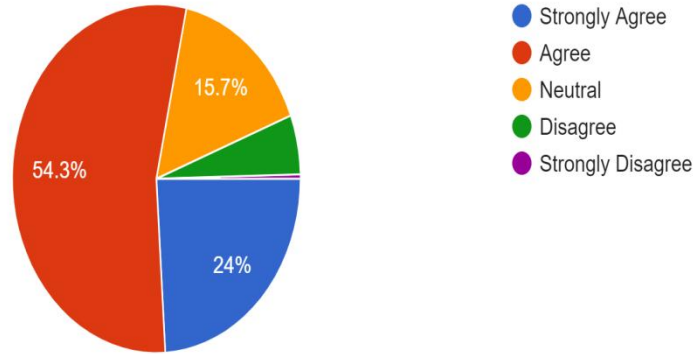
There was **divided opinion** among the respondents about adequacy of current India Foreign Policy strategy with **37 % agreeing** that current Indian policy **is adequate** while **42 % opine** that current Indian foreign policy strategy **is inadequate**.



94.5 % of the respondents agree that China and Pakistan will adopt collusive policies to counter India in post USA withdrawal Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is likely to become a breeding ground for terror descending into chaos, with Taliban 2.0 at helm as polycentric organization with multiple-power centers.

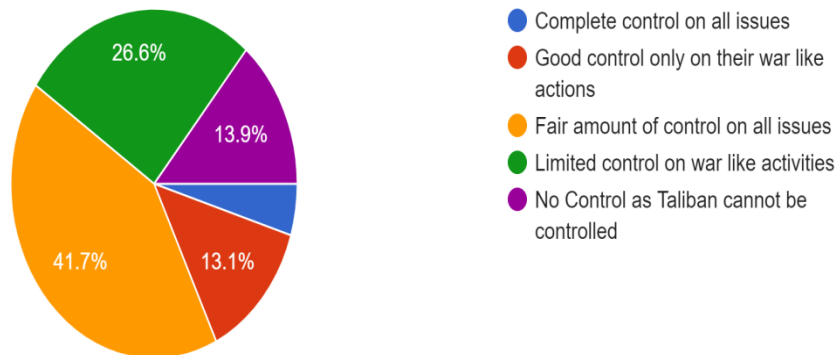
254 responses



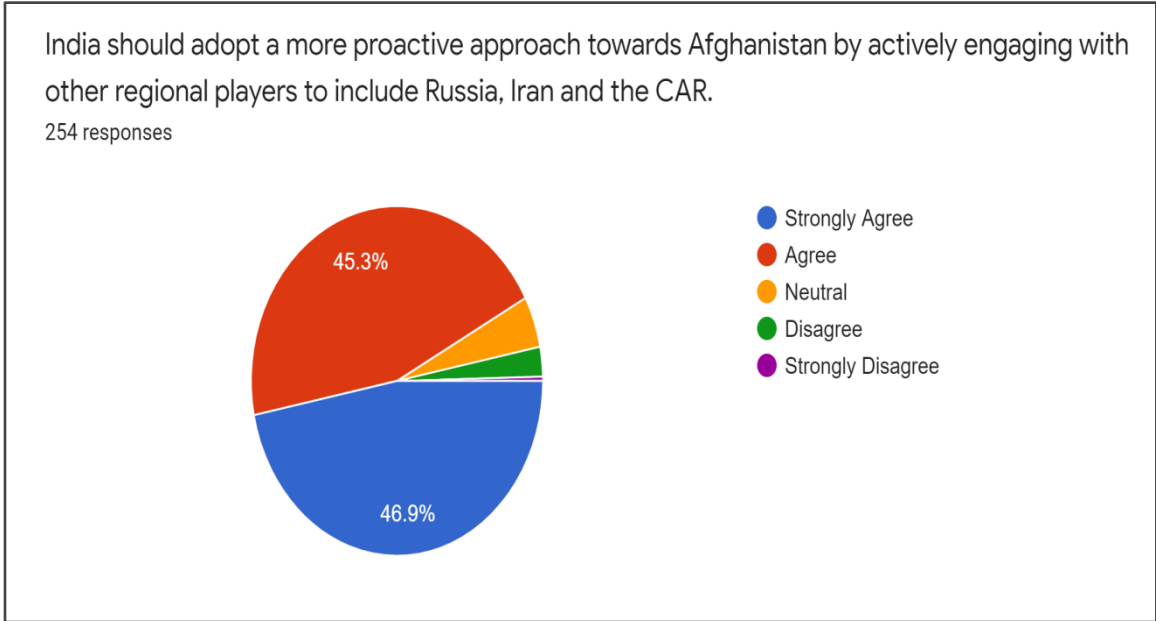
78 % of the respondents agree that Afghanistan will in all probability become breeding ground for terror under Taliban factions.

Pakistan, by virtue of its influence over Pashtun population and control over the Haqqani network will be able to exert control over the Taliban led Af... to following level. (Can be more than one options)

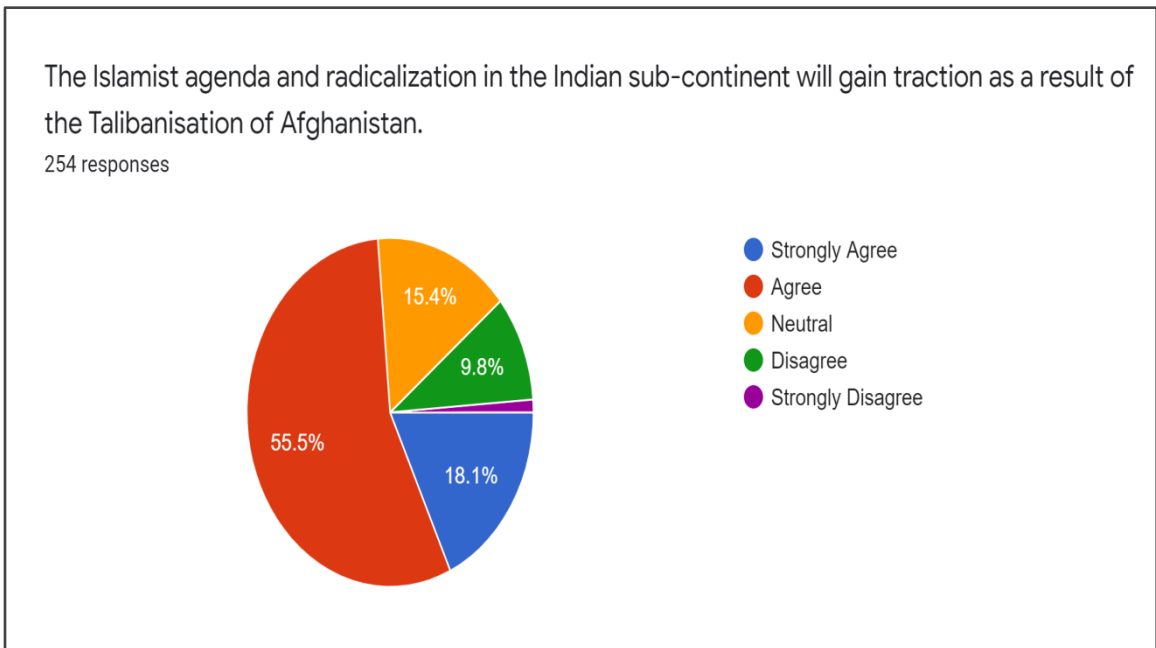
252 responses



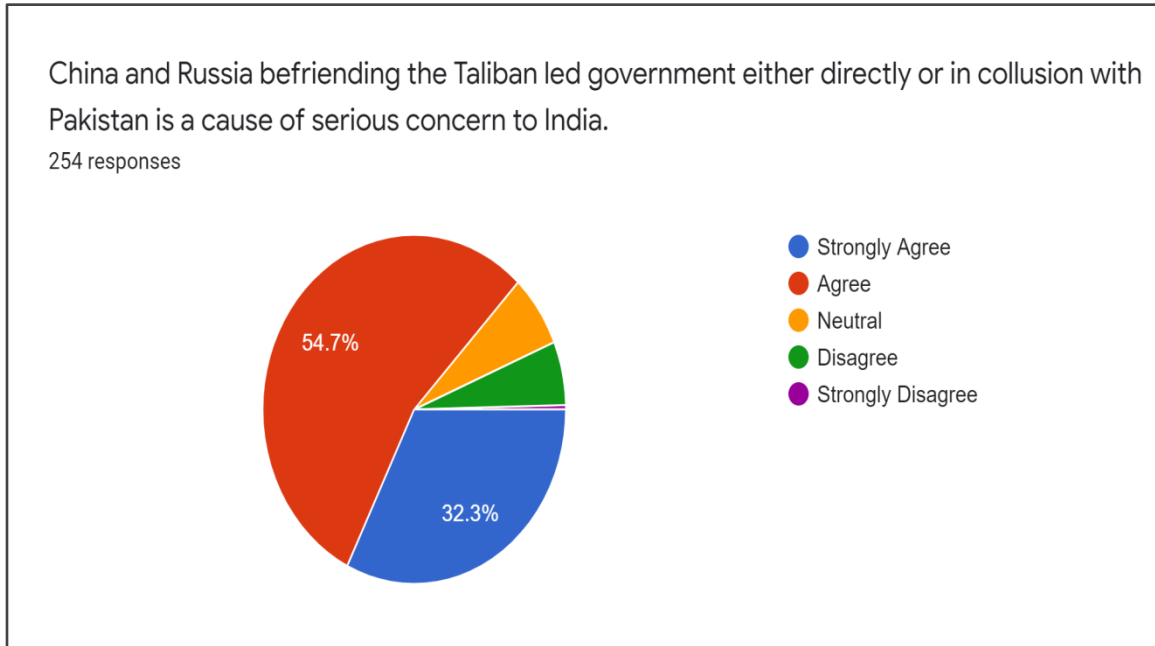
There was **divergent views** on Pakistan's influence over Taliban with **18 % opining** that Islamabad will have *complete to good degree of control*, **41 %** of the opinion *it will have fair degree of control* and **41 %** of the view that Pakistan will have *limited or no control over Taliban*.



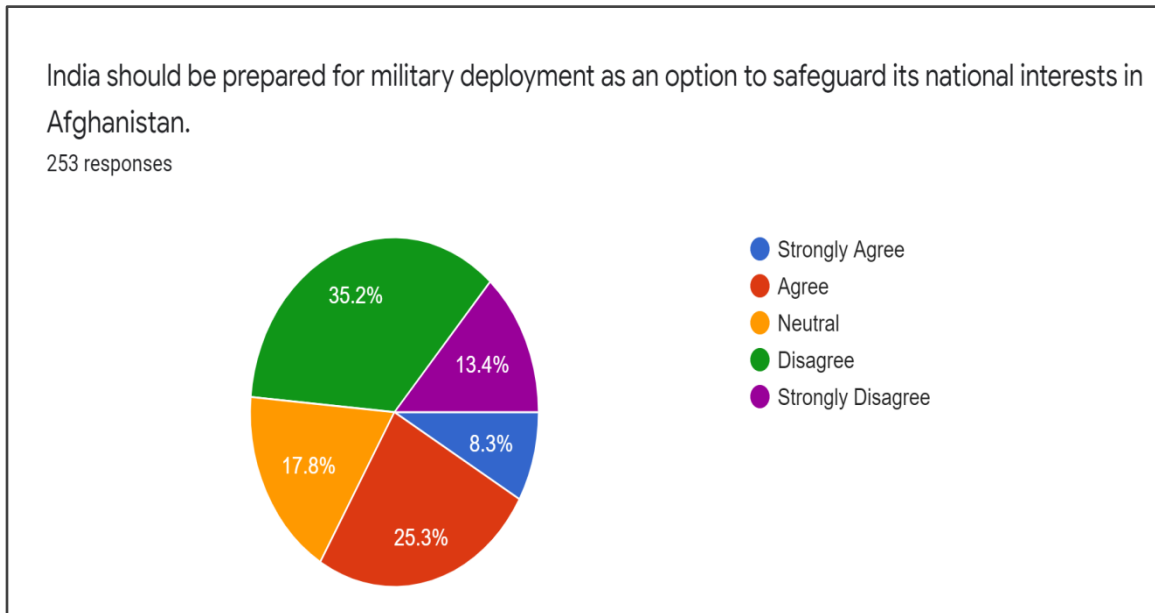
92 % of the respondents agree that India should be proactive in engaging with other regional players including Russia, Iran and CAR.



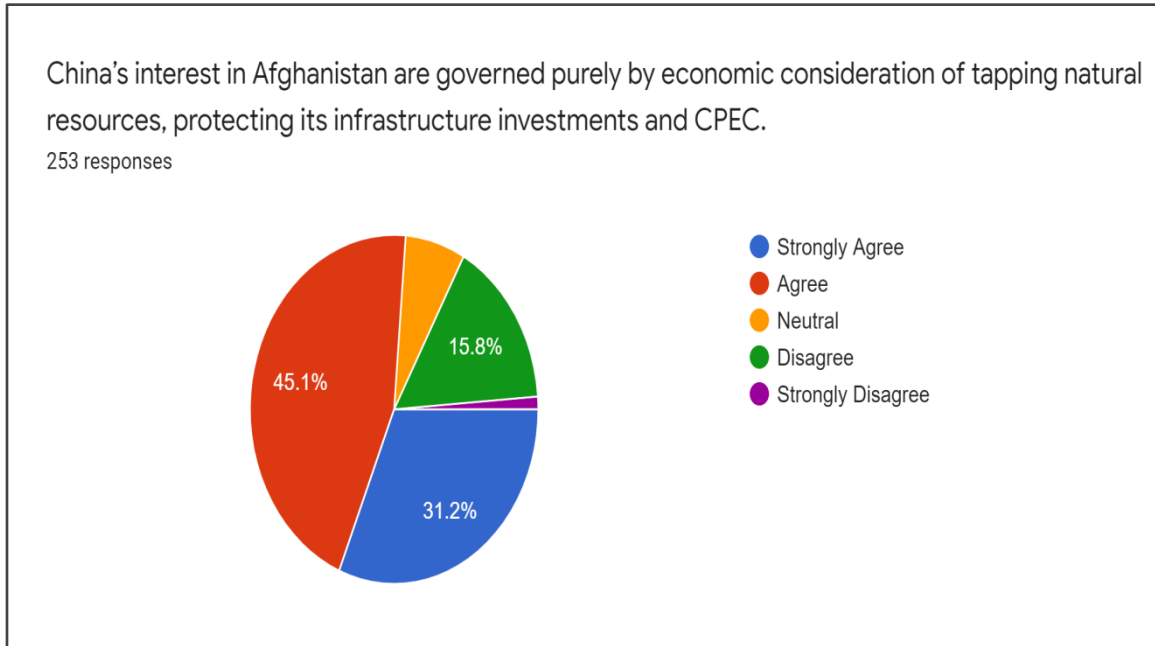
74 % of the respondents agree that radicalization will get a boost with Taliban coming to power in Afghanistan.



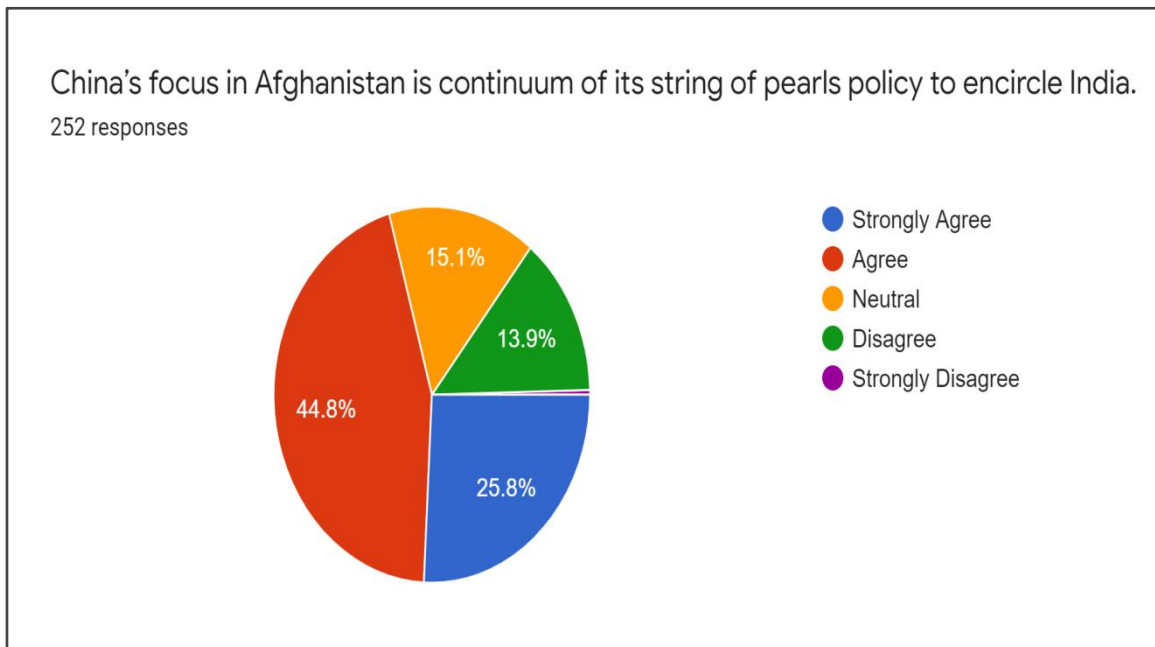
87 % of the respondents agree that India should be concerned with Moscow and Beijing becoming closer to Taliban.



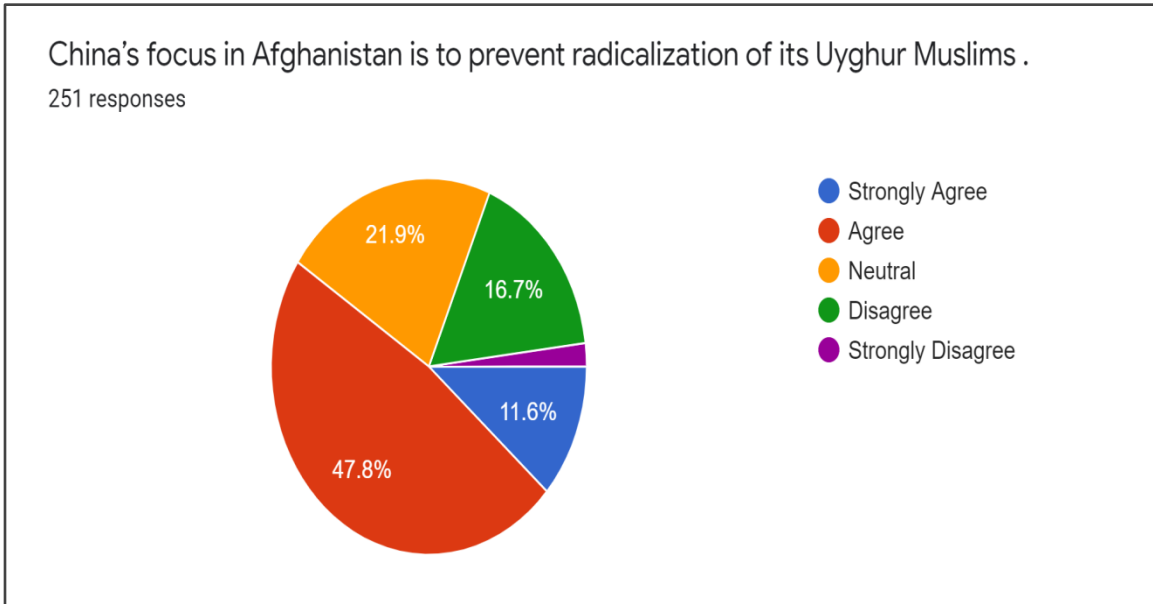
There was **divided opinion** among the respondents on question of military deployment by India to safeguard its national interest in Afghanistan with **33 % in favour**, **48 % not in favour** and *18 % choosing to remain neutral*.



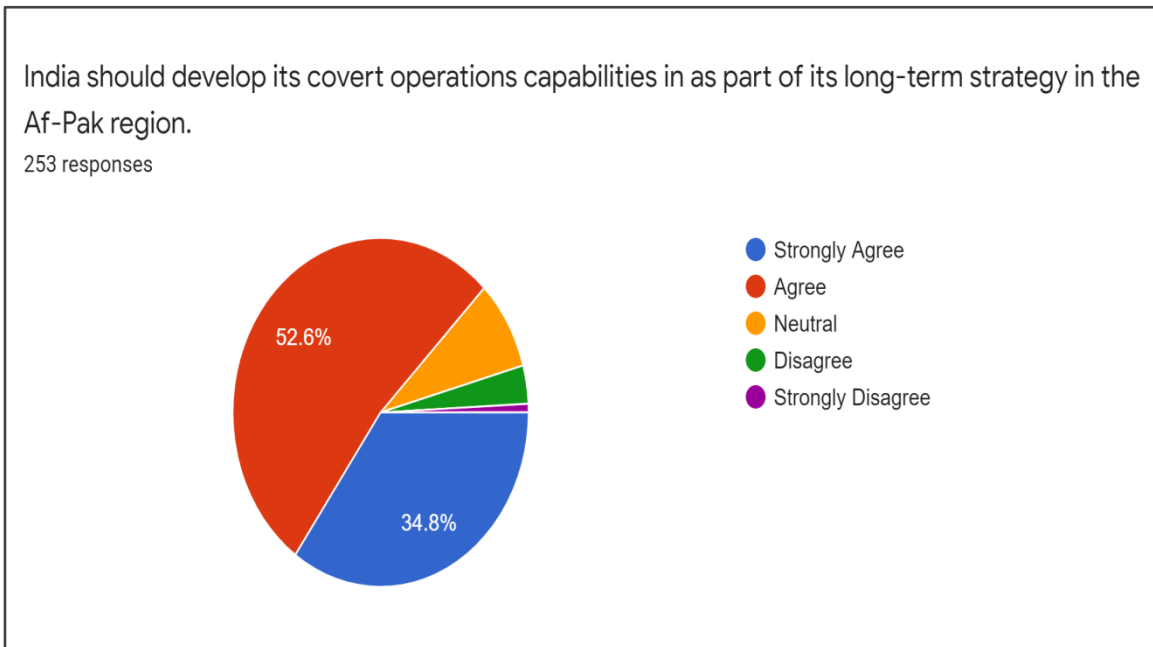
76 % of the respondents agree that China's interest in Afghanistan is due to its economic interest and CPEC.



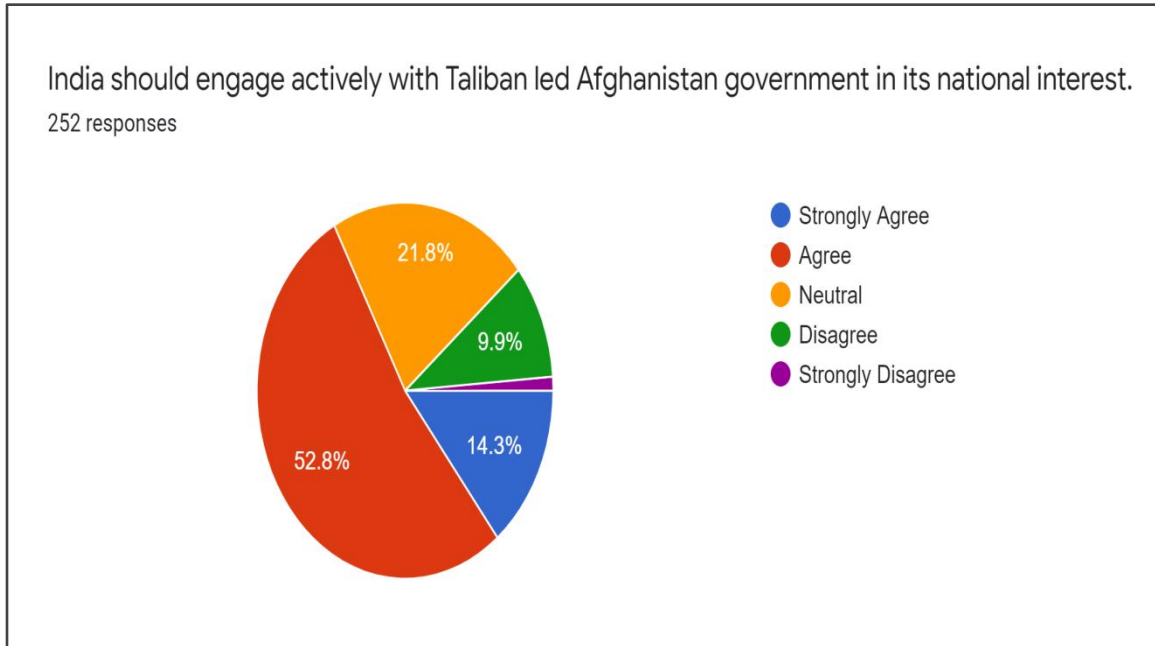
70 % of the respondents agree that China's interest in Afghanistan continuation of its string of Pearls policy against India while **15 % disagree**.



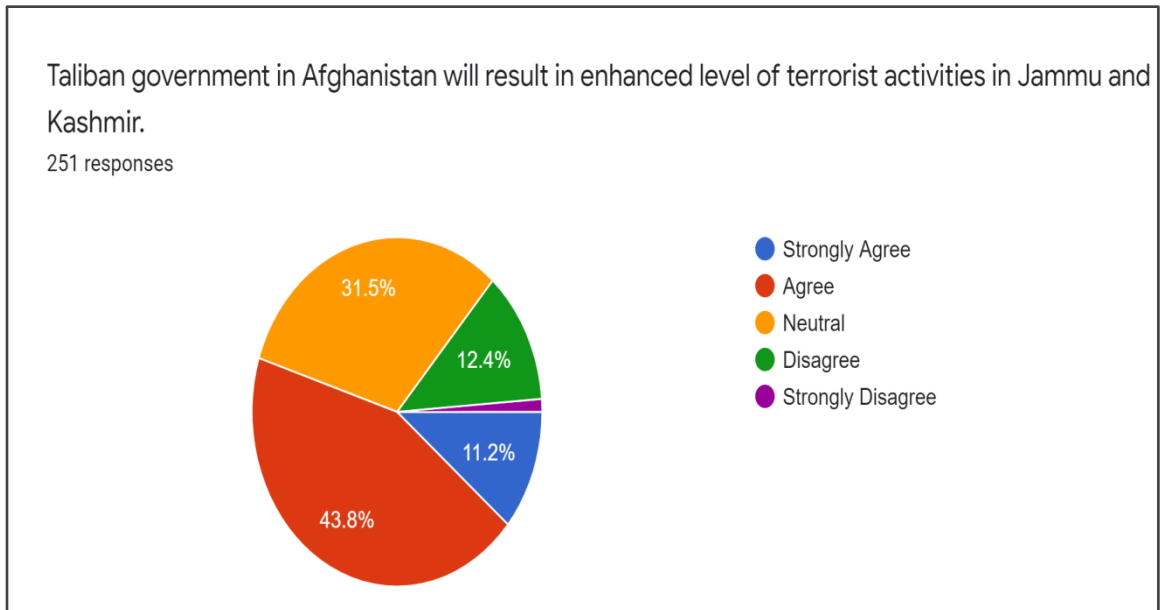
59 % of the respondents agree that China's interest in Afghanistan is to prevent radicalization of Uyghur Muslims while **19 % disagree** and **22 % choose to remain neutral**.



87% of the respondents agree that India should develop covert operations capability as part of its long term strategy in Af-Pak region.



67 % of the respondents agree that India should engage with Taliban government in our national interest while **11 % disagree** and **22 % choose to remain neutral**.



There was **divergent views** on effect on terrorist activity in J & K due to Taliban government in Afghanistan with **55 % agreeing** that terrorism will increase, **13.5 % disagreeing** and **31.5 % remaining neutral**.

Recommendations

India needs foreign policy recalibration in consonance with the current politico-security situation and emerging geo-economic dynamics in the region. A pragmatic, well coordinated, multi pronged and constructive strategy would not only assist in securing India's contemporary national interest but also give dividends in future. Certain policy recommendations for achieving the Indian objective of ensuring that Afghanistan is not influenced or controlled by any power that is hostile to India are as follows:

- a. **Constitute empowered committee for Afghan strategic policy formulation.** The empowered committee should comprise of MEA officials, Department of Military Affairs (DMA), intelligence and security forces representatives. The committee can be headed by a Special envoy on Afghan Affairs empowered to interact with all the stakeholders, supported by governmental agencies, policy advisors and reporting directly to Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS).¹¹
- b. **Advance beyond Zero Sum Game** – The policy considerations should strikes a balance between geo-political realities of the day, leverage India's soft power, focus on ameliorating hardships of Afghans and prevent the country's descent into a failed state.
- c. **Proactively engage with all factions of Taliban.** India should establish a working relationship with the Taliban faction in power while continuing to cultivate the more nationalist faction of Taliban. New Delhi should take advantage of the growing differences between the nationalist faction and ISI and the Durand line.

- d. **Hedging Policy.** Indian policy makers need to hedge their bets by remaining engaged with other tribal leaders and Taliban factions. It also need retain its connect and goodwill with the common masses based on a citizen centric humanitarian policy.
- e. **Leverage Durand Line dynamics.** Pakistan's anti India policy and stance can be negated by suitably leveraging the spirit of Pashtun nationalism in the FATA region where the Pashtuns are divided by the British brokered Durand line; the legitimacy of which was never accepted by Afghanistan.
- f. **Capitalise on commonality of Indo – Russia- China Interests.** The shared interests of India, China and Russia in anti narco-terrorism, drug trafficking and radicalization form a ideal common ground for the three powers to come together in ensuring regional stability. The convergence of Afghan policy hinges on the nuanced approach that India adopts during the current Ukraine situation. New Delhi must use all the available resources to ensure that both Beijing and Moscow to agree to adopt concerted effort in stabilizing Afghanistan.
- g. **Leveraging Indo – Iran Ties.** The Indo- Iranian ties if used imaginatively in current geo-political scenario would be a win – win situation for both the nations. It would prove to be a game changer in securing Indian national interest in Afghanistan as well as address security concerns from terrorist activities both in India and Afghanistan. Establishing Chahbahar port as access point for trade and humanitarian aid movement to/from Afghanistan would not only bypass Pakistan but can be projected as alternate access point to the international community reducing dependence and influence of Pakistan.

h. **Keep USA and western powers engaged in the region.** India needs to ensure that USA and other western powers remain involved in Afghanistan despite Ukraine situation. It can work together with these countries, ie USA, EU, UK, OIC and Eurasian nations in coordinating an international response to engage more effectively with the Taliban regime. At the recently held G20 Summit in Rome, India working towards this direction issued a call for collective global action in response to the Afghan crisis. The level of global community's engagement with the Taliban can be made contingent upon the Taliban regime's response to humanitarian crisis and political stability.

i. **Involve UN in creating enabling environment.** UN and its agencies have a major role to play in current humanitarian crisis situation in Afghanistan. Ensuring human and women rights are protected, provision of humanitarian and medical aid is few of the areas where UN can facilitate India's assistance program in face of Pakistan's obstructionist attitude. India's EAM Jaishankar highlighted at the UN Summit in September 2021, India's willingness to send humanitarian assistance relies heavily on whether the UN can create an "*enabling environment*."¹² PM Modi too, reiterated this in his G20 address in early October, when he highlighted the importance of "*unhindered and urgent humanitarian assistance for the Afghans*."¹³

j. **Strengthen counter-terrorism and anti – radicalization capabilities.** The assurances/commitments from Taliban that no anti India terrorist group will be permitted to operate from Afghanistan should not be taken at face value. India

should strengthen its counter terrorism mechanism with inbuilt preventive surgical strike and punitive action capabilities.

k. **Retain Hard power Options.** India needs to develop its Hybrid warfare, intelligence and & surveillance strategy in a manner which is proactive, deterrent and punitive strategy that is detrimental to powers working on policy detrimental to India's interest in the region. The strategy will give India the advantage of cost effective preventive actions rather than cost prohibitive reactive retaliatory actions.

l. **Remain invested in Afghanistan through capacity building, infrastructure development and re-construction.** The Indian reconstruction and development initiatives were effective in winning the hearts, minds and goodwill of the common man in Afghanistan. The current generation of Afghans is aware that change is indeed possible: technological progress, women's empowerment, infrastructural growth and education are the factors that enable change. The Taliban regime will be hard-pressed to match these developmental initiatives and citizens aspirations. Hence, India must remain invested in Afghan capability development.

m. **Leverage ITEC and Indian Education.** The Taliban are averse to educating women and their role in public life as was seen in Taliban 1.0 rule. The interim government too has been formed without any representation of women indicative of the Talibani thought process on education of girl-child.¹⁴ In given scenario, the existing ITEC program and strong online education system validated during two years of Covid has the potential of providing universal education from

home. These online education platforms can assist school children as well as working professionals for learning, upgrading their skills, and undertaking technical training through edtech services.¹⁵

Conclusion

Afghanistan constitutes a vital element India's global power aspirations and regional security dynamics. The current situation in Afghanistan remains fluid and uncertain even after more than six months of the Taliban rule and the Ukraine crisis situation have further enhanced the global security complexities. It is imperative that the current Ukrainian crisis does not divert global and American attention from long term stability in the region which is of vital importance to ensure global as well as Indian strategic interests are secured. International community needs to adopt a very balanced approach in the current geo-political dynamics in its endeavour to ensure that Afghanistan does not relapse into a base for fundamentalist and global terrorism. The new Great Game in the region will ensure presence of multiple players with convergence and divergence of interests either in geo-political or geo-economic domain. The impact of the Islamic extremism being exported from the Af-Pak region will be felt globally but India is likely to bear the brunt of it especially in J & K. Taliban's success in all probability motivate and provide impetus to the terrorist groups in J & K, instill in them a sense of invincibility and embolden them to unleash more potent terrorist attacks against India. Taliban 2.0 is distinctly different from the previous regime, with a more calculative approach; they are pursuing global acceptance and legitimacy. India enjoys convergence of some, if not all, interests with most of the stakeholders, both within

Afghanistan and outside including Russia, China, Iran and CAR nations among others. There are those who, like India, comprehend the strategic implications of a radicalized and fundamentalist regime in Kabul. New Delhi has the requisite credentials to take lead in bringing together a coalition aimed at providing humanitarian assistance, work on regional security and contain radicalization. Russia, China, Iran, CAR, OIC nations can all be suitably incorporated in stabilizing the situation in the region in pursuit of shared interests and commonalities. While pursuing common agenda for peace and stability in the region, India needs to ensure her strategic interests are not compromised. Sino-Pak collusive policies will endeavour to use the fundamentalists and radicals against India particularly by escalating terrorist incidences in Kashmir.

India needs to pursue a well calibrated, multi pronged and constructive approach while engaging with global and current powers in Kabul, yet be cautious in trusting them. Taliban has reneged on numerous previous assurances particularly in extra judicial killings, human rights and association with radical terrorist groups. India has adopted a nuanced approach by not being hasty in according Taliban legitimacy or taking at face value its public proclamations of pursuing independent policies from those of Pakistan. From the Indian perspective, a significant optimistic factor is Pakistan's inability "*to construct a stable and legitimate order in Afghanistan*" despite having "*the capability to destabilize*" any Afghan regime ruling from Kabul.¹⁶ India also needs to contemplate the nature of its future involvement with Afghanistan by realistically assessing the emerging geo-political and geo-economic realities in the region. As on date New Delhi's presence in Afghanistan is nonexistent, it must continue utilising the multilateral channels of communication and work towards disbursing humanitarian aid

the Afghan people leveraging its citizen centric approach and retaining connect at the functional level. The Indian policy approach in current geo-political dynamics needs to think beyond zero sum game, leverage comprehensive national power, emphasizing on smart power while retaining hard power option in securing its national interests.

CHAPTER VII: END NOTES

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APPENDIX A: AFGHANISTAN GEO-STRATEGIC LOCATION

(Refers to Executive Summary)

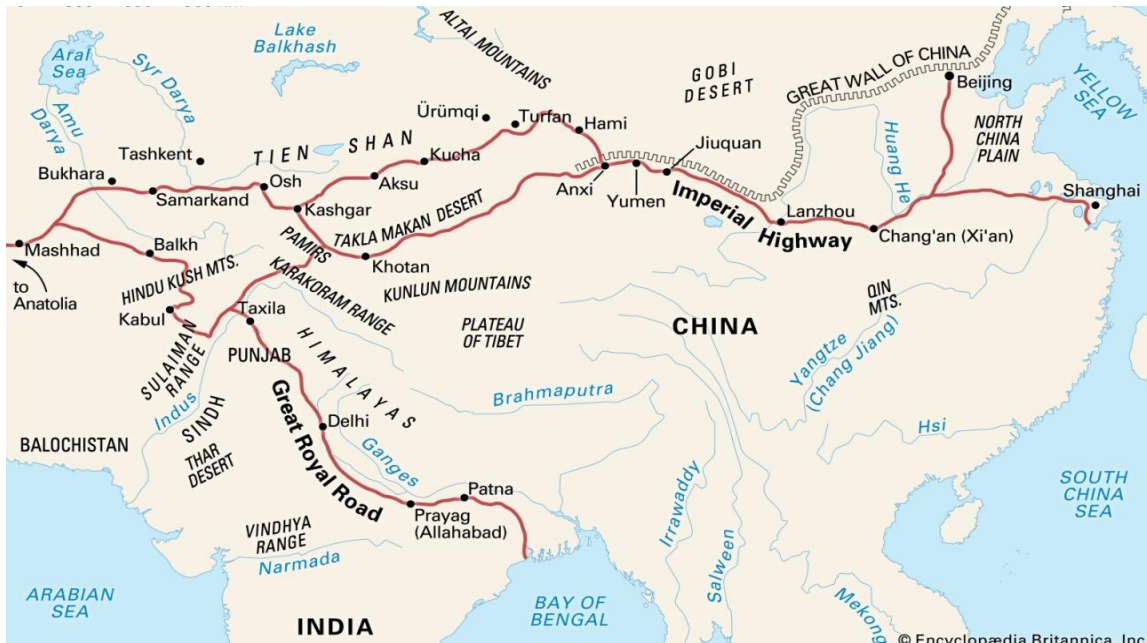


Fig 5: The Silk Route

Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Silk-Road-trade-route>



Fig 6: Afghanistan Administrative Divisions

Source: CIA Maps

<https://www.cia.gov/resources/map/afghanistan/>

APPENDIX B: AFGHANISTAN FACT SHEET

(Refers to Chapter I)

1. **Area:** 652,230 Sq km.
2. **Climate :** Arid to semiarid; cold winters and hot summers.
3. **Natural Resources :** Natural gas, petroleum, coal, copper, chromite, talc, barites, sulfur, lead, zinc, iron ore, salt, precious and semiprecious stones, arable land.
4. **Economic Overview :** Extremely low-income South Asian economy; import drops, currency depreciation, disappearing central bank reserves, and increasing inflation after Taliban takeover; increasing Chinese trade; hit hard by COVID; ongoing sanctions.
 - a. **GDP (Purchasing Power Parity)** \$77.04 billion (2020).
 - b. **GDP per capita (Purchasing Power Parity)** \$2,000 (2020).
 - c. **Industries** - brick production, textiles, soap, furniture, shoes, fertilizer, apparel, food products, non-alcoholic beverages, mineral water, cement, carpets, natural gas, coal.
 - d. **Agricultural products** - wheat, milk, grapes, vegetables, potatoes, watermelons, melons, rice, onions, apple.
 - e. **Exports** \$1.48 billion (2020). UAE 45%, Pakistan 24%, India 22%, China 1%. Gold, grapes, opium, fruits and nuts, insect resins, cotton, handwoven carpets, soapstone, scrap metal.
 - f. **Imports** \$6.98 billion (2020). UAE 23%, Pakistan 17%, India 13%, China 9%, US 9%, Uzbekistan 7%, Kazakhstan 6%. Wheat flours, broadcasting equipment, refined petroleum, rolled tobacco, aircraft parts, synthetic fabrics.

- g. **Population** : 37.5 million (July 2021) with **growth rate of 2.34%** (2021).
- h. **Ethnicity** : Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, other (includes smaller numbers of Baloch, Turkmen, Nuristani, Pamiri, Arab, Gujar, Brahui, Qizilbash, Aimaq, Pashai, and Kyrghyz) (2015).
- i. **Language** : Afghan Persian or Dari (official) 78% (Dari functions as the lingua franca), Pashto (official) 50%, Uzbek 10%, English 5%, Turkmen 2%, Urdu 2%, Pashayi 1%, Nuristani 1%, Arabic 1%, Balochi 1%, other <1% (2017).
- j. **Religion** : Muslim 99.7% (Sunni 84.7 - 89.7%, Shia 10 – 15%), other 0.3% (2009).

APPENDIX C: USA - TALIBAN PEACE AGREEMENT**(Refers to Chapter IV)****Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America****February 29, 2020****which corresponds to Rajab 5, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Hoot 10, 1398 on the Hijri Solar calendar**

A comprehensive peace agreement is made of four parts:

1. Guarantees and enforcement mechanisms that will prevent the use of the soil of Afghanistan by any group or individual against the security of the United States and its allies.
2. Guarantees, enforcement mechanisms, and announcement of a timeline for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan.
3. After the announcement of guarantees for a complete withdrawal of foreign forces and timeline in the presence of international witnesses, and guarantees and the announcement in the presence of international witnesses that Afghan soil will not be used against the security of the United States and its allies, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will start intra-Afghan negotiations with Afghan sides on March 10, 2020, which corresponds to Rajab 15, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Hoot 20, 1398 on the Hijri Solar calendar.
4. A permanent and comprehensive ceasefire will be an item on the agenda of the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations. The participants of intra-Afghan negotiations will discuss the date and modalities of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire,

including joint implementation mechanisms, which will be announced along with the completion and agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan.

The four parts above are interrelated and each will be implemented in accordance with its own agreed timeline and agreed terms. Agreement on the first two parts paves the way for the last two parts.

Following is the text of the agreement for the implementation of parts one and two of the above. Both sides agree that these two parts are interconnected. The obligations of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban in this agreement apply in areas under their control until the formation of the new post -settlement Afghan Islamic government as determined by the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations.

PART ONE

The United States is committed to withdraw from Afghanistan all military forces of the United States, its allies, and Coalition partners, including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting services personnel within fourteen (14) months following announcement of this agreement, and will take the following measures in this regard:.

A. The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will take the following measures in the first one hundred thirty-five (135) days:

1) They will reduce the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan to eight thousand six hundred (8,600) and proportionally bring reduction in the number of its allies and Coalition forces.

2) The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will withdraw all their forces from five (5) military bases.

B. With the commitment and action on the obligations of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the

Taliban in Part Two of this agreement, the United States, its allies, and the Coalition will execute the following:

- 1) The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will complete withdrawal of all remaining forces from Afghanistan within the remaining nine and a half (9.5) months.
- 2) The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will withdraw all their forces from remaining bases.

C. The United States is committed to start immediately to work with all relevant sides on a plan to expeditiously release combat and political prisoners as a confidence building measure with the coordination and approval of all relevant sides. Up to five thousand (5,000) prisoners of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and up to one thousand (1,000) prisoners of the other side will be released by March 10, 2020, the first day of intra-Afghan negotiations, which corresponds to Rajab 15, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Hoot 20, 1398 on the Hijri Solar calendar. The relevant sides have the goal of releasing all the remaining prisoners over the course of the subsequent three months. The United States commits to completing this goal. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban commits that its released prisoners will be committed to the responsibilities mentioned in this agreement so that they will not pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies.

D. With the start of intra-Afghan negotiations, the United States will initiate an administrative review of current U.S. sanctions and the rewards list against members of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban with the goal of removing these sanctions by August 27, 2020, which corresponds to Muharram 8, 1442 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Saunbola 6, 1399 on the Hijri Solar calendar.

E. With the start of intra-Afghan negotiations, the United States will start diplomatic engagement with other members of the United Nations Security Council and Afghanistan to remove members of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban from the sanctions list with the aim of achieving this objective by May 29, 2020, which corresponds to Shawwal 6, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Jawa 9, 1399 on the Hijri Solar calendar.

F. The United States and its allies will refrain from the threat or the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Afghanistan or intervening in its domestic affairs.

PART TWO

In conjunction with the announcement of this agreement, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will take the following steps to prevent any group or individual, including al-Qa'ida, from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies:

1. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qa'ida, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.

2. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will send a clear message that those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies have no place in Afghanistan, and will instruct members of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban not to cooperate with groups or individuals threatening the security of the United States and its allies.

3. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will prevent any group or individual in Afghanistan from threatening the security of the United States and its allies, and will prevent them

from recruiting, training, and fundraising and will not host them in accordance with the commitments in this agreement.

4. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban is committed to deal with those seeking asylum or residence in Afghanistan according to international migration law and the commitments of this agreement, so that such persons do not pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies.

5. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will not provide visas, passports, travel permits, or other legal documents to those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies to enter Afghanistan.

PART THREE

1. The United States will request the recognition and endorsement of the United Nations Security Council for this agreement.

2. The United States and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban seek positive relations with each other and expect that the relations between the United States and the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government as determined by the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations will be positive.

3. The United States will seek economic cooperation for reconstruction with the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government as determined by the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations, and will not intervene in its internal affairs.

Signed in Doha, Qatar on February 29, 2020, which corresponds to Rajab 5, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Hoot 10, 1398 on the Hijri Solar calendar, in duplicate, in Pashto, Dari, and English languages, each text being equally authentic.

APPENDIX D: INDIAN DEVELOPMENTAL ASSISTANCE TO AFGHANISTAN (Refers to Chapter VI)

According to Indian Embassy Kabul Website <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0354?000> “The SPA between the two sides, provides for assistance to help rebuild Afghanistan's infrastructure and institutions, education and technical assistance to re-build indigenous Afghan capacity in different areas, encouraging investment in Afghanistan's natural resources, providing duty free access to the Indian market for Afghanistan's exports support for an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, broad-based and inclusive process of peace and reconciliation and advocating the need for a sustained and long-term commitment to Afghanistan by the international community. The Indian developmental assistance programme, stands at approximately USD 3 billion making India one of the largest contributors.”

Key Infrastructure Projects

- **Construction of a 218 km road from Zaranj to Delaram** for facilitating movement of goods and services to the Iranian border.
- **New Afghan Parliament building** (inaugurated on 25 December 2015 jointly by H.E. Dr. Ashraf Ghani, President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and H.E. Mr. Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India).
- **Afghan-India Friendship Dam (Salma Dam).**
- **Construction of 220kV DC transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul** and a 220/110/20 KV sub-station at Chimtala, Doshi and Charikar.
- **Upgrading of telephone exchanges** in 11 provinces.
- **Expansion of national TV network** by providing an uplink from Kabul and downlinks in all 34 provincial capitals for greater integration of the country.
- **433 High Impact Community Development Projects** have been completed with Indian financial support in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan so far and around 110 projects are ongoing in various provinces of Afghanistan.

- **India signed five (05) agreements for construction of schools and roads** worth US\$ 2.6 mn on 05 July 2020,
- **Investments in the country's mining sector in the Hajigak iron ore reserves** through a consortium of public and private Indian companies specifically formed for the purpose.
- **Capacity building in mining area** through a Mines Institute proposed to be established in Kabul with GoI technical & financial support.
- Restoration of Stor Palace.

Human Resource Development and Capacity Building

- Human resource development and capacity building initiatives constitute an important segment of India's assistance in Afghanistan. On an average, more than 3,500 Afghan nationals undergo training/education in India every year.
- More than 15,000 Afghan students pursue education in India on self-financing basis.
- Reconstruction and renovation of Habibia School in Kabul including assistance for training and maintenance of the school.
- A Special Scholarship Scheme of 1,000 scholarships per annum to Afghan nationals (administered by ICCR) with 100% utilization in most years.
- India offers over 1,000 ITEC slots to Afghanistan annually. Specialised ITEC courses are held for Afghan Government Officials on specific demand.
- The Afghanistan National Agricultural Sciences and Technology University (ANASTU) established with India's assistance is contributing to capacity building in agricultural sciences. The Indian Agriculture Research Institute (IARI) is involved in training, equipping and establishing the University.
- Under India-Afghanistan Agricultural Fellowship Programme, Afghan students and scholars pursue graduation and research courses at various agricultural universities and institutes in India. 614 ICAR scholarships under this programme commenced in 2012-13 lasting up to 2020-21.

- 50 Afghans are completing graduation in the Indian school of Mines Dhanbad with a view to strengthen technical man-power in mining sector in Afghanistan.
- Establishment of new Diagnostic Centre (completed) & construction of Decentralised Waste Water Treatment System at Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health (IGICH).
- Commitment to contribute US\$ 1 million annually over next five years to Afghan Red Crescent Society for treatment of Afghan children with Congenital Heart Disease (214 children have already been treated under this aid till mid-March 2016).
- Donated 1000 buses to improve transportation system in Kabul.

Small Development Projects (SDP)

- The SDP are to be implemented in three Phases- under I & II phase (total commitment of US\$ 20 million) 132 projects at a cost of approx.
- US\$ 19.5 million were approved (94 projects completed).
- MoU for implementation of the Third Phase of the SDP scheme was signed during President Karzai's visit to India in November 2012 with an additional outlay of US\$ 100 million.
- A total of 287 projects at approx. US\$ 52.5 million have been approved under Phase-III and are at various stages of implementation. 87 additional projects are under Government of India's active consideration.

Humanitarian Assistance

- To combat the global pandemic of COVID-19 and related issues of food security, India is committed to deliver 75,000 MT of Wheat to Afghanistan in 2020.
- Supply of 5 lakh tablets of Hydroxy-chloroquine, 1 Lakh tablets of Paracetamol and 50,000 pairs of surgical gloves to Government of Afghanistan in 2020.
- To promote food security, particularly children during the times of drought, India has distributed 2000 tonnes of pulses to Afghanistan in 2018.

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