

Relevance of neighbourhood in India's foreign policy

Without enduring primacy in one's own neighbourhood, no nation can become a credible power on global stage. Therefore, a country's neighbourhood must enjoy unquestioned primacy in foreign policy making.

India's neighbourhood relations are very important for India's foreign policy; it has far reaching consequences for India in terms of its losing or gaining stranglehold in South Asia.

According to former Prime Minister **Atal Bihari Vajpayee**, '**You can change your friends but not neighbours**'.

According to **Prime Minister Narendra Modi**, "A nation's destiny is linked to its neighbourhood. That is why my government has placed the highest priority on advancing friendship and cooperation with her neighbours."

Thus, India's neighbourhood policy can have long lasting impacts on India's stature and its aspirations of becoming a credible power on the global stage. The cornerstones of India's foreign policy has been **to build a strategically secure, politically stable, harmonious and economically cooperative neighbourhood.**

India's position in earlier decades was that neighbours should reciprocate the benefits of relations with India by being sensitive to India's security concerns. This strand of policy has been retired and is very evident in various foreign policy initiatives like:

- Gujral doctrine
- Look East Policy
- Act East Policy
- Neighbourhood First policy.

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Neighbourhood First policy

The objective of neighbourhood first policy is to have special focus and attention on neighbouring countries and to develop closer ties in the neighbourhood. India wants to develop a web of interdependence in its neighbourhood. PM Modi launched this policy with his Oath taking ceremony in 2014:

- All SAARC leaders were invited for PM Modi's oath taking ceremony in 2014.
- PM Modi's first international visit was to Bhutan and subsequently Nepal.
- All BIMSTEC leaders were invited for oath taking ceremony in 2019. Head of state of Mauritius and Kyrgyzstan were also invited; indicating that India's extended neighbourhood i.e. Central Asia and the Indian Ocean region would also be a policy priority. The implication seems to be that India is looking to chart new vistas of cooperation **leaving aside troublesome neighbour Pakistan.**
- Prime Minister Modi's first official visit abroad in his second term to the Maldives and Sri Lanka again reiterated that the "neighbourhood first" policy remains the credo of the new government.
- India has taken the lead to form SAARC emergency fund for COVID.
- Operation Sanjeevani.
- Operation SAGAR.
- Generous grants and LOC's being given to small neighbours.
- Vaccine Maitri

According to **Dr. Jaishankar**, India's neighbourhood first policy means that as the biggest country of the region, we must take the lead, must go the extra mile, must be non-reciprocal, must be generous, must invest in our neighbourhood. So that irrespective of issues that the neighbours might have vis-a-vis India, we should be able to create an environment so that the neighbourhood remains bound to us and sensitive to our core security concerns and we in turn go the extra mile in terms of their development aspirations,"

In a recent event, speaking on the relevance of Gujral doctrine in 21st century, **Mr. Jaishankar indicated that unlike Gujral's policy which was aimed at the entire region, the "Neighbourhood First" of the Modi government would keep Pakistan 'aside'.**

Apart from a shared history and strong bonds of culture, **India has a strong security interest in ensuring that Afghanistan remains sovereign, stable, united and free from outside influence.** Since time immemorial, the peoples of Afghanistan and India have interacted with each other through trade and commerce, peacefully coexisting on the basis of their shared cultural values and commonalities.

However, Afghanistan is a notoriously difficult country to govern. Empire after empire, nation after nation have failed to pacify what is today the modern territory of Afghanistan, giving the region the nickname **“Graveyard of Empires”**.

India’s concerns

India has been apprehensive of Afghanistan becoming a centre of radical ideology and violence again (Taliban rule). Revival of Taliban rule has raised questions about security and safety of India’s investments in Afghanistan.

India and the Taliban have had a bitter past. New Delhi nurses bitter memories from the **IC-814 hijack in 1999**, when it had to release terrorists — including **Maulana Masood Azhar** who founded **Jaish-e-Mohammed** that went on to carry out terror attacks on Parliament (2001), in Pathankot (2016) and in Pulwama (2019). The Taliban perceived India as a hostile country, as India had supported the anti-Taliban force **Northern Alliance in the 1990s. India never gave diplomatic and official recognition to the Taliban when it was in power during 1996-2001.**

Moreover, comeback of Taliban will strengthen Pakistan’s position versus India. As far as New Delhi is concerned, the Taliban was not the central problem. Pakistani influence on the Taliban and the latter’s inability to liberate itself from such influence is the main issue. Pakistan understands this clearly: One of the demands that Pakistan consistently made from Kabul in return for cooperation was reduction in Indian diplomatic, intelligence and developmental presence in Afghanistan.

India - Afghanistan Relationship Significance

For India, Afghanistan has immense strategic potential. More important; a **friendly, stable regime in Kabul is a geopolitical insurance against Pakistan’s deep state.**

- Afghanistan is gateway to energy rich central Asia. Afghanistan is situated at crossroads between South Asia and Central Asia and South Asia and the Middle East.
- The massive reconstruction plans for the country offer a lot of opportunities for Indian companies.
- Afghanistan also has significant oil and gas reserves. Afghanistan has rich sources of rare earth materials.
- Stable and democratic government in Kabul will not give safe heaven for terrorist activity, which might reduce insurgency in Kashmir.
- Yet, the most important goal for New Delhi remains the prevention of Pakistan from regaining its central role in Afghan affairs.

Post 2001 evolution of Afghanistan – India bilateral ties

- In 2005, India proposed Afghanistan's membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Both nations also developed strategic and military cooperation against Islamic militants.
- Afghanistan's first Strategic Partnership Agreement was signed with India in 2011.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi was conferred with Afghanistan's highest civilian honour, the **Amir Amanullah Khan Award**
- **India had supported an Afghan led and Afghan owned national reconciliation process within the framework of the Afghan constitution.** India was of the view that it would support "any process" which can help Afghanistan emerge as a united, peaceful, secure, stable, inclusive and economically vibrant nation, with guaranteed gender and human rights. India had always supported strengthening of the democratically elected Ashraf Ghani government. India had never favored directly engaging with Taliban.
- India's MEA **Subrahmanyam Jaishankar** had said, "The world, region and the Afghan people all want the same end state: An independent, neutral, unified, peaceful, democratic and prosperous nation... The future of Afghanistan cannot be its past. A whole new generation has different expectations. We should not let them down."

- In 2020 **US – Taliban deal** was signed, which triggered US withdrawal from Afghanistan. This was contrary to India's position as USA bypassed democratic government while signing direct deal with Taliban.
- This deal ended America's longest war and was based on following understanding:
 1. A timeline for the **conditional and phased withdrawal** of US troops from Afghanistan.
 2. Intra-Afghan negotiations.
 3. Taliban's commitment to not fuel terrorism in the region.
- On 15 august, 2021 **Taliban captured Kabul** while US forces left Afghanistan. Democratic government disappeared and Afghan National Security forces surrendered.
- In September a **Taliban Government** in Afghanistan was formed. India has not given diplomatic recognition to Taliban government.

The Strategic Partnership Agreement

India was the first country Afghanistan chose to sign a strategic partnership agreement with, despite the U.S. and Pakistan keen on doing so. India had promised, in a strategic partnership agreement signed in 2011 to assist in **“the training, equipping and capacity-building programmes for the Afghan National Security Forces”** and help rebuild Afghanistan's infrastructure and institutions.

India donated three Mi-25 attack helicopters (with an option to send one more in future) to Afghanistan as part of the bilateral strategic partnership to counter the Taliban. It had also signed the TAPI pipeline project that aims to bring natural gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India.

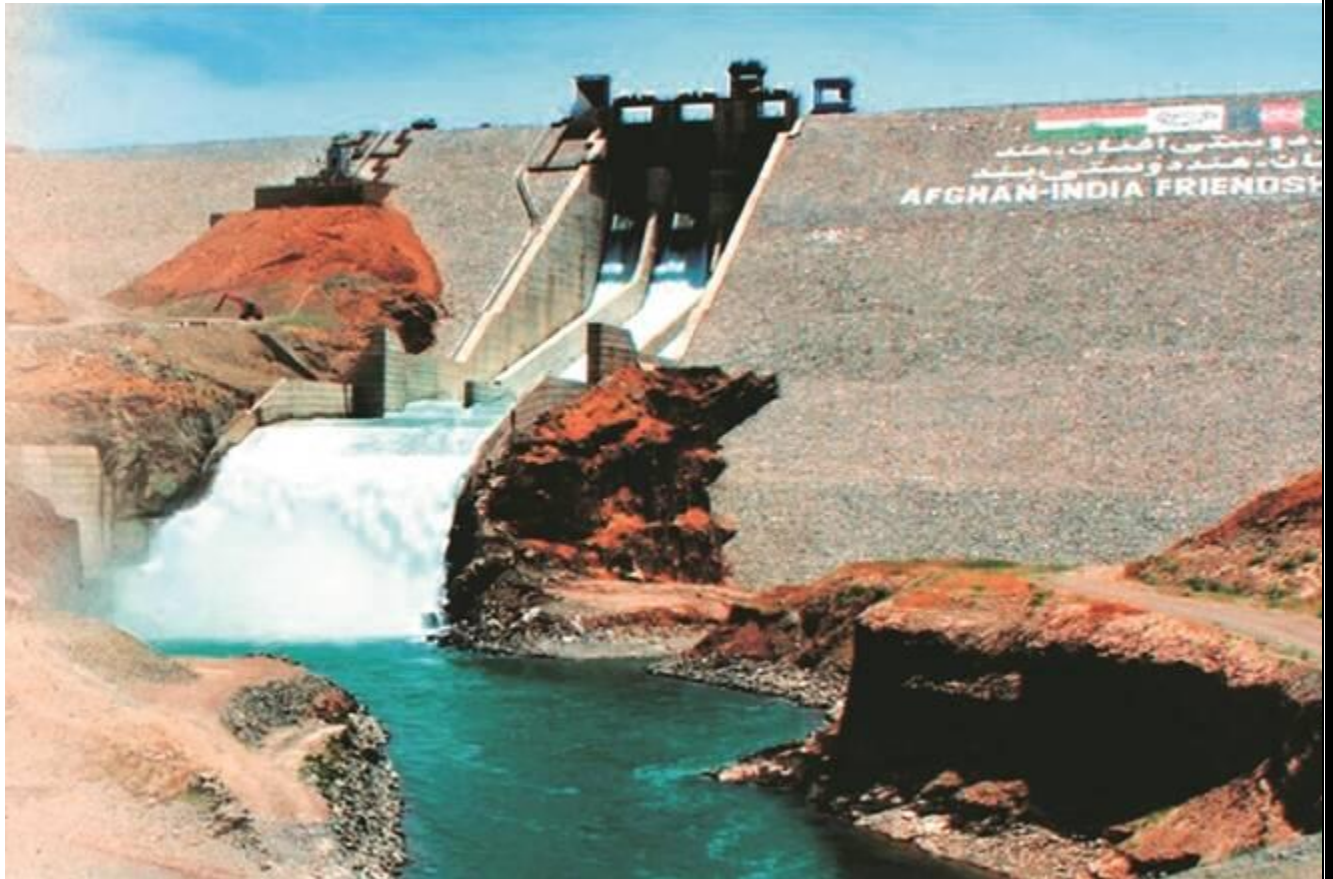
India's contribution in institution and infrastructure building

India has been one of the largest donors to Afghanistan in diverse development projects in infrastructure, education and agriculture. India has been playing an important role in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Afghanistan.

India built vital roads, dams, electricity transmission lines and substations, schools and hospitals, etc. **India's development assistance is now estimated to be worth well over \$3 billion.** And unlike in other countries where India's infrastructure projects have barely got off

the ground or are mired in the host nation's politics, it has delivered in Afghanistan. No part of Afghanistan today is untouched by the 400-plus projects that India has undertaken in all 34 of Afghanistan's provinces. **Following are some of the major projects:**

SALMA DAM: 42MW Salma Dam in Herat province. The hydropower and irrigation project, completed against many odds and inaugurated in 2016, is known as the **Afghan-India Friendship Dam**.



ZARANJ-DELARAM HIGHWAY: The other high-profile project was the 218-km Zaranj-Delaram highway built by the **Border Roads Organisation**. Zaranj is located close to Afghanistan's border with Iran.

With Pakistan denying India overland access for trade with Afghanistan, the highway is of strategic importance to New Delhi, as it provides an alternative route into landlocked Afghanistan through Iran's Chabahar port. 11 Indians and 129 Afghans lost their lives during the construction. India has already transported 75,000 tonnes of wheat through Chabahar to Afghanistan during the pandemic.

PARLIAMENT: The Afghan Parliament in Kabul was built by India at \$90 million. It was opened in 2015; Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the building. Modi described the building as **India's tribute to democracy in Afghanistan**. A block in the building is named after former PM AB Vajpayee.

STOR PALACE: In 2016, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Prime Minister Modi inaugurated the restored Stor Palace in Kabul, originally built in the late 19th century, and which was the setting for the 1919 Rawalpindi Agreement by which Afghanistan became an independent country.

POWER INFRA: Other Indian projects in Afghanistan include the rebuilding of power infrastructure such as the 220kV DC transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri, capital of Baghlan province to the north of Kabul, to beef up electricity supply to the capital. Indian contractors and workers also restored telecommunications infrastructure in many provinces.

HEALTH INFRA: India has reconstructed a children's hospital it had helped build in Kabul in 1972 —named Indira Gandhi Institute for Child Health in 1985 — that was in a shambles after the war. **'Indian Medical Missions'** have held free consultation camps in several areas. Thousands who lost their limbs after stepping on mines left over from the war have been fitted with the **Jaipur Foot**. India has also built clinics in the border provinces of Badakhshan, Balkh, Kandahar, Khost, Kunar, Nangarhar, Nimruz, Nooristan, Paktia and Paktika.

TRANSPORTATION: According to the MEA, India gifted 400 buses and 200 mini-buses for urban transportation, 105 utility vehicles for municipalities, 285 military vehicles for the Afghan National Army, and 10 ambulances for public hospitals in five cities. It also gave **three Air India aircraft** to Ariana, the Afghan national carrier, when it was restarting operations.

OTHER PROJECTS: India has contributed desks and benches for schools, and built solar panels in remote villages, and Sulabh toilet blocks in Kabul. New Delhi has also played a role in building capacity, with vocational training institutes, scholarships to Afghan students, mentoring programmes in the civil service, and training for doctors and others.

ONGOING PROJECTS (before Taliban seized power): recently it was announced that India had concluded with Afghanistan an agreement for the construction of the **Shatoot Dam**

in Kabul district, which would provide safe drinking water to 2 million residents. India had also announced the start of some 100 community development projects worth \$80 million.

India also pledged \$1 million the restoration of the **Bala Hissar Fort** south of Kabul, whose origins go back to the 6th century. Bala Hissar went on to become a significant Mughal fort, parts of it were rebuilt by Jahangir, and it was used as a residence by Shah Jahan.

Trade relationship before Taliban takeover

India's bilateral trade with Afghanistan crossed \$1.3 billion in 2019-20. The balance of trade was heavily tilted — exports from India were worth approximately \$900 million, while Afghanistan's exports to India were about \$500 million.

Afghan exports are mainly fresh and dried fruit. Some of this comes overland through the Wagah border; Pakistan has permitted Afghan trade with India through its territory. Indian exports to Afghanistan take place mainly through government-to-government contracts with Indian companies. Exports include pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, computers and related materials, cement, and sugar.

Major stumbling block in trade is Pakistan's refusal to provide land route. Afghanistan and Pakistan signed Afghanistan Pakistan Transit and Trade Agreement (APTTA) in 2011 which gives each country equal access up to the national boundaries of both. The agreement does not cover road transport vehicles from any third country, be it from India or any Central Asia country.

The APTTA agreement allows Afghan trucks to transport exports to India via Pakistan up to the Wagah crossing point, but does not offer Afghanistan the right to import Indian goods across Pakistani territory. India had expressed its willingness to join Afghanistan Pakistan Transit and Trade Agreement (APTTA); however, Pakistan is not very keen to welcome India as a member of APTTA. **In such a scenario, India needs to accelerate the expansion of the Chabahar port on the Iranian coast which provides an alternative route to Afghanistan and Central Asia.**

Initiatives to develop connectivity:

India has been cooperating with Afghanistan and Iran for development of the Chabahar Port which provides an alternative route to Afghanistan and Central Asia. In this context, a **trilateral transport and transit agreement** based on sea access through Chabahar was

signed in the presence of the leaders of the three countries in Tehran in May 2016. This trilateral connectivity pact will potentially open up an alternative route to world markets for Afghanistan. For India and Iran, it offers a strategic advantage as Pakistan has restricted Afghanistan's trade.

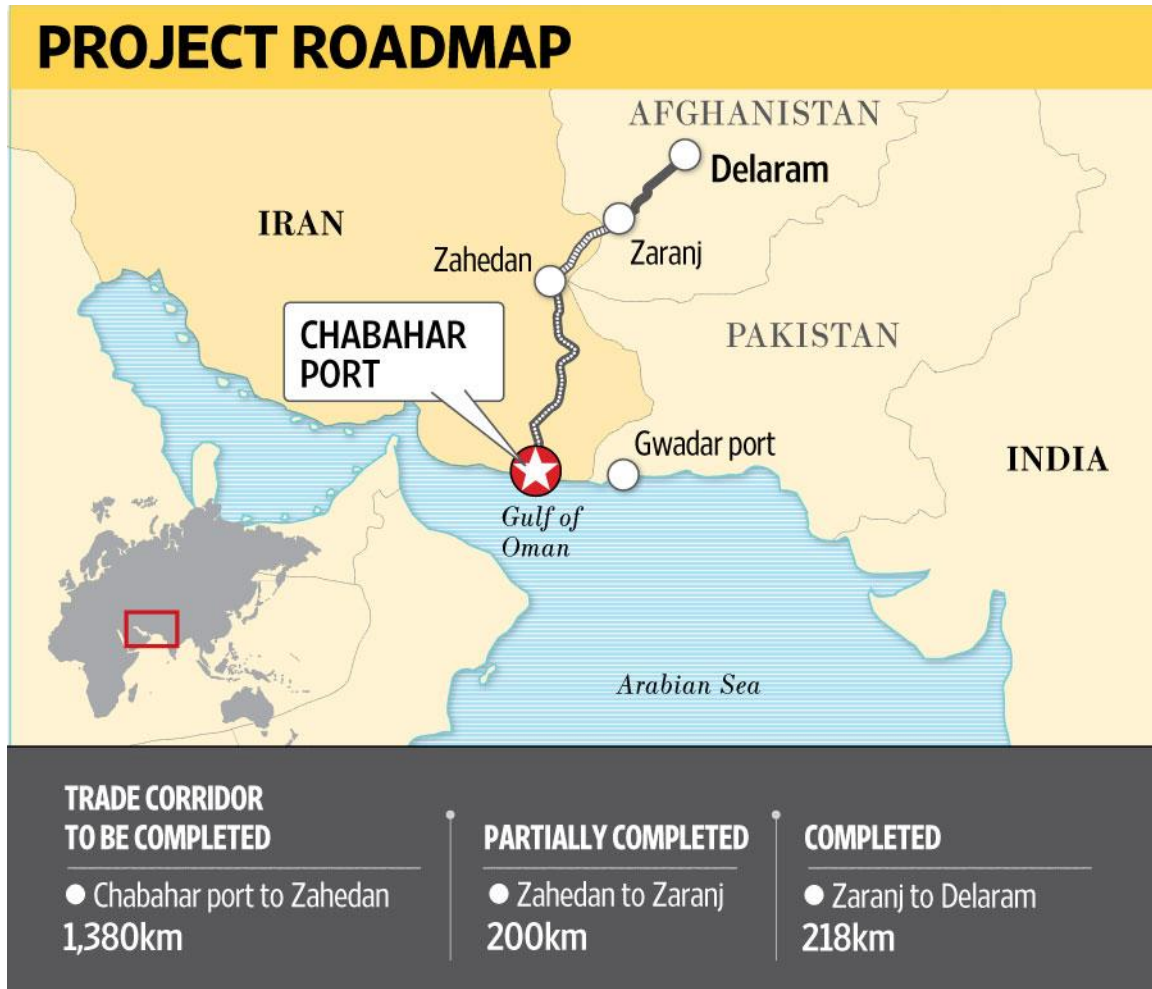
Recently, India has taken over operations of a part of Shahid Beheshti Port, Chabahar. This is the first time India will be operating a port outside its territory. This would open a new strategic route connecting Iran, India, and Afghanistan bypassing Pakistan.

Significance of Chabahar port project:

- The Chabahar port in the Sistan-Balochistan province in the energy-rich nation's southern coast is easily accessible from India's western coast and is increasingly seen as a counter to **Pakistan's Gwadar port** located at distance of around 72 km from Chabahar.
- The Chabahar port is being considered as a gateway to golden opportunities for trade by India, Iran, and Afghanistan with central Asian countries, besides ramping up trade among the three countries in the wake of Pakistan denying transit access to New Delhi.
- Integrated development of connectivity infrastructure including ports, road, and rail networks would open up greater opportunities for regional market access and contribute towards the economic integration and benefit of the three countries and the region.
- The Chabahar port is also seen as a feeder port to the **International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)** that has sea, rail and road routes between India, Russia, Iran, Europe, and Central Asia.

Recognising its strategic importance for Afghanistan, the **US has not sanctioned the port and has given India an exemption.** However, even though U.S. has issued India a waiver to develop Chabahar port, the US Administration's crippling economic sanctions on Iran have ensured that companies remain wary of engaging Iranian ports, resulting in slowing down of trade via Chabahar.

Moreover, **worryingly in July 2020, Iran decided to proceed with the rail line construction on its own, citing delays from the Indian side in beginning and funding the project.**



US withdrawal from Afghanistan and Taliban takeover

President Joe Biden had declared that US military operations in Afghanistan would cease by 31 August. Other NATO countries, including the UK, also withdrew all military forces ahead of Mr. Biden's deadline. It was accompanied by Taliban militants seizing territory throughout Afghanistan.

The speedy withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan was matched by the swift advance of the Taliban across the nation. While Washington was still withdrawing, **Taliban captured Kabul on August 15, resulting in panic reaction among the local population as President Ashraf Ghani fled the country.**

Post US withdrawal, Taliban has again seized power in Afghanistan. They have firmly established their rule. A Taliban government has been formed. **The second Taliban regime**

is in many ways a reflection of the first. Many of the same groups are still in power. It is non-inclusive and Pashtun-dominated. The stamp of the ISI is unmistakable.

In terms of structure, the new government in Kabul is similar in some ways to the one in Tehran. The top religious leader of the Taliban, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, is Afghanistan's supreme authority, even though he is not part of the government. Akhundzada has instructed the new government to uphold Islamic rules and Sharia law in Afghanistan.

Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund is the new prime minister. **As expected, no woman has found a place in the cabinet, and there are very few non-Pashtuns — only three out of 33.** This has belied expectations in some quarters of the international community that the “new” Taliban would be “inclusive” and “representative”. **There were women negotiators in the Intra-Afghan talks in Doha, but none of them have found a place in the cabinet.**

Taliban 2.0 : Impact on India

Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan is likely to cause a significant shift in the geopolitics of South Asia, and it could be particularly testing for India as Pakistan and China's role in Afghanistan may increase. India's infrastructure investments in Afghanistan are at risk. **Besides, New Delhi has lost a friendly government in Kabul. Worse, Islamabad's close partners have come back to power in Kabul.**

For India, the era of prolonged peace in Afghanistan secured by the US military presence has come to an end. Now there are new constraints on Delhi's ability to operate inside Afghanistan. **There is also the danger that Afghanistan under the Taliban could also begin to nurture anti-India terror groups (sponsored by Pakistan).**

- For India, the house-of-cards collapse of the 20-year-old Afghan democracy represents a strategic setback and a stinging humiliation.
- Since 2001, India has spent a non-trivial \$3bn or so to bolster the American-installed regime. It built roads, dams, power lines, clinics and schools across the country. It trained Afghan officers, including women, in its military academies. It gave scholarships to thousands. India even presented a fancy new parliament. Now, India's infrastructure investments in Afghanistan are at the risk of being seized by an unfriendly Taliban government.
- Should the Taliban adopt a radical approach to establish power, militancy may rise on Indian borders, which may be further fuelled by Pakistan.

- It is noteworthy that Pakistan has considerable influence over Taliban and has actively assisted their return to power in Kabul. Thus, there is also the danger that Afghanistan under the Taliban could also begin to nurture anti-India terror groups. India faces threat from terrorist factions such as the **Haqqani group**, which is among the United Nations' designated entities as a terror group and is a key member of the Taliban. It is known for engineering and carrying out attacks against Indian assets, including the Indian embassy in Kabul.
- **The new Afghan government has Pakistani's stamp all over it (big concern for India).** ISI chief played an important role in handpicking leaders for the new government in Afghanistan. The imprint of Rawalpindi is visible as the new cabinet is dominated by leaders of the **Haqqani Network terrorist outfit** and the Kandahar-based Taliban group. The Taliban group based in Doha, which had been negotiating with the international community and had **established contacts with New Delhi**, have been sidelined.
- India's access to Central Asian markets may be curtailed and India's infrastructure in Afghanistan may also be compromised. Indian assets in Afghanistan's neighbouring countries such as the Chabahar port may become redundant.
- Human rights violation: The rule of Taliban may be accompanied by erosion in women's and minority rights and the overturning of a democratic system which stands a concern for India.
- Problem of Illegal drug trade is bound to intensify under the Taliban rule: **Golden crescent of opium.**

India's response to Taliban takeover in Afghanistan

After Taliban takeover, India conducted **Operation Devi Shakti** to evacuate more than 800 people including its citizens and Afghan partners from Afghanistan. Ministry of External Affairs also held meeting with Taliban in Doha, focused on safety, security and early return of Indian nationals stranded in Afghanistan, and the travel of Afghan nationals, especially minorities, to India. However, **India has refused to give diplomatic recognition to Taliban government of Afghanistan.**

India has officially stated that **world community's approach to Afghanistan should be in line with UN Security Council resolution 2593**, which demands Afghan soil shouldn't be

used in any way for terrorism and seeks an inclusive and negotiated settlement to the crisis in the war-torn country.

UNSC resolution 2593, adopted during India's presidency of the Security Council in August, unequivocally demands that **Afghan territory not be used for sheltering, training, planning or financing terrorist acts, and specifically refers to terrorist individuals proscribed by the UN Security Council, including Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad.**

Moreover, India is engaging with regional partners to chalk out a stable, prosperous and peaceful future for Afghanistan and to secure India's strategic interests in the region:

Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan

National Security Council Secretariat of India hosted '**Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan**'. The National Security Advisers from seven other countries attended the meeting, chaired by India's NSA Ajit Doval. Seven participants were Iran, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

A joint statement titled the '**Delhi Declaration**' issued after the meeting called for:

- Collective cooperation against terrorism and drug trafficking in the region
- Expressed concern over the deteriorating socio-economic and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan and underlined the need to provide urgent humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan.
- Humanitarian assistance should be provided in an unimpeded, direct and assured manner and help should be distributed across the country in a non-discriminatory manner across all sections of the Afghan society.

3rd meeting of India-Central Asia dialogue

Six nations expressed their common concerns and objectives on Afghanistan and developed a **broad 'regional consensus'** on the issues related to Afghanistan, which includes following:

- Formation of a truly representative and inclusive government
- Combating terrorism and drug trafficking: they agreed to uphold UNSC Resolution 2593 (2021), which unequivocally demands that Afghan territory not be used for sheltering, training, planning or financing terrorist acts.

- Central role of the UN
- Providing immediate humanitarian assistance for the Afghan people and preserving the rights of women, children and other national ethnic groups.

Way forward for India

India's response to the new situation in Afghanistan must be multi-pronged, carefully calibrated, and multilateral. Only then, can it overcome the many challenges which lie on the road ahead. India must ensure implementation of UNSC resolution.

If India remains active, but patient, many opportunities could open up in the new Afghan phase. For now, India must actively contribute to regional deliberations on Afghanistan like SCO and engagement with Central Asian nations. As the world deals with new facts on the ground created by the Taliban, **Delhi must make all possible efforts to get the international community to hold the Taliban to its word.**

Moreover, it has been widely suggested that New Delhi must fundamentally reset its Afghanistan policy. India must consider directly engaging with Taliban 2.0. Time for hesitant backchannel talks is over; therefore, **India should begin open talks as it is a strategic necessity.** There is no need to be secretive or embarrassed about it.

The lessons for India are clear; it will have to fight its own battles. So it must make enemies wisely, choose friends carefully, rekindle flickering friendships, and make peace while it can.

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