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# **Taliban Takeover Of Afghanistan: What It Means For India?**

**Authored By- Debangana Ray**

## **Abstract**

*With the re-emergence of the Taliban, the geopolitical situation of India has changed drastically. In Indian context, there are some risks involved due to such change. The Taliban has received massive support and legitimization from China and its good friend, Pakistan. This has led to India having serious security concerns and problems as it already has a strained relationship with both Pakistan and China. This study aims to present risks posed to India due to the emergence of Taliban and analyses its history with the previous government of the Taliban and later the US Led government. India has always been supportive towards anti-Taliban alliances and vice versa. Will anything change in the attitude of India with the emergence of Taliban 2.0? What risks India has to face?. These are some of the questions that this study attempts to answer.*

**Keywords:** Taliban, India, Afghanistan, Terrorism, Politics, US

## **1. Introduction:**

On 15<sup>th</sup> August, subsequent to the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, the Taliban which a radical fundamentalist terrorist organization, quickly took over the administration of Afghanistan. This event marked the end of a twenty year long war. The US-led war had begun on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, 2001, less than a month after the September 11 attacks. The war named Operation Enduring Freedom, targeted Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda militants. The US also replaced the Taliban Government with a US- friendly democratic government. Several leaders of Afghanistan had been invited to Germany in the December of 2001 in order to sign the Bonn Agreement sponsored by the US. This was done in order to end conflict in the country and restore peace, stability, respect for human rights. An interim government was formed with Hamid Karzai as the president and 30 other leaders. A supreme court and a special Independent commission was also formed.

The return of the Taliban in Afghanistan has created a strategic and security dilemma for India. India had supported the civilian government and had provided developmental assistance for over the past two decades. Since, 2001, India has invested nearly 3 billion US dollars or Rupees 224 crore in development projects in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> These development projects focused on improving infrastructure, facilitating capacity building, enhancing trade, providing humanitarian assistance and so on. Previously, when the Taliban had come to power, they had provided shelter to Pakistani Terrorists. Therefore, this time too India is apprehensive that with the emergence of the Taliban Government, the terrorist activities and tensions at the Indo-Pak Border will increase. However, the future remains uncertain.

The victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan has increased the confidence of Al-Qaeda groups who have vested interests in Kashmir. There can an increase in terrorist activities which can be detrimental to Indian interests. Also, in India, the emergence of Taliban has led to increased Islamophobia exhibited by Hindu Extremist groups.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sharma; August, 2021; "After the Taliban's takeover, uncertainty looms over India's investments in Afghanistan", <https://qz.com/india/2048512/what-will-happen-to-indias-investments-in-talibans-afghanistan/>

<sup>2</sup> Pantucci, R., & Basit, A. (2021). Post-Taliban Takeover: How the Global Jihadist Terror Threat May Evolve. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 13(4), 1–7. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48618776>

India has previously invested in Military training and support to the Afghan army which included supply of Mi-24 helicopters and Cheetah light utility helicopters.<sup>3</sup> These are now in the hands of the Taliban. The Taliban have already taken control of few Indian Investments in Afghanistan such as the Zarang-Delaram Highway. India fears that its strategic and security interests will be hurt as a result of the Taliban group.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. Taliban In 1996- 2001**

The Taliban who emerged in the 1990s is an Ultraconservative religious and political group. The group consisted of students from Islamic religious schools which had been built for afghan refugees in northern Pakistan. When the Taliban first came into power during the 3<sup>rd</sup> Afghan Civil war, They established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. This happened after the collapse of a communist regime in Afghanistan and withdrawal of Troops from the Soviet Union. In 1994, the Taliban had acquired Kandahar by defeating the local leaders there. Soon, in 1996, with the help and support from the foreign conservative Islamist groups and the Southern Pashtun ethnic group, Taliban was able to seize control over the country by taking over the capital of the country, Kabul. However, the group faced resistance from other Non-Pashtun ethnic groups mainly the Uzbeks in the west, the Tajik in the north and the Hazara in central Afghanistan. The Taliban had acquired control of the entirety of Afghanistan except for a small region in Northern Afghanistan.

The reputation of the Taliban in the world was largely negative. This is due to the treatment women and non-islamic groups were subjected to. Women had to follow archaic social rules. They were excluded and banned from having a public life, beaten publicly for failing to follow Islamic rules imposed on them by the Taliban. The Taliban destroyed non-Islamic artistic structures and also imposed harsh and extreme forms of Punishment for the people in Afghanistan. It however, had the support of few countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The Taliban was also said to be giving shelter to Terrorists such as Osama Bin Laden who was responsible for numerous terrorist attacks, most popularly the September 11 attacks in the World Trade Centre.

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<sup>3</sup> Saxena, C. (2021). The American Exit, the Fall of Afghanistan and the Indian Dilemmas. Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, 13(4), 8–13. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48618777>

<sup>4</sup> Raj Verma (2021) The US-Taliban peace deal and India's strategic options, Australian Journal of International Affairs, 75:1, 10-14, DOI: [10.1080/10357718.2020.1769551](https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2020.1769551)

This enraged the US and they subsequently asked the Taliban to extradite Osama and other Al-Qaeda terrorists to US. The Taliban refused which led to the beginning of the US-led war in Afghanistan.

### **3. After The Us Invasion (2001-2021):**

On 7<sup>th</sup> October, 2001, the US and UK launched an airstrike named “Operation Enduring Freedom” . By mid-November, the Taliban had been driven out from Kabul. On December, the Taliban Rule over Afghanistan officially ended as Kandahar fell in the hands of the US. This US led war in Afghanistan led to the Taliban losing control of Afghanistan and a new interim US-friendly government was formed led by Hamid Karzai who became the President. Many countries including India supported the removal of Taliban and promised to provide help for the development of Afghanistan. The government was formed with the goal of restoring peace, stability and respect for human rights. The Afghani leaders also signed the Bonn Agreement and planned regarding the country needs to be governed by creation of a constitution.<sup>5</sup>

### **4. India’s Investments In Afghanistan:**

India invested more than 3 Billion US Dollars for Development projects in Afghanistan for over two decades. Some of the main investments include a direct air freight corridor which was established between India and Afghanistan in order to provide increased access to Indian markets and enhance trade. Afghan businessmen can use and foster trade networks. They can invest in India as well. Afghan farmers can access Indian markets in a quick and direct manner in order to sell their produce. The Chabahar port, located in the Sistan -Baluchistan province in Iran is an important development project by India and Iran, in order to facilitate sea-land connectivity with the Central-Asia and Afghanistan and ensure the smooth passage of Goods between Afghanistan and the Port. India also sent its first ever wheat Shipment to Afghanistan and committed to send over 1.1 million tonnes of wheat to Afghanistan through Chabahar port.

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<sup>5</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2021, September 24). Taliban. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Taliban>

This would help in enhancing the connectivity and trade between Afghanistan and India. It had further helped in building a 218 km road connecting Zaranj to Delaram which was completed in 2010. This road was built with the intention to ensure easy movement of goods and services to the Iranian border. The 86 acre parliament building was also built with the help of India and was inaugurated in 25<sup>th</sup> December, 2015 by the prime minister of India along with the president of Afghanistan.

India had assisted Afghanistan in constructing a multipurpose dam named “afghan India Friendship Dam which has been generating electricity and has become a source of irrigation. The Dam has a capacity of 42 MW and provides enough water for irrigating approximately 75000 hectares of land. Further, a 100- year old palace located in the foreign office premises in Kabul has been restored with the help of Indian assistance in 2016. India has also aided Afghanistan on the health and education front. The Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health is a 400-bed hospital and forms the main hospital for children in Afghanistan. It was established in the 1970s with the help of Indian assistance. Approximately 3 Lakh children get treated in the hospital annually. A diagnostic centre has also been set up in the hospital with the help of the Indian government who provided financial assistance and supplied equipment to the centre. India has played an important role in providing equipment to the Afghan Army such as Mi-24 attack helicopters. India has also provided training to the Afghan army and police in order to effectively maintain the rule of law and secure peace in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

Other Projects include Scholarship programmes for Afghan Students. The Afghanistan National Agricultural Sciences and Technology University was set up with the help of the Indian Government. The Indian Agricultural Research University provided training and equipment for the establishment of the university.

## **5. Re-Emergence Of Taliban (2021-):**

President Donald Trump signed a peace agreement with the Taliban on February 2020. This agreement stated that the US would withdraw all troops from Afghanistan provided the Taliban kept its promises which was to not allow Al-Qaeda or militants of foreign terrorist organizations to operate on Afghan land.

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<sup>6</sup> Ministry of External Affairs; “ India-Afghanistan: A historic and time-tested friendship”; [https://mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/30860\\_India-Afghanistan\\_Map\\_Book.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/30860_India-Afghanistan_Map_Book.pdf)

As the withdrawal of US forces began, the Taliban quickly took over the entirety of Afghanistan including Kabul on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, 2021. However, chaos ensued. The people of Afghanistan started fleeing for their lives in order to escape the return of Taliban rule. They feared that the Tyrannical rule of Taliban will return. Even if the Taliban claims a change in character, their actions say otherwise. Women apprehend that they will lose their freedom and livelihood once again which can be said that it has been proved to be true as more reports emerge that women are being asked to stay at home and are being restricted from pursuing a higher education. The Taliban has been seen to severely curtail the Freedom of Press and Media. Also, Barbaric punishments for not following Islamic rules are set to return. Embassy officials and civilians from other countries are also being evacuated from Afghanistan.

## **6. How Will Taliban Rule Affect India?**

With the re-emergence of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, the geopolitics of South Asia is set to change drastically. India had previously supported the Soviet led democratic system of governance of Afghanistan. Even after the Civil war, when the Taliban rule emerged, India continued to support the Najibullah Government in Afghanistan. The Taliban were only supported by the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The Taliban destroyed Buddhist monuments in Bamiyans which had caused a lot of Outrage in India. They also implemented rules that stated that Afghan Hindus have to wear identification labels on them. The Taliban were also suspected of supporting the 1999 Hijack of the Indian Airlines Flight 814 which was made to land in Kandahar in Afghanistan. Therefore, India was supportive of the Northern Alliance who were anti-Taliban. After the US invasion in 2001, India provided support to the coalition forces and fostered diplomatic relations with the new interim democratic government. It also provided financial support in the reconstruction process.

In February of 2020, a peace agreement was signed between the US and the Taliban. The agreement was signed by US envoy, Zalmay Khalizad on behalf of the United States and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar on behalf of the Taliban. When the Taliban reoccupied the country, India was flocked by Afghan refugees who escaped Afghanistan and from the Taliban Rule.

According to United Nations, there are already 16,000 refugees in India along with 18000 unregistered refugees as well. In order to provide entry to the incoming Afghan refugees, the Indian Government initiated Fast-Track visa applications under Operation Devi Shakti. India also closed all its embassies and consulates and have evacuated its officials.

Some risks that India is fearful of with the Taliban takeover include terrorism. Previously India has faced numerous attacks on its assets in Afghanistan and even at the Indian Embassy in Kabul. These attacks have been carried out by the Haqqani Group of Taliban which remain the most armed and the best trained among all the other groups. Such attacks have also been supported by the ISI in Pakistan. The Taliban and ISI share close ties with each other. Even though the agreement signed clearly guaranteed that the Afghan land would not be misused there still remains fear considering the fact that the Taliban and the ISI share close and friendly relations with each other. Also, with the withdrawal of forces there has been created a lack of security, which has given rise to a new state named the Islamic State of Khorasan or the IS-K in South and Central Asia . The group has managed to attract radical individuals from India as well as from the Taliban and other Pakistani terrorist groups. Therefore, it forms a significant threat to the future of India in Afghanistan. There was also an attack which happened in a Gurudwara in Kabul in the march of 2020 behind which the IS-K was responsible. Also, among the group there were four individuals who were from Kerala making this attack all the more hurtful to India.

Secondly, the relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban. The Pakistani influence on Afghanistan is increasing with the emergence of the Taliban. The ISI always had cordial relations with the Taliban. Even if Taliban promises to prevent terrorism in its land, it cannot deny the relationship it shares with the ISI. India fears that this influence of Pakistan on the Taliban can potential hurt India's interests in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

Thirdly, the Chinese support directed towards the Taliban is worrying for India. The presence of the US government in India has affected China's aggressive border strategy along the Line of Actual Control and Indian borders either in support of Pakistan or on its own. Pakistan has ridiculed India's investments in Afghanistan and have raised its issues regarding Jammu and Kashmir. Pakistan is keen on creating problems for India by bringing Taliban's attention to the Union Territory.

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<sup>7</sup> Chaudhuri, Shende (June 2020), "Dealing With the Taliban: India's Strategy in Afghanistan After U.S. Withdrawal", <https://carnegieindia.org/2020/06/02/dealing-with-taliban-india-s-strategy-in-afghanistan-after-u.s.-withdrawal-pub-81951>

It is going to be a serious security concern for India if the Taliban decides to join hands with China and Pakistan. Though the Taliban decided to stay out of the affairs of Pakistan and India at present, the future remains uncertain.<sup>8</sup>

## **7. Way Forward:**

It has been advisable for India to accept the new reality and formulate diplomatic relations with Afghanistan. It should recognize its own interests and be pro-active in Afghanistan. There has been a change of policy in India as India held talks with the Taliban. The talks revolved around security concerns and early return of Indian nationals who were stuck in Afghanistan. India also raised a concerns regarding misuse of Afghan lands for terrorist activities and security of Minorities. The Taliban responded in a positive manner assuring India that it would look into the matter.<sup>9</sup> However, Though the Taliban promised non-interference in matters in Kashmir, later it said that it had the right to comment about the Muslims in India.

## **8. Conclusion:**

The emergence of Taliban has affected the geopolitics of South Asia. India has valid reasons to be worried due to the risky geopolitical situation. Though the Taliban has promised friendship to India, it cannot be said that they would keep this promise due to pressure from Pakistan, ISI and China. However, India should continue its diplomatic relations with the new government and be proactive in Afghanistan.

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<sup>8</sup> Prabhash K. Dutta, September 2021, “Why China backs Taliban and how it poses a threat to India” <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/why-china-backs-taliban-and-threat-to-india-1852499-2021-09-14>

<sup>9</sup> Vaid, September 2021, “ India announces first diplomatic contact with the Taliban”; <https://p.dw.com/p/3zkhk>