

Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan: India's perspectives

August 16, 2021

Surprising everyone, the Taliban has won a stunning military and political victory. The United States (US)-supported Afghan government led by President Ashraf Ghani could not stand up to the Taliban assaults and has ultimately surrendered. After the Taliban took over power in Afghanistan, there has emerged a newfound risk for India at the international front.

In news: Taliban takeover: 5 top questions for the Modi government

Placing it in syllabus: Foreign Affairs

Dimensions

- Chain of events since 2001
- India's interest in the region
- India's contribution in development of the region
- Challenges before India

Content:

Chain of events since 2001:

2001: 9/11 and 'War on Terror'

- US President George W. Bush launched his "war on terror" in response to the September 11 attacks that killed around 3,000 people, with airstrikes on Afghanistan on October 7, 2001.
- The Taliban government had sheltered Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda movement, which masterminded 9/11.
- In power since 1996, the Taliban are soon defeated and flee the Afghan capital Kabul on December 6.

- Hamid Karzai is appointed to lead an interim government and NATO begins to deploy its International Security Assistance Force.

2004: First presidential election

- Afghanistan's first election under a new system is held on October 9, 2004 with an enthusiastic turnout of 70 percent. Karzai wins 55 percent of the vote.
- The Taliban regroup in the south and east, as well as across the border in Pakistan, and launch an insurgency.

2008-2011: US reinforcements

- As attacks multiply, the US command in 2008 asks for more troops and the first reinforcements are sent.
- Karzai is re-elected on August 20, 2009 in elections that are marred by massive fraud, low turnout and Taliban attacks.
- In 2009, President Barack Obama, who had campaigned on a pledge to end the Afghanistan war, doubled the number of US troops to 68,000. In 2010, it reached around 100,000.
- Osama bin Laden was killed on May 2, 2011 in a US special forces operation in Pakistan.
- On June 22, Obama announced the beginning of a troop withdrawal, with the departure by mid-2012 of 33,000 soldiers.

2014: NATO exit

- In June 2014, Ashraf Ghani was elected president but voting was marred by violence and a bitter dispute over claims of fraud.
- In December, NATO ended its 13-year combat mission but a number of troops remain to train the Afghan military.
- The following year, the Taliban made their greatest military advances since being ousted.
- The Islamic State jihadist group also becomes active in the region. Bloody attacks multiplied, notably in Kabul.

2020: US-Taliban deal, disputed election

- Ashraf Ghani was declared victorious for a second term on February 18, 2020, an announcement rejected by his rival and former minister Abdullah Abdullah, who vowed to form his own parallel government.
- On February 29, the United States and the Taliban signed a historic deal in Doha under which all foreign forces would leave Afghanistan by May 2021, provided the insurgents start talks with Kabul and adhere to other security guarantees.
- A power-sharing deal ends the bitter Ghani-Abdullah feud in May. Abdullah takes the role of leading the peace negotiations.
- Talks begin in September but violence surges and the Taliban are blamed for a wave of targeted killings.

May 2021: Foreign troops withdrawal

- On May 1, 2021 the United States and NATO started withdrawing their 9,500 soldiers, of which 2,500 are American.
- In May, the Americans withdrew from the Kandahar air base.
- On July 2, Bagram air base – Afghanistan's biggest, and the nerve centre of the US-led coalition's operations – was handed over to Afghan forces.
- US President Joe Biden said that the US troop withdrawal will be completed by August 31, before the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

May-August 2021: Taliban blitz

- The insurgents launch lightning attacks across Afghanistan, capturing vast stretches of the hinterland as the final foreign troops begin their withdrawal.
- The Taliban captured their first provincial capital, Zaranj in the southwest, on August 6.

- Other major cities fall within days, including Kandahar and Herat – Afghanistan’s second- and third-biggest cities respectively.
- The insurgents fully encircled the capital on August 15 with the capture of Jalalabad in the east. It leaves Kabul as the only city under government control.
- Diplomatic missions scramble to evacuate officials and local staff who fear reprisals from the Taliban.
- Ghani fled the country, reportedly to Tajikistan, and the Taliban entered Kabul, eventually taking position in the presidential palace. In a statement, Ghani admits the insurgents have “won”.

India’s interest in the region:

- India sees Afghanistan as a strategically important country. Afghanistan is important for India in a multi-dimensional manner.
- Afghanistan is India’s bordering neighbour, however the part which borders Afghanistan is occupied by Pakistan.
- **Connecting link to Central Asia:** The most important role of Afghanistan is always considered as India’s gateway to Central Asia. It implies continental outreach. But in partnership with Iran, it also allows for serving India’s maritime interests.
- Connectivity with Afghanistan and further with Central Asia have been primarily the reasons for India’s engagement with Iran to develop Chabahar port
- **Security:** Safeguarding a Taliban free Afghanistan is in interest of India which is one of the favourite target of cross border terrorism. A stable Afghanistan is crucial for regional and domestic security and stability for India. With Afghanistan becoming a centre of radical ideology and violence again, such a development would affect Pakistan and would inevitably reach India.
- **Energy ambitions:** To address its energy needs to sustain its economic growth, pipelines from Iran and Central

Asia would be extremely important. India sees Afghanistan as an essential component of the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline. An unstable Afghanistan would hurt the construction of this pipeline and the subsequent flow of gas.

- **Trade:** In case of trade, Afghanistan can help India export its products to Europe, gaining foreign exchange. The railway line from Chabahar to Zahedan in Afghanistan envisages to connect New Delhi with Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Europe.

Natural resources: Afghanistan is known for its geo-strategic importance and abundance of natural resources. Afghanistan has an estimated 1 trillion USD of untapped resources according to a joint report of The Pentagon and US Geological Survey. Stable Afghanistan with better relations means more economic development in the region and of India.

India's involvement has been characterized by Soft diplomacy. India sought to involve itself through soft power rather than militarily as India believed in winning the hearts and minds of Afghans.

India has been particularly active in the construction, infrastructure, human capital building and mining sectors. Besides, it has also identified the telecommunications, health, pharmaceuticals, and information technology and education sectors for cooperation.



India's contribution in development of the region:

- New Delhi's engagement with Kabul underscores the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan and is based on the principles of soft power diplomacy.
- India has been consistent with its developmental assistance to Afghanistan post-2001 era.
- India has played a significant role in the reconstruction and rehabilitation process in Afghanistan.
- India's extensive developmental assistance programme, which now stands at around US 2 billion, is a strong signal of its abiding commitment to peace, stability and prosperity in Afghanistan.
- India has opted to pursue a 'soft power' strategy to engage Afghanistan, preferring to contribute substantially in the civilian sector rather than in defence and security.
- India is particularly active in the construction, infrastructure, human capital building and mining sectors. Besides, it has also identified the telecommunications, health, pharmaceuticals, and information technology and education sectors for cooperation.

- India fosters cooperation and collaborates on infrastructure and high impact community development projects in Afghanistan.

India's development programmes in Afghanistan are focused around following five pillars:

- **Large infrastructure projects:** Shahtoot Dam, Salma Dam (Afghan-India Friendship Dam), Pul-e-Khumri transmission line of 2009, Parliament building etc
- **Human resource development and capacity building:** Habibia High School,
- **Humanitarian assistance:** India sent more than 20 tonnes of medicines, other equipment and transported 75,000 tonnes of wheat to Afghanistan to address the COVID-19 challenge.
- **High-impact community development projects:** Specialised ITEC courses for Afghan Government Officials, ICAR scholarships under India-Afghanistan Fellowship Programme
- **Enhancing trade and investment through air and land connectivity:** Zaranj-Delaram road

Important Indian Projects in Afghanistan:

- Construction of a 218 km road from Zaranj to Delaram for facilitating movement of goods and services to the Iranian border;
- construction of 220kV DC transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul and a 220/110/20 kV sub-station at Chimtala;
- upgrading of telephone exchanges in 11 provinces;
- expansion of the national TV network by providing an uplink from Kabul and downlinks in all 34 provincial capitals for greater integration of the country.
- New Afghan Parliament building (inaugurated on 25 December 2015)

- Afghan-India Friendship Dam (Salma Dam) (opened on 4 June 2016)
- India has also committed to contribute substantially in improving the transportation system in Kabul and has decided to donate 1000 buses to Afghanistan along with upgradation related infrastructure.
- A consortium of public and private Indian companies has been formed to invest in Afghanistan's mining sector in the Hajigak iron ore reserves.
- Mines Institute is proposed to be established in Kabul with GoI technical & financial support to build capacity in mining area

Challenges before India:

Evacuation of Indians:

- There is a considerable size of Indian citizens working in Afghanistan.
- On Sunday, an Air India flight was able to fly out carrying 129 passengers from Kabul to Delhi, but since then, the chaos at Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport has meant commercial flights are unable to ply, and for the moment Kabul airspace has been closed.
- With thousands of desperate Afghans seeking to leave the country, the tarmac has been overrun by people blocking the airplanes from taking off or landing.
- According to officials, evacuating Indians remains the government's first priority.

Asylum to displaced persons from Afghanistan:

- Hundreds of Afghan nationals, many of them allied to the previous Ghani government, are seeking to leave the country, and have applied for visas from the Indian Embassy in Kabul.
- Among them are those with links to India, who have studied or trained here, or with families in India, or

those who could face reprisal attacks from Taliban militia.

- While the MEA has made a statement on its commitment to facilitate members of the Hindu and Sikh minorities in Afghanistan, no stated policy has been announced on whether it will welcome all Afghans, as India has done on previous occasions.
- If the government does accept them, then arrangements for what could be thousands of refugees will need to be made.

Angle of Pakistan and repercussions:

- The larger questions that the government faces are about how its strategic options in Afghanistan will change given the Taliban's proximity to Pakistan's establishment.
- There are concerns that anti-India terror groups could occupy space in Afghanistan to carry out terror attacks against India.
- India's influence with the new government is likely to be considerably curtailed, as Pakistan's influence over the Taliban remains strong, and the government will have to reconsider whether to now engage Pakistan directly as well.
- Regardless of whether or not India recognises the Taliban as the legitimate ruler in Afghanistan, the government will have to open channels of communication to engage the Taliban
- Other strategic issues involving future connectivity, which India had sought to do via Chabahar port in Iran, must also be considered in the longer term.

India's stand on the issue:

- In the past few months, security officials and diplomats have made initial, furtive contact with the Taliban in Doha, and the MEA said it is engaging "various

stakeholders" in Afghanistan.

- Last week after talks involving 12 countries including India, U.N. representatives and Afghan representatives with the Taliban in Doha, a nine-point statement issued made it clear that they will "not recognise any government in Afghanistan that is imposed through the use of military force".
- The decision of recognising the Taliban regime is particularly difficult for India, which was closely allied to the Afghan government, and helped build democratic and constitutional processes there, and sees the treatment of women and minorities as integral to those processes. Recognising a Taliban regime, giving it global legitimacy will be a difficult step for India.

Mould your thought: After the Taliban took over power in Afghanistan, there has emerged a newfound risk for India at the international front. Evaluate.

Approach to the answer:

- Introduction
- Discuss the recent developments in Afghanistan Briefly
- Reasons for India's interest in Taliban-free Afghanistan
- Mention the challenges faced by India with the rise of Taliban Regime
- Conclusion