



## **In Afghanistan, how India missed the bus**

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### **Abstract**

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## Analysis

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Despite sizeable investment in Afghanistan by the international community for the last 19 years, the task of stabilizing Afghanistan seems farfetched. Dwindling international financial assistance, talks of troop withdrawal and lack of economic stability in Afghanistan is leading to a constant flow of refugees out of Afghanistan, rise in unemployment, and increase in criminal, narco and insurgent activities. Most of the development projects initiated by the international community in post-2001 Afghanistan are winding down or have been abruptly closed, leading to an economic crisis in the aid dependent country.

In this context, Germany and India who have made huge investments in Afghanistan are uniquely positioned to help preserve and build on the gains achieved thus far. This is critical not only for Afghanistan but also for Germany and India as they aspire to play a major role in the international arena. The new “Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region”<sup>1</sup> issued by the German government in September 2020 is an important development to take cognizance.

As I travelled to Kandahar on October 4, 2011, the day India signed the Agreement on Strategic Partnership (ASP) with Afghanistan, I could feel a sense of optimism and achievement among Afghan officials, politicians, business and women’s groups in the province. There was overwhelming hope that India would be an enduring and reliable friend. ASP was meant to institutionalise the decade long gains India had made through its development assistance policy.

From the saga of the hijacking of IC-814 in December 1999 and negotiations in Kandahar for the release of the aircraft to the closure of its mission in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime, India had come a long way in re-establishing its presence in the war-ravaged country after 2001. Two decades later, however, with the closure of its consulate and evacuation of the diplomatic staff from Kandahar on July 10, India is left to salvage whatever little it can from its two-decade-long engagement.

As the Taliban captures district after district, the fall of Kabul looks imminent, unless the United States (US) and the international community realise the folly of surrendering the country to the insurgents. There is uncertainty in New Delhi about how to deal with the rapidly changing Afghan scenario. The responses have ranged from support to the Afghan government to support for peace talks to even outreach to the Taliban.

The Taliban, it is certain, no longer requires the pretence of a peace process to capture power. That can be achieved in a matter of months by using extreme violence that breaks the morale of the Afghanistan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF). Kabul can only hope to delay the inevitable by garrisoning its forces and retaining control over some of the urban centres, and allowing the insurgents to take over large swathes of the country. Without external assistance that resembles nothing short of the 2001 intervention, Afghanistan is all set to slide into the chaos of the 1990s.

The swiftness with which the insurgents have continued vanquishing the ANDSF underlines two disturbing facts. First, two decades of military operations against the insurgents by the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces had little impact on the Taliban’s operational capacity. In spite of the reported

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<sup>1</sup> *Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region*, Federal Government of Germany, September 2020, <https://rangun.diplo.de/blob/2380824/a27b62057f2d2675ce2bbfc5be01099a/policy-guidelines-summary-data.pdf>. Accessed on 20 November 2020.



leadership squabble and factionalism, the Taliban was able to project a unified leadership, and recruit, regroup and arm their foot soldiers from sanctuaries in Pakistan.

Second, the billions spent on creating a modern security architecture comprising intelligence, police and army wings have not yielded the desired result in Afghanistan. Moreover, in the absence of airpower support, it will be a Herculean task for the ANDSF to curtail the insurgent onslaught.

At the time of writing this article, the American withdrawal from Afghanistan has been mostly completed. Other NATO countries like Germany have already pulled out all their troops from the war-torn country. President Joe Biden is unlikely to halt the pull-out of US forces by linking it to the conditions on the ground, let alone reverse his decision and redeploy the withdrawn forces. With the reported domination over a large chunk per cent of territory, the Taliban does not need to stay engaged in the peace process. Even if it does so, for the sake of paying lip service to the February 2020 agreement with the US, the Afghan government has little leverage left to negotiate from a position of strength. With the ANDSF's resistance disintegrating, power-brokers and warlords in Afghanistan are possibly the last frontier the Taliban has to breach in order to capture Kabul. Yet, they too are jockeying for power and influence with support from regional proxies.

These developments are akin to the unfolding of the worst-case scenario for New Delhi, a return to the mid-1990s. The Taliban domination and civil war situation will effectively impinge on its plan to continue with aid and development assistance. As violence intensifies, the possibility of New Delhi being able to even maintain its diplomatic presence in the country will come under stress. India has already shut three of its four consulates. It could very well be a matter of few months before New Delhi will have to consider evacuating all its embassy and consulate staff.

India is in the midst of frantic efforts to avoid such a scenario. Since it is ill-placed to halt the Taliban, it has reportedly reached out to the insurgents to open a line of communication with the probable new rulers. As revealed by a Qatari minister, a round of backchannel negotiations might have taken place between Indian security officials and unnamed Doha-based Taliban leaders. However, it is unlikely that much would result from these delayed efforts to establish contacts with the insurgents.

On the other hand, reverting to its traditional friends in the Northern Alliance (NA) is no longer an option for New Delhi. The NA, an erstwhile consolidated and militarily influential entity, is a poor caricature of itself today. The warlords, who comprise the NA, can at best hope to maintain little islands of influence with their militia, as the Taliban takes over most parts of the countryside.

New diplomacy has taken India's external affairs minister S Jaishankar on a whirlwind tour of Qatar, Iran, and Russia. However, just like its reported outreach to the Taliban, these are much-delayed efforts unlikely to salvage the situation. India is struggling to find a place in the new peace initiative proposed by Russia, which is falling back on a troika comprising Pakistan and China. Having pledged aid and development assistance to Afghanistan of more than \$3 billion and functioned under the US-led security umbrella, New Delhi is caught on a back foot. Without emphasis on institution-building in the long-term, most of the projects run the danger of reversal. While New Delhi may be trying desperately to end its isolation from the Afghan developments, it remains to be seen whether it will be acceptable to the influential regional players as a key stakeholder.

As Afghanistan slides into chaos, New Delhi will be left to rue the missed opportunities. Following the US-led efforts in the security sector and peace process, India made little effort since 2014 (the date announced by President Obama for withdrawal) till the present with regard to long-term institution-building, stabilising the



security situation, promoting inclusive peace process, building an intra-Afghan consensus, and preserving its gains. The projects and structures created by India carry very little wherewithal to withstand the Taliban's advances and takeover. While there is substantial goodwill for India in Afghanistan, not moving in fast to help the Afghans will turn the chessboard to its disadvantage. In strategic terms, India's loss would be Pakistan and China's gain. In real terms, it would mean the erosion of goodwill of a friendly neighbour that looked up to India for support in times of need.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. A version of this article first appeared in the [Hindustan Times](#), New Delhi, 21 July 2021.

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