Scholarly Research Journal for Humanity Science & English Language,
Online ISSN 2348-3083, SJ IMPACT FACTOR 2019: 6.251, www.srjis.com
PEER REVIEWED & REFEREED JOURNAL, DEC-JAN, 2021, VOL-9/43

INDIA'S STRATEGY WITH TALIBAN IN AFGHANISTAN

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Paper Received On: 15 JAN 2021

Peer Reviewed On: 18 JAN 2021

Published On: 01 FEB 2021

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Introduction

On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed an agreement in Doha to end the war in Afghanistan. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who was released from a Pakistani prison in 2018 and is a deputy to the Taliban leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, signed this pivotal agreement. Suspicious of the agreement until the very end, Baradar signed only after Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. envoy who has dedicated many years to seeing this deal through, lent his signature to the document. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo sat in the first row in the audience. A large group of Taliban representatives sat behind, cheering on the Baradar-Khalilzad pact. Thousands of miles away, in Kabul, U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper stood next to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani at a news conference and issued a joint declaration. It outlined a four-stage process for a "comprehensive and sustainable peace agreement," culminating in a "permanent and comprehensive ceasefire." Days earlier, the United States had released joint statements in support of the peace agreement with its coalition partners, as well as the United Nations (UN) and Russia. Whether observers like the agreement or not, it is a reality. Furthermore, this is a bipartisan issue in the United States. There is "no appetite on either side of the aisle" for keeping troops in the country, argues an expert who has tracked Afghanistan since at least the 1990s. The Democratic presidential hopeful, Joe Biden, has clearly stated that "we don't need those troops there. I would bring them home." He argued that "any residual U.S. military presence in Afghanistan would be focused only on counterterrorism operations." This would mean no more than 5,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Soon after Khalilzad signed the

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agreement with Baradar, U.S. President Donald Trump reminded journalists that "everybody's tired of war." The withdrawal, he stated, would "start immediately." A reduction of 9,000 troops, according to a former director in the U.S. National Security Council, "seems to be on track by July 2020." Beyond that, he suggests, "it is unclear what getting to zero [U.S. troops] will actually mean." What "intel presence" will be left behind is "also not known."[10] For the most part, despite the ambiguity with regard to the drawdown, it is clear that the United States is going home.

India's position in this present state of affairs is hardly enviable. There is no doubt that the agreement privileges both the Taliban, which may ultimately enter into some form of power-sharing agreement in Kabul, and Pakistan, without whose active support it is unlikely that Taliban leaders like Baradar could have even reached the negotiating table. Baradar was arrested by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) in 2010. Ironically, he was arrested because he engaged in unauthorized talks with then Afghan president Hamid Karzai. "The ISI," argues a close Afghan watcher, "were sending a very clear message to the Taliban leadership: don't engage in talks without our say-so." In 2018, the ISI gave its nod to the talks. In short, without Pakistan's support of the Taliban and of the agreement in question, the discussions in Doha would have folded years ago. The official Indian position on reconciliation supports "an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled process for enduring peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan." But, as the latest talks show, the process is neither Afghan-led nor Afghan-controlled. It is shepherded and largely controlled by the United States. The Taliban's reliance on Pakistan is unlikely to change anytime in the near future. Nevertheless, this paper argues that the cost to India of remaining distant from the ongoing attempts at reconciliation (it has thus far nurtured a relationship mainly with the Afghan government) would likely be much higher than the cost of being involved in them. Being more engaged in international negotiations, and even agreeing to talk to certain sections of the Taliban as part of a broader diplomatic initiative, are options that India can no longer afford to disregard.

Leaving the reconciliation process primarily to an unstable administration in Kabul will do little for India's long-term interests in Afghanistan. To be sure, the power-sharing agreement that Ghani and former chief executive Abdullah Abdullah signed on May 17, 2020, as welcome as it is, provides few guarantees for long-term stability. The fact that the Afghan government,

following the February 29 agreement, is more likely than before to be in direct contact with the Taliban provides room for India to reposition its imperatives and to talk to sections within the Taliban, with a clearer sense of political purpose. This is not to suggest, at all, that the democratically elected government in Kabul has passed its political sell-by date. Repositioning Indian imperatives means also remaining ever-connected with the deep ties that India has nurtured with both Ghani and Abdullah. Yet, as this paper suggests, it also means being willing to pivot to the changing realities in Afghanistan and being much more involved in conversations on and around reconciliation than before. With this in mind, Indian officials and representatives need to urgently answer two questions: first, what are the greatest risks to India given this deal, and second, how best can these risks be mitigated?

This article paper begins by providing an assessment of the strategic risks to India, in the context of the withdrawal of U.S.-led troops from Afghanistan and the possibility that the peace agreement may result in parts of the Taliban returning to Kabul. It then provides a short overview of the current peace talks and how they have been viewed in India. Next, the article presents three sets of strategic actions that could, at least in part, mitigate the risks in question. These actions include adopting a broader diplomatic engagement strategy that accounts for the need to more urgently engage with all parties to the current conflict; continuing to economically support the democratically elected Afghan government and escalate military assistance to the Afghan National Security Forces; and lastly, working with and through other countries invested in Afghanistan's future.

After examining why each strategic action might be necessary—to "make the case," as it were—the paper discusses how to implement these actions, including what policy calibrations will be necessary for long-term mitigation. The paper ends with a short conclusion laying out the potential risks and costs associated with the actions and why these might be more acceptable today because of the U.S. withdrawal and the fast-changing nature of the conflict in Afghanistan.

A caveat is in order: we, the authors of this policy paper, are deeply cognizant of Henry Kissinger's lasting words: "The analyst can choose which problem he wishes to study, whereas the statesman's problems are imposed on him." Our aim, as researchers, is to examine only what we can observe. Our analysis is based on trends that we see, and conversations that we have been privy to, through interviews, track 2 meetings, and other meetings between 2008 and the present.

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Though this article offers specific prescriptions for action, its aim, ultimately, is to stimulate debate. In writing it, we are more appreciative than it might seem of two more of Kissinger's dictums: "The statesman is only permitted one guess," and "the statesman must act on assessments that cannot be proved at the time that he is making them." In short, the aim of this paper is not to second-guess policy decisions made in the past but to offer a set of strategic actions for the future. As a close Afghan watcher who has spent the past decade tracking this conflict says, "The combination of America leaving, a divided government in Kabul, and now the [coronavirus] crisis" presents "newer and fast changing realities."

Lastly, John Lewis Gaddis's warning about history—that it has a "habit of making bad prophets out of both those who make and those who chronicle it"—remains equally true in contemporary times. This article is based on the premise that the United States will withdraw troops from Afghanistan at some point in the next two years and that the Taliban or parts of the movement, in some form or shape, will be politically represented in Kabul or, at the very least, be more involved than it is at present in Afghanistan's democratic politics as the troop draw down is completed. These are the foundational assumptions of our observations and analysis. Should they be wrong, we must be and are prepared to be called poor prophets.

Assessing Risks

Assessing risks is a risky business. The fields of social and cognitive psychology have a considerable body of literature on how risks are perceived and dealt with. There is general agreement that people in a particular empirical field "simplify reality" according to their schemata or the ways in which they choose to organize knowledge. Such would be the case even with Indian decisionmakers' reading of India's role in Afghanistan.

Further, the reality in question is dependent, as Robert Jervis has often reminded his readers, on perceptions. While the precise relationship between perceptions and reality is a question better left to academic debate, what is important from the point of view of a policy paper such as this one is to recognize that such a relationship exists.

An entity's perception of risks is, after all, connected to its interests, which, at least in part, are a function of its perceptions of emerging realities. George Kennan's famous Long Telegram was crucial to set the basis of containment at the onset of the Cold War exactly because he was able to identify that the Soviet leadership "relied on the fiction of external threat

to maintain its internal legitimacy." This "fiction" was the Soviet Union's postwar "reality." Hence, there was no point, according to Kennan, in attempting to win Stalin over by cooperation. In general, it could be said that India's aim should be to continue to have the ability to be represented in Afghanistan for a long time to come. A "degree of stability and security" allowing "us [India] to be engaged" in Afghanistan is how Rakesh Sood, a former Indian ambassador to the country and former special envoy for disarmament and nonproliferation, summarizes the fundamental elements of Indian interests.

What is it, then, that puts these interests at risk, especially at a time of withdrawal and peace negotiations?

For Indian decisionmakers, there is a well-founded schemata of the risks to India's interests. Whether observers agree or disagree with the validity of these risks, they are as real to India as the Trump administration's perception that it needs to withdraw from this so-called graveyard of empires. These risks are India's truths. They can be falsified by scholars and practitioners alike—in Washington, London, Islamabad, Berlin, Doha, and elsewhere—but these crystallized perceptions are a part of the Indian leadership's simplified realities and cannot be wished away by disagreement. From the Indian perspective, the question is how they can be mitigated.

Terrorism

The first set of risks has to do with the possibility of international and regional terrorism. One of the four guiding principles mentioned in the joint declaration between the United States and the Afghan government includes "guarantees to prevent the use of Afghan soil by any international terrorist groups or individuals against the security of the United States and its allies." However well-intentioned these words might be, there is little clarity on how these guarantees will be upheld. After all, the factions to be reconciled will also include those elements who have fronted the ISI's war against India from within Afghanistan. The evidence supporting this claim is overwhelming.

The Haqqani group, which continues to be the best armed and trained Taliban faction, has engineered and carried out attacks against Indian assets, including the Indian embassy in Kabul. "The US media," argues Myra Macdonald, "reported that Washington believed the ISI had provided support for the attack." Given the close connections between the ISI and the Haqqani

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leadership, it is highly likely that a reconciled Haqqani group will continue with its anti-India agenda. Sirajuddin Haqqani, a deputy leader of the Taliban, asserted in the New York Times that it is important to "maintain friendly relations with all countries and take their concerns seriously," but this does nothing to assuage the concerns of Indian security officials. As those who have long studied the Haqqani group confirm, the relationship between the group and the ISI is "still strong."

Lastly, the security vacuum created by the U.S.-led drawdown of forces has resulted in the rise of the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), a branch of the self-proclaimed Islamic State operating in South Asia and Central Asia. This group's ability to attract radicalized individuals, including from India, and recruit well-trained defectors from Taliban and Pakistani militant groups is a very real threat to India's future in Afghanistan and the region more broadly. An attack on a gurdwara (a place of worship) in Kabul, in March 2020—for which the IS-K claimed responsibility—is the most telling example of the very real security risks to India's footprint inside Afghanistan. That one of the four IS-K operatives who stormed the gurdwara complex was from Kerala, in the south of India, makes this threat all the more pressing for Indian officials.

Pakistani Influence

The second related set of risks has to do with the ISI's increasing influence in Afghanistan. The nexus between the Taliban (especially the Haqqani group) and the ISI underscores Pakistan's increasing influence within the country. The Taliban leadership may not always see eye to eye with the Pakistani state and the ISI, but the ISI's influence over the Taliban is undeniable. "They are our powerful watchmen" is how one former founding member of the Taliban summarized his relationship with the ISI. Given the potential of Taliban representation in Kabul in the near future, this state of affairs is naturally far from comfortable for India.

Divided Afghan Government

The third set of risks has to do with the perpetually divided Afghan government. While a semi-united government led by Ghani and Abdullah might have offered India some options for mitigating the risks mentioned above, such an arrangement seemed unlikely with both sides engaged in a months-long bitter rivalry while violence escalated. The recent political agreement between Ghani and Abdullah, while welcome, does not guarantee political stability. The two

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leaders, on opposing sides until very recently, will now have to find ways to work together. India will need to identify its own strategic actions and not rely on an Afghan-led approach on reconciliation, which carries the risk of disintegrating because of the sharply competing politics and the outsized battle of egos among Afghanistan's leaders. Relying primarily on the Afghan government for stability may have sufficed as a strategy until a decade ago, when discussions on withdrawal began to occupy administrative energies in Washington and London. To a degree, with some adaptations, it might even have worked until January 2017, when Trump inherited this long war. But, at present, it is simply untenable. "Ashraf and Abdullah" provide "no real equities for our [India's] long-term interests in Afghanistan," is how one former senior Indian official put it. "If you want to play a role," he made clear, "you have to build new equities, without forgetting those you [India] have supported for a long time."

While there is some agreement across different Indian government departments and agencies on the risks to India's interests—outlined in detail above—there is little clarity on how exactly these risks might be mitigated. In general, the approach so far has been to support the Afghan government economically as well as militarily through providing training and limited security equipment. If it is accepted that the majority of U.S.-led troops will soon leave Afghanistan and that there is even a slight chance of the Taliban being politically represented in Kabul, or at least playing a larger role than it currently does, such strategic actions may need to be revised. This is all the more pressing given that the U.S.-Taliban agreement is no longer a theoretical possibility. Its effects can be observed and even measured, as outlined below.

What is the Deal?

The initiation of formal talks on the U.S.-led withdrawal, coupled with the desperate need for international cooperation following the outbreak of the coronavirus, has led the Taliban to adopt a conciliatory tone in formal pronouncements. On March 17, 2020, a Taliban official stated that it was ready to "cooperate and coordinate" with the World Health Organization and other international entities "in combating the coronavirus." In the past, Taliban commanders have considered temporary ceasefires to allow vaccination operations in insurgent strongholds. It is clear today that the Taliban's broader diplomatic engagement has become all the more pronounced because of the complex, ongoing health emergency. But it is also clear that the pandemic will partially delay timelines set out in the agreement signed in Doha.

The central concern around the U.S.-led exit is not just about the withdrawal of the majority of troops from Afghanistan. It is equally about the minimal force structure that might be left behind for counterterrorism missions. As of now, there is no clarity on the latter. As Joshua White, a former director in the U.S. National Security Council, puts it, estimating the exact number of troops to be left behind is like entering a "world of unknowns." Promotion of democracy, civil liberties, and women's rights play a limited role in the United States' decision to leave quickly. Whether one calls this a withdrawal agreement or the initiation of a peace deal, the proclamations on paper will have some effect on the ground. As it is written, the deal does not insist on a reduction of violence upon signing. In fact, the rising levels of violence in Afghanistan soon after the Taliban applauded the Doha agreement has left the U.S. administration expectantly undeterred.

Unlike in 2012, when the last round of talks commenced and then failed, in Doha in 2020, the Afghan government and all major stakeholders appear to have been brought on board. "This is exactly the kind of process that we would have wanted to follow eight or nine years ago," argues an official intently involved in the 2012 negotiations. He states that then U.S. president Barack Obama "was not willing to go ahead with the Taliban [in terms of talks]" because "there were many more red lines to consider, including the role of women and democratic rights." Furthermore, "the Afghan government had more of a hold on the talks, making them difficult to proceed with." This time, he makes clear, "it's good that the Americans got past that point." As Barnett Rubin, a former senior adviser to the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (2009–13), puts it, there was "no political constituency for supporting negotiations with the Taliban." The fact that "Holbrooke [the U.S. special representative under Obama] hated Karzai" could not have helped. The only successful track for reconciliation during this time was the one engineered by Karzai himself—that is, the outreach to former prime minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an action that was "initially opposed" by the U.S. government.

Given all the history, it is "amazing that Khalilzad has been able to crack on," says a serving British official. This is not to say that the deal has active support from all quarters in Afghanistan—rather that every effort was made by the United States and, in particular, Zalmay

Khalilzad to invite support for the agreement from sections of Afghanistan's leadership that have historically opposed talks with the Taliban.

In essence, what was signed in Doha and agreed upon in Kabul was a detailed framework for a process that is, theoretically, meant to lead to a lasting settlement. The agreement is divided into two parts. As per the first part, the Taliban are expected to provide "guarantees" and spell out "enforcement mechanisms" to ensure that Afghan soil is not used by any group working against the "security of the United States and its allies." And indeed, after the agreement, Taliban spokespersons have not missed an opportunity to publicly stress that they do not want any "foreign outfit using Afghan soil to target any country."

In turn, the United States is expected to provide guarantees, outline enforcement mechanisms, and announce a "timeline for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan." In a secret annexure, according to those who have followed reconciliation attempts since at least 2004, the United States has outlined plans detailing which "military bases will be shut and by when" as the peace talks proceed. This is essentially a "ticktock of the drawdown," as Joshua White argues. These details have only been shared with select U.S. legislators.

Following this reciprocal process of providing guarantees, the Taliban were meant to begin "negotiations with Afghan sides" on March 10, 2020. These negotiations were intended to outline the "modalities of a comprehensive and permanent ceasefire" and what would potentially become a joint Taliban–Afghan government "political roadmap for Afghanistan." A crucial part of this process includes a steady withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan—from the current 13,000 troops down to 8,600 by July 12, 2020, or 135 days from the signing of the agreement. This, one observer suggests, "appears to be on track." By April 30, 2021, or fourteen months from the signing of the agreement, the United States and other coalition forces are supposed to completely withdraw from Afghanistan.

The withdrawal timetable is intended to run in parallel with a plan for the release of both Taliban prisoners held in Afghan jails (up to 5,000 in total) and Afghan government and military personnel held in Taliban captivity (1,000 in total). "This was thrown into the agreement in the last minute by Khalilzad," an expert following the negotiations argues, "to get the deal over the line."

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According to Dawood Azami, a BBC journalist and a regional expert, 1,500 Taliban prisoners are supposed to be released in the near term. Following the beginning of negotiations within Afghanistan, 200 Taliban prisoners are to be released every week thereafter. This process apparently started in the middle of April 2020 and was facilitated by the International Committee of the Red Cross. By May 29, 2020, the United States is supposed to commit itself to working with the UN and other allies to remove members of the Taliban from a sanctions list. As per the second part of this agreement, further verifications are to be conducted to make sure that the Taliban remain detached from al-Qaeda. The Taliban have made clear that other groups that threaten the security of the United States and its allies "have no place in Afghanistan"; its commitment to ensuring this, too, will need to be verified. As mentioned above, the verification process has been kept a secret. The last step is for the UN to recognize and endorse the completion of the agreement. For a range of reasons, the timetable for this agreement is not being followed so far. According to experts, Ghani's desire for "full control" over the intra-Afghan peace process; his "immediate and expected refusal" to "agree to the prisoner swap," an important part of the "final deal that he was not fully consulted on by the Americans"; and the delays following the outbreak of the coronavirus have set these timelines back by a few months already. Apart from not being consulted on the section about prisoner exchanges, the Taliban argue that there is "no reason" for the delays from their end. The main issue, experts claim, is that all sides of the current Afghan government are continuing to "use the deal to get concessions" even after the United States and the Taliban have signed.

Frustrated with all the other sides involved in the agreement, on March 10, 2020, Pompeo stated that the Taliban's increase of violent attacks against Afghan civilians was "unacceptable." A few days later, clearly exasperated with the inability of the Afghan leadership to create a unified government in Kabul, Pompeo announced a review of aid assistance to Afghanistan, with the aim of reducing it by $1 billion. He provided an inducement at the same time, however: "Should Afghan leaders choose to form an inclusive government, that can provide security and participate in the peace process," he made clear, "the United States is prepared to support these efforts and revisit the reviews initiated today." Despite the delays, it remains possible that steps toward meaningful negotiations will commence in the near future. If Pompeo's billion-dollar threat is anything to go by, the United States will coerce those it can

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pressure in Kabul and those it has already shaken hands with in Doha to begin the process. To an extent, the pressure the United States is inflicting is paying off. On March 27, 2020, the Afghan government appointed Masoom Stanekzai, the Cambridge-educated former spy chief as the head of a twenty-one-member negotiations team. He is, according to an expert who has known him and has followed the peace process for a long time, "easily the best person" to take charge. It means, he argues, that the Ghani government is "now taking this very seriously." What also helps, argues a British official and close Afghan watcher, is that Stanekzai "knows the Taliban." On May 17, 2020, Ghani and Abdullah finally reached a power-sharing agreement. Accordingly, Abdullah, who at this point is considered to be close to Russia, has been made the chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation. He will lead the negotiations with the Taliban. What this means in practice, given the role that Stanekzai was supposed to play, remains unclear.

An Indian Reading

During his recent visit to India, Trump reportedly provided Prime Minister Narendra Modi with certain "guarantees" about Taliban reconciliation. "India need not worry" is how one official summarized Trump's message to Modi. Broad and ambiguous guarantees such as these are unlikely to satisfy the concerns of Indian officials—and neither should they. After all, these officials emphasize, with Trump, "anything is possible." Most Indian experts make clear that the deal is "entirely one-sided." Essentially, the argument goes, this is a withdrawal agreement that has left Afghanistan at the mercy of both the Taliban and Pakistan. The fact that U.S. legislators briefed on the more secret aspects of the deal have asked whether the Trump administration has basically handed Afghanistan to the Taliban will only strengthen Indian officials' belief that the deal is nothing less than a sellout. This is the majority view. Even those in India who have historically supported speaking with the Taliban are unconvinced by the merits of the agreement signed in Doha.

At least one former senior Indian official, who has spent considerable time in Afghanistan, views the current negotiations as a means by which the United States is seeking to "reposition itself." According to their reading, the Trump administration has reached the conclusion that a deal with the "Taliban may provide greater stability" in Afghanistan. The fact

that “Baradar is directly talking to Trump” is telling. Khalilzad, they argue, “really believes that a deal is still possible,” one way or another.

One person closely involved in the negotiations argued that Khalilzad “gave them [the Taliban] a lot of credibility”—in fact, more than was needed. He has made the Taliban believe, wrongly, that “they are more powerful than they actually are.” In turn, the Taliban are a lot more prepared today, argues a British official, than they ever have been. Khalilzad, the official emphasizes, “learnt the right lessons” from the “light touch” approach eight years ago. The bottom line is that the “Americans are willing to go where they weren’t in 2012.” It is increasingly clear that the Taliban, or some part of the group, will likely be a constituency in the political future of Afghanistan.

No doubt, the idea of dealing directly with the Taliban is a bitter one for Indian officials and the larger Indian population, and for good reason. This was the group that escorted terrorists into Pakistan following the hijacking of an Indian Airlines flight in 1999. As Arun Singh, the former Indian ambassador to the United States, recollects, during the hijacking, “it was painfully revealed to us that India had no outreach to the structures dominating Afghanistan then.” After all, the Taliban, supported by the Pakistani state, remained antagonistic to India throughout their time in power between 1996 and 2001. Equally, for Indian officials, there was little or no merit in engaging directly with the Taliban because of their close ties to the ISI. Further, one key Taliban faction, the Haqqani group, remains firmly anti-Indian. Supported by the Lashkar-e-Taiba, they have done the bidding of the ISI for a very long time. They, without a doubt, represent the best bet the Pakistani establishment has of playing a significant role in the future of an as-yet indeterminate Afghan state.

Further, Indian experts often make the case that talking to the Taliban is of no value given the organization’s near-complete reliance on the Pakistani state. After all, Taliban families continue to live under the close watch of the ISI, and Pakistani minders shadow Taliban leaders in their engagements with the international community. Nevertheless, the agreement is underway. And whether India likes it or not, some version of the Taliban will contribute to the future of Afghanistan’s political life. If India wants to protect its fundamental interests—of remaining engaged in Afghanistan and being able to support an independent government—it will

have to make some uncomfortable choices and reposition its strategic actions with a view to mitigating the risks identified by its own officials and diplomats.

As Rakesh Sood argues, there are two choices before the Indian government. First, it can "wait and watch" to see if Ghani and Abdullah are able to mend fences and provide a degree of political stability. Second, given the "enormous instability" that looms large, in order to remain "engaged in Afghanistan in the future," India may have to build "new equities." This will require India to be "actively involved" and, equally important, "to be seen to be actively involved" in a wider set of international and national conversations. This article strongly advocates the latter approach.

Conclusion

There are costs to every strategy of action. if india were to consider appointing a special envoy, speaking directly to the Taliban, and seriously consider escalating military assistance to the ANSF—both of which this article strongly advocates—it would no doubt invite opposition from the Ghani-led government (which itself is struggling with the question of Taliban negotiations), Pakistan (which remains opposed to everything India does in Afghanistan), and other quarters. though the situation is in flux, India will need to conduct a detailed net assessment of the political costs to its interests. the key will be to find an equilibrium between approaches to its strategy that are necessarily paradoxical, as such approaches often are.

However, the potential costs should not become excuses to ignore the urgent need to politically reassess the current shifts underway in Afghanistan. as much as the analysis in this paper has been based on a close reading of these shifting realities, it has also been written keeping in mind the Indian state's emphatic ability to pivot to "uncharted initiatives." india's recent history is full of examples where it took bold decisions, rather than, as a former indian national security adviser puts it, "letting sleeping dogs lie."

The Modi government has shown that it can "look beyond dogma," whether it is through a willingness to use force in pakistan; to build stronger relations with the middle east; to capture trump's imagination; to recognize Europe's importance in times of changing geopolitics; to embrace the fact that technology is central to international relations; or to rewire india's position within Asia. as Jaishankar states, "evidence strongly supports the view that India has advanced

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its interests effectively" precisely "when it made hard-headed assessments of contemporary geopolitics." he adds, "taking risks is inherent to the realisation of ambition."

It is time for such ambition to be tested in Afghanistan. it will mean taking risks, assessing costs, and expecting failures, but it will also mean doing everything possible to address very real challenges in a country that readily signed a treaty of friendship with india as far back as 1950. facts have to be taken for what they are. that Afghanistan is changing is a fact. that there is even the probability of the Taliban returning to Kabul, in some form or shape, is a fact. that the united states is leaving is a fact. it is not easy, as Kissinger argues, to change facts. what is more possible, as he has often made clear, is for facts to be used should you wish to do so.

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