

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Open Access

THE TALIBAN FACTOR IN INDIA'S NEW STRATEGIC APPROACH TO AFGHANISTAN

Shoislom Akmalov

Candidate of Political Sciences, Associate Professor, International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan, Uzbekistan

Abstract

This article is devoted to examining some of the changes in India's strategy towards Afghanistan and the reasons for establishing cooperative relations with the Taliban.

KEYWORDS: Taliban, Haqqani Network, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), Kashmir, Zaranj-Delaram road, Salma Dam, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Kunar River, Shahtut Dam.

INTRODUCTION

The current international relations system is facing unexpected changes. Along with traditional security threats, this system is increasingly viewed as an arena of intense competition between major power centers in the world order, determined by the desire to gain a "geopolitical share" of strategic territories. In particular, intense political events such as the withdrawal of US military forces from Afghanistan in 2021 and the re-occupation of Kabul by the Taliban movement, the Russia-Ukraine war that began in 2022, the Palestinian-Israeli war in 2023, and the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria in 2024 require states to assess today's international relations with new approaches.

Professor Abdusamat Khaydarov comes to the conclusion in his article that the basis of the current situation is the omissions and underestimation by the former government and Western countries of the role of cultural code of Afghans. It is noted that finding a compromise between the international community and the interim Government of Afghanistan, apparently, will not be easy and will require considerable efforts on both sides and time

(Khaydarov, 2023, p.85). The withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan as a result of negotiations between the US and the Taliban in 2021, and the subsequent capture of Kabul by the Taliban in August of that year, have created a worrying picture in India's foreign policy. In particular, it is becoming increasingly clear that India has changed its previous views in the regions close to its region and has begun to develop a new strategy. This can be seen in the example of relations with the Taliban government that currently rules Afghanistan.

METHODS

In the article, historical and comparative analysis methods were used.

RESULTS

The establishment of the Taliban government in Afghanistan

This is because concerns about Pakistan, India's traditional rival, re-establishing its influence in Afghanistan through the Taliban have created

unregulated, complex and ambiguous problems for the New Delhi leadership. The sudden end of the very close cooperation established with the Ashraf Ghani government that led Afghanistan before that was a painful situation for India. Moreover, the possibility of some proxy groups supported by Pakistan becoming active in Afghanistan and directing them towards Kashmir could further increase New Delhi's concerns.

According to some reports, the activities of a number of religious and political groups known for their methods of combat terrorism reflect Islamabad's strategic interests as a tool for waging a war against India in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Notably, Western intelligence officials attribute the July 2008 attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul to the Haqqani network (Waldman, 2010, p.17). The Indian Ministry of External Affairs also strongly condemned the terrorist attack on a Sikh religious minority temple in Kabul in March 2020 (India strongly condemns...). India is alarmed by the presence of another anti-Indian terrorist group in the Afghan conflict, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT). LeT, a loyal proxy of the Pakistani military more cohesive and lethal than JeM, was forged in the crucible of the anti-Soviet war. In 2008 the group carried out multiple attacks in India's financial capital of Mumbai that left 166 dead, including six Americans. In Afghanistan, LeT has attacked Indian diplomatic facilities, government employees, and aid workers. LeT augments the Taliban's capabilities with expertise and fighters. Yet LeT does not claim responsibility for the violence it perpetrates in Afghanistan to avoid provoking international pressure on Islamabad, according to former State Department intelligence analyst Tricia Bacon. Stephen Tankel, another terrorism specialist, writes that in addition to striking Indian interests, LeT's influx into Afghanistan enables ISI to gather intelligence on the "militant state of play across the border" (Zachary Constantino, 2020, p.6.).

India was a key donor to Afghanistan, and the cumulative level of commitment of Indian assistance to Afghanistan amounted close to US\$3 billion. The Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between India and Afghanistan in 2011

provided a further boost to the relationship. Most of India's development projects in the past could be broadly divided into four categories:

1. **Large Infrastructure Projects:** India initiated several medium and large infrastructure projects in its assistance program to Afghanistan, including the construction of a 218 km road from Zaranj to Delaram, a 220/110/20 kV sub-station at Chimtala and 220kV DC transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul. The inauguration of the new Afghan Parliament (2015) and the Salma Dam (2016), known as the Afghan-India Friendship Dam, located in the Herat province in western Afghanistan, were significant initiatives that were part of the Indian assistance.
2. **Humanitarian Assistance:** Indian efforts included the supply of wheat and commitment to regularly contribute to the Afghan Red Crescent Society for the treatment of Afghan children with Congenital Heart Disease.
3. **Capacity Building Initiatives:** This was a significant area of Indian assistance to Afghans, and critical initiatives included Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC) courses for Afghan Government officials, training via telecommunication at medical facilities, and Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) fellowships for Afghan students.
4. **Small Development Projects:** These were initiated in the fields of agriculture, rural development, vocational training, health, education, etc (Shalini Chawla, 2024, India adopts...).

It should be noted that India was one of the two countries that refrained from the situation in Afghanistan after 2021, in particular, the rapprochement of the neighboring countries with the Taliban and the establishment of dialogue with the Afghan Interim Government. One of them was Tajikistan from the Central Asian region, and the other was India from South Asia, and the position of these two countries towards the Taliban was associated with the consequences of Taliban's past policy (1996-2001). For example, the hijacking of an Indian Airline which was diverted to Kandahar (that was under the Taliban control) in Afghanistan

in 1999 remains a significant event in the history of India-Afghanistan relations under the first government of the Taliban (Raghav Ohri, 2021, 1999 Kandahar...). The traditional ties that Islamabad has maintained with the Taliban, in turn, Beijing also expresses sympathy for the Taliban interim government, which will not leave New Delhi without worrying that. The following points of view of the former Indian Foreign Minister Somanahalli Krishna clearly express Delhi's views on this issue: "Delhi does not recognize the "good" of the Taliban as there is not the "good" of the terrorists" (Akmalov, 2013, p.189-193). The historian William Dalrymple succinctly describes the dynamics among Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India as "three countries caught in a deadly triangle of mutual mistrust and competition" (William Dalrymple, 2013, A Deadly Triangle...).

India's Evolving Strategic Approach

It is worth noting that, de facto, the political, trade-economic, and other relations of the Taliban government with the neighboring countries of Afghanistan, as well as the growing tensions between Islamabad and the Taliban, including the transformation of the two sides from "brothers to rivals," prompted India's establishment to develop a new strategic approach towards Afghanistan. Tensions between the Taliban and Islamabad escalated due to the active involvement of the "Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan" (TTP) group, which created significant repercussions in the region. In response, Pakistan deported 1.7 million Afghan migrants and refugees from its territory in November 2023 (Hussain, 2023). In retaliation, the Taliban threatened to capture the lower valleys of the Kunar River in Islamabad and construct large fortifications in those areas (AmuTV). The intensification of relations between the Taliban and Islamabad opened up certain possibilities for New Delhi. In this regard, New Delhi began efforts to establish relations with the Taliban, aiming to support the group against Pakistan. India sent diplomats to Kabul in 2022 to renegotiate diplomatic relations and engage in talks with the Taliban. A brief historical analysis shows that the former Ashraf Ghani government, with India's assistance, had planned 12 dams along the Kabul

River. Naturally, the escalation of tensions between the Taliban and Islamabad has created an opportunity for India to make proposals to the Taliban to finance the construction of such dams. In 2022, Bharat Kumar, the representative of India in Afghanistan, held talks with the Afghan Minister of Urban Development and Housing, Hamdullah Nomani, and agreed to jointly implement the construction of the Shahtut Dam in Kabul (Vaishali, 2023). Abdul Qahhar Balkhi, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Interim Government of Afghanistan, in an interview with the "Indian Express" stated that since there are many and various projects of India in Afghanistan, but they have not been fully completed, the "Taliban" side aims to complete these works (Akmalov, 2024, p.109).

In November 2024, the visit of a delegation led by India's Special Representative for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, J.P. Singh, to Afghanistan, and the direct meetings with Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and Defense Minister Mullah Yaqub (Sachin Parashar, 2024), can be seen as a result of strategic changes in New Delhi's approach toward Afghanistan. During the meeting, the Taliban assured that there would be no threats from Afghanistan's territory to India, and the two sides agreed to cooperate on security matters (سنجر سهیل...).

DISCUSSION

It can be said that India's current approach to Afghanistan has changed due to the "Taliban" factor. This is primarily linked to India's strategic interests aimed at ensuring national security, and on the other hand, the tensions between Islamabad and the Taliban, which India sees as an opportunity. In turn, cooperation between the Taliban government and India not only helps accelerate international processes aimed at recognizing the Taliban-led government, but also serves as a significant catalyst for the country's reconstruction by attracting Indian investments into the Afghan economy. In this regard, the interests of both sides are now becoming increasingly aligned.

REFERENCES

1. Akmalov Shaislam. (2024) New Reality in Afghanistan: Indian Approach. The American Journal of Political Science and Criminology. Volume 6, Issue 1.
2. India strongly condemns the heinous terror attack on a Gurudwara in Kabul today // Ministry of External Affairs of Government of India.
<https://mea.gov.in/pressreleases.htm?dtl/32598/india+strongly+condemns+the+heinous+terror+attack+on+a+gurudwara+in+kabul+to+day>
3. Khaydarov Abdusamat. (2023) Strokes to the Causes And Consequences Of the fall of the Government of A. Ghani in Afghanistan. Вестник учёных-международников. 2023. № 1 (23).
4. Pakistani official warns of 'hostility' over Taliban's Kunar River dam decision. Amu TV, December 17, 2023. <https://amu.tv/76296/>
5. Vaishali Basu Sharma. Afghanistan 'Unleashes' Hydro Power on Pakistan; Dam on Kunar River Powers Taliban, Haunts Neighbors. EurAsian Times Desk. December 27, 2023. <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/afghanist-an-unleashes-hydro-power-on-pakistan-dam/>
6. William Dalrymple. "A Deadly Triangle: Afghanistan, Pakistan & India," Brookings Institution, June 25, 2013, <http://csweb.brookings.edu/content/research/essays/2013/deadly-triangle-afghanistan-pakistan-india-c.html>
7. Акмалов, Ш. (2013) Афганская политика Индии в контексте ее стратегических интересов в Южной и Центральной Азии. ЎзМУ Хабарлари, № 3/1, 2013.
8. Waldman Matt. (June, 2010) The Sun in the Sky: The relationship between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan insurgents. Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.
9. Constantiono Zachary. (January, 2020) The India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan. United States Institute of Peace, Special Report.
10. Raghav Ohri. (Aug 30, 2021) 1999 Kandahar Hijacking: Only one behind bars; real perpetrators still untried. Retrieved from https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/1999-kandahar-hijacking-only-one-behind-bars-real-perpetrators-still-untried/articleshow/85777240.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst
11. Hussain Abid. (22 November 2023) 'What's wrong?': The silence of Pakistanis on expulsion of Afghan refugees. Aljazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/22/whats-wrong-the-silence-of-pakistanis-on-expulsion-of-afghan-refugees>
12. Dr Shalini Chawla. (March 28, 2024) India Adopts a Cautious Middle Path in Afghanistan. Retrieved from <https://capsindia.org/india-adopts-a-cautious-middle-path-in-afghanistan/>
13. Sachin Parashar. (Nov. 7. 2024) In a first, Indian official holds talks with Taliban defence minister. Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/in-a-first-indian-official-holds-talks-with-taliban-defence-minister/articleshow/115035194.cms>
14. سنجر سهیل. سیاست خارجی هند و روابط با طالبان؛ رابطه استراتژیک، دکانداری نیست Nov 11, 2024
15. <https://8am.media/fa/indias-foreign-policy-and-relationships-with-the-taliban-strategic-relationship-is-not-shopkeeping/>