

JUNE 2020

# Dealing With the Taliban: India's Strategy in Afghanistan After U.S. Withdrawal

Rudra Chaudhuri and Shreyas Shende

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## Summary

An agreement signed between the United States and the Taliban on February 29, 2020, marks a milestone in America's longest ever war. Accordingly, the majority of U.S. troops are expected to withdraw from Afghanistan by the end of 2021. In turn, and if this agreement is successfully implemented, sections of the Taliban could be expected to play a larger role in Afghan politics. This is hardly desirable for a country like India. Indian assets in Afghanistan have been targeted by the Haqqani group, a major Taliban faction. India has also been able to invest in Afghanistan's future partially because of the presence of U.S.-led troops and the relative stability it brought. With this stability at risk, India needs to urgently reposition its priorities. In these fast-changing times, this paper identifies the risks to India's continued presence in Afghanistan and recommends a set of strategies to mitigate them.

The first risk has to do with terrorism. While the U.S.-Taliban agreement states that the Taliban will prevent terrorist outfits from operating on Afghan soil, there is little clarity on how the agreement will be verified and enforced. The second risk has to do with the growing influence of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, which shares an undeniable link with the Taliban, especially the Haqqani group. The third risk to India's long-term interests in Afghanistan has to do with the increasing political instability in Kabul. Notwithstanding a power-sharing agreement signed between Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and former chief executive Abdullah Abdullah, on May 17, 2020, it is clear that such alliances cannot be taken at face value.

An interlinked set of mitigation strategies could help India protect its interests:

- **Broader Diplomatic Engagement:** India should consider appointing a special envoy dedicated to Afghan reconciliation. The envoy can ensure that Indian views are expressed at every meeting, broaden engagement with the Afghan government and other political actors, and reach out to certain Taliban representatives.
- **Continued Training and Investments:** India should provide more military training to Afghan security forces and invest in longer-term capacity-building programs. It should actively support and invest in the National Directorate of Security (for example, by providing training and sharing intelligence). Finally, given the continued levels of violence and the impact of the coronavirus on the Afghan economy, India should expand its development assistance.

- **Working With and Through Others:** India should look to broaden its engagements with Iran and Russia, explore opportunities for cooperation (as limited as they might be) with China, and find common ground with the United States on Afghanistan's future. This does not mean forcing competing interests to align; it means investing in a wider diplomatic initiative with the view to carve out areas of convergence.

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

Whether observers like the agreement or not, it is a reality.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> The Democratic presidential hopeful, Joe Biden, has clearly stated that “we don’t need those troops there. I would bring them home.”<sup>6</sup> He argued that “any residual U.S. military presence in Afghanistan would be focused only on counterterrorism operations.”<sup>7</sup> This would mean no more than 5,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup>

Soon after Khalilzad signed the agreement with Baradar, U.S. President Donald Trump reminded journalists that “everybody’s tired of war.” The withdrawal, he stated, would “start immediately.”<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

The official Indian position on reconciliation supports “an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled process for enduring peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan.”<sup>14</sup> 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 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 paper 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.”<sup>15</sup> 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.

Though this paper 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.”<sup>16</sup> 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.”<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> This paper 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 drawdown 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.<sup>19</sup>

## 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup>

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.”<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>

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.”<sup>27</sup> Given the close connections between the ISI and the Haqqani leadership, it is highly likely that a reconciled Haqqani group will continue with its anti-India agenda.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> As those who have long studied the Haqqani group confirm, the relationship between the group and the ISI is “still strong.”<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup> An attack on a gurdwara (a place of worship) in Kabul, in March 2020—for which the IS-K claimed responsibility<sup>32</sup>—is the most telling example of the very real security risks to India’s footprint inside Afghanistan.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup>

## 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.<sup>35</sup> “They are our powerful

watchmen” is how one former founding member of the Taliban summarized his relationship with the ISI.<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup> The two 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.<sup>38</sup> 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.”<sup>39</sup>

While there is some agreement across different Indian government departments and agencies on the risks to India’s interests<sup>40</sup>—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.<sup>41</sup>

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.<sup>42</sup> 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.”<sup>43</sup> In the past, Taliban commanders have considered temporary ceasefires to allow vaccination operations in insurgent strongholds.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup>

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.<sup>46</sup> 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.”<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup>

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.<sup>49</sup> “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.”<sup>50</sup> 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.”<sup>51</sup> The fact that “Holbrooke [the U.S. special representative under Obama] hated Karzai” could not have helped.<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup>

Given all the history, it is “amazing that Khalilzad has been able to crack on,” says a serving British official.<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup>

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.”<sup>56</sup> 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.”<sup>57</sup>

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.<sup>58</sup> This is essentially a “ticktock of the drawdown,” as Joshua White argues.<sup>59</sup> These details have only been shared with select U.S. legislators.<sup>60</sup>

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.”<sup>61</sup>

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.”<sup>62</sup> 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.<sup>63</sup>

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.”<sup>64</sup>

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.<sup>65</sup> This process apparently started in the middle of April 2020 and was facilitated by the International Committee of the Red Cross.<sup>66</sup> 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.<sup>67</sup>

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;<sup>68</sup> his “immediate and expected refusal” to “agree to the prisoner swap,”<sup>69</sup> an important part of the “final deal that he was not fully consulted on by the Americans”;<sup>70</sup> and the delays following the outbreak of the coronavirus have set these timelines back by a few months already.<sup>71</sup> 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.<sup>72</sup>

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.”<sup>73</sup> 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.”<sup>74</sup>

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 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.<sup>75</sup> 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."<sup>76</sup> What also helps, argues a British official and close Afghan watcher, is that Stanekzai "knows the Taliban."<sup>77</sup> 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.<sup>78</sup> 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.<sup>79</sup> 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."<sup>80</sup>

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.<sup>81</sup> 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.<sup>82</sup> 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.<sup>83</sup>

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.”<sup>84</sup> 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.”<sup>85</sup> 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.<sup>86</sup> As Arun Singh, the former Indian ambassador to the United States, recalls, during the hijacking, “it was painfully revealed to us that India had no outreach to the structures dominating Afghanistan then.”<sup>87</sup> 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.<sup>88</sup> Supported by the Lashkar-e-Taiba, they have done the bidding of the ISI for a very long time.<sup>89</sup> 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.<sup>90</sup> 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.<sup>91</sup> This paper strongly advocates the latter approach.

## Mitigation Strategies: Broader Diplomatic Engagement

### The Case

Successive Indian governments have been consistent in lending support to an Afghan-led reconciliation process. In 2011, the Congress-led government of then prime minister Manmohan Singh took what was considered a “leap of faith” when it supported such a program.<sup>92</sup> India’s commitment continues to the present day. In a letter delivered to Ghani a day before the Khalilzad-Baradar pact was signed, Modi wrote, “We also remain committed to our principled position of support for an inclusive Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace and reconciliation process.”<sup>93</sup>

The strategy of working primarily through the Afghan government has, for a long time, been an unrealistic one. That Ghani and Abdullah cannot agree on a unified vision for the state, and until very recently on a national government, is not surprising. In a bizarre development, on March 9, 2020, both Ghani and Abdullah held parallel presidential swearing-in ceremonies in Kabul. Although Ghani was declared the winner of the 2019 presidential election by the country’s Independent Election Commission, Abdullah cried foul and created his own “inclusive government.”<sup>94</sup> Even Khalilzad could not broker peace between the two Afghan leaders, argues Abdullah Khenjani, the former editor-in-chief at Tolo TV, an Afghan television station.<sup>95</sup>

For Pompeo, according to a longtime Afghan watcher, “Ghani lost credibility” as a result of the increasingly divided state of politics in Kabul. There is, according to this expert, “a significant cooling” in the U.S.-Ghani relationship. He argued that though “you won’t see the Afghan administration crumble,” new configurations will emerge in this time of instability.<sup>96</sup> The failure of Afghan leaders, some experts argue, has not only negatively impacted the credibility of the Afghan political class but also “its legitimacy.”<sup>97</sup> The May 17 agreement may have returned a degree of legitimacy to both Ghani and Abdullah, but whether or not this will actually lead to stability is questionable. Given the acrimonious recent past, whether or not they will be able to agree on matters of national importance, such as dealing with the Taliban,<sup>98</sup> or broader governance issues like the appointment of provincial governors, are political tests that cannot be banked on. In sum, for India, the urgency of adopting a broader diplomatic strategy is as pressing today as it was prior to the Ghani-Abdullah agreement.

Afghan insiders like Khenjani, who have historically been well disposed toward India, argue that “New Delhi waited too long on the peace process” and that despite its “enormous leverage and capital” in Kabul, it consciously pushed itself to “irrelevance.”<sup>99</sup> An attendee at the signing ceremony in Doha argues that India’s official position—that it will work only through the Ghani-led government and not “annoy” it—has “distanced” India from a process that is shaped only in part by

Ghani.<sup>100</sup> Ghani and Abdullah realize that the Afghan government has limited agency in seeing the deal through.<sup>101</sup> That “Ghani has less leverage” now than before in this entire process and in the agreement is clear to experts and practitioners alike.<sup>102</sup>

In short, it is becoming increasingly apparent with each passing day that the strategy of working through the Afghan government needs to be adapted. Senior Indian officials who have long followed the politics of Afghanistan suggest that if and when direct negotiations between the Taliban and the democratic government in Kabul begin, it would be prudent for India to “visualize scenarios” that would require “spreading the net wide,” including “within parts of the Taliban” in the context of such a peace process.<sup>103</sup> Other Indian experts state bluntly that, for India, talking to the Taliban before it is a “part of the formal governing arrangement” is “the only way forward.”<sup>104</sup> At the same time, engaging in talks with certain sections of the Taliban does not mean playing a central role in an otherwise uncertain process—in fact, it is not clear whether India can or should do this. Rather, it would mean seeking to ensure that India’s voice and concerns are represented in every opportunity for dialogue and retaining the advantage of building bridges.

As Lawrence Freedman concludes in his masterly account of conflict in the Middle East, all too often states tend to “describe enemies in overly stark terms.” More often than not, they view them as “having an unrealistic homogeneity” and miss out on “their internal conflicts and potential for implosion.”<sup>105</sup> Directly speaking with those in the Taliban who are able and willing to listen would allow India the advantage of making the best of the political implosions that are likely to occur in the future.

As far as the Taliban’s ability to engage with India is concerned, Azami, who was present in Doha in February 2020, argues that “the mainstream Taliban is very careful with India.” They are not always, he suggests, as “trapped by their Pakistani handlers” as it might seem. There are parts of the Taliban, he makes clear, that “are open to working with India.”<sup>106</sup> Interviews with Taliban commanders and former Taliban officials suggest that there is a smaller, older, and still effective part of the insurgency that is open to talks with India.<sup>107</sup> One former Indian official who supports adopting a broader diplomatic strategy in Afghanistan argues that “engaging with both the Kabul- and Doha-based elements of the Taliban” makes sense only when the Ghani-led government directly negotiates with the Taliban.<sup>108</sup>

However, as this paper makes clear, a revised diplomatic strategy should include talking to sections of the Taliban as soon as is possible. As David Loyn, an expert on Afghanistan, argues, with the “prisoner releases being authorized and put in practice,” and with the appointment of Stanekzai and then Abdullah to lead the negotiations on behalf of the government in Kabul, “the prospect of some Taliban representation in Kabul is more likely than it has ever been.”<sup>109</sup> This is the reality that India

faces. This is not to say that the state administration in Kabul will weaken to the extent of irrelevance—“this is highly unlikely,” according to Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, a former Indian ambassador to Afghanistan. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), supported by a staunchly anti-Taliban administration, is well capable of continuing to support the democratically elected leadership in Kabul, he suggests. Mukhopadhyaya also underlines that his views on Afghanistan’s future “are not necessarily in consonance” with those presented in this paper.<sup>110</sup> But the potential of change and challenge is worrisome, and this is where India needs to do more to prepare for the future.

This is not to suggest that a wider and a better-networked approach will in any way directly give India an opportunity to offset the risks described in this paper. Rather, India must seek to diversify its equities in Afghanistan, including with parts of the Taliban. India will need to carefully consider who in the group it will engage with. To plan these advances, it can rely at least partially on past experiences. According to Avinash Paliwal, the author of a substantial book on India and Afghanistan, “India has,” in the last few years, “reached out to the Taliban.”<sup>111</sup>

Whether it is through Afghanistan’s National Directorate of Security (NDS) or on their own, Indian intelligence agencies have long had contacts with various factions within the Taliban. Turning these sporadic intelligence-led outreach operations into a sustainable diplomatic strategy will require administrative reorganization.

Pivoting to these new realities will have the added advantage of also capitalizing on what Freedman describes as the fundamentally “argumentative” nature of radical groups like the Taliban. Here, it is worth keeping in mind what Freedman refers to as one of the truisms of radical insurgent groups: their “capacity” to “fracture and overplay what are often poor hands.”<sup>112</sup>

## Policy Calibrations

India might consider appointing a special envoy dedicated to Afghan reconciliation. A serving senior diplomat in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) or a retired ambassador with experience in Afghanistan would be the ideal choice. The envoy could make sure that India’s views are heard at every meeting and conference on reconciliation. Further, the special envoy could look to enter into discussions with Taliban representatives or former representatives who have not been disowned by the movement. Such Taliban influencers are easy to access and are open to dialogue with Indian officials.

To be sure, the question of whether or not Indian representatives should directly engage with the Taliban has been debated in India for years.<sup>113</sup> The idea of a special envoy has been “floating around for a long time,” within the MEA as well as India’s National Security Council (NSC). It is, according to some former officials, “positively necessary.”<sup>114</sup>

As mentioned above, Indian intelligence officers have connected with Taliban fighters in the past—through the NDS as well as through Iran.<sup>115</sup> These contacts were largely established to help secure the release of kidnapped Indian engineers and personnel working in Afghanistan. For instance, retired Indian officials met with former but influential Taliban leaders for talks in London as far back as 2011.<sup>116</sup> Even as recently as 2018, during peace talks with the Taliban in Moscow, India was represented by two former senior diplomats at a nonofficial level.<sup>117</sup> Reportedly, India coordinated its participation in Moscow with the Afghan government.

In addition to ensuring that India is heard, an envoy committed to reconciliation could keep abreast of the fast-moving changes within Afghanistan and remain in constant touch with once staunchly anti-Taliban leaders in the Afghan government who have now offered rhetorical support for the peace process. For instance, in an article he authored in *Time* magazine, Afghan Vice President Amrullah Saleh, who was targeted by the Haqqani group in a daring attack on the first day of his political campaign in 2019, has advocated for the need to “change the past and make ourselves peace builders.”<sup>118</sup>

In the past, Saleh had routinely warned international visitors and the Afghan government of Pakistani duplicity and had argued that speaking to the Taliban was futile.<sup>119</sup> Yet, today, whether “he likes it or not,” it is clear that he cannot afford to “resist the U.S. demand for peace talks,” according to those who have known him for a long time.<sup>120</sup> Interviews with those from the Panjshir Valley, Saleh’s home base, suggest that he is still a “strong anti-Pakistani voice,” but even he “can’t openly challenge the Taliban and their supporters in Pakistan the way he used to.”<sup>121</sup>

There are many in Saleh’s camp, in northern Afghanistan, who are unwilling to support any form of reconciliation with the Taliban. In addition to connecting with external actors and the Taliban, the envoy would need to keep channels open with detractors, many of whom have helped India greatly in the past. Partially centralizing such advances around the office of one dedicated envoy would help form a bridge for the many departments that deal with Afghanistan, improve coordination on India’s position, and help preserve institutional memory. It would also allow other external actors to connect with one central office when it comes to Afghanistan, rather than working through multiple Indian agencies and ministries.

There is, according to former senior Indian officials, “a strange resistance” to the appointment of a special envoy. Bureaucratic turf-protection is cited as the most common reason for the objection.<sup>122</sup> No doubt, a position such as this requires the support of the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), the MEA, the NSC, and the embassy in Kabul. A special envoy would need an office space where she or he could, as and when necessary, study classified cables and access files. This would need to be in a government office. According to Shakti Sinha, who was the private secretary to former Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and also the head of development and governance in the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the position would require the “complete support of the prime minister.”<sup>123</sup>

This will not be easy. Take the case of Satinder Lambah, former Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh’s special envoy on Pakistan. Lambah shaped what came to be called the “four-step formula” for peace between India and Pakistan.<sup>124</sup> He enjoyed the support of the prime minister. Yet he was often received with curt welcomes from senior diplomats within the MEA. Whether he was visiting Kabul or Bonn, Germany, he could not be sure of receiving “support on the ground” from within the Indian administration.<sup>125</sup> As Rakesh Sood puts it, getting “support from different parts of government” is “the most difficult part of the job.”<sup>126</sup> Indeed, even as special representatives in the United States have learned, positions such as these are as much about jostling internally as they are about being effective externally—a balance that is perilously difficult to get right.<sup>127</sup> Khalilzad is perhaps one of the few envoys who has mastered the art of bureaucratic politics of this nature.

In India, there is precedence for such a position. In 2015, the current government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi appointed the former director of the Intelligence Bureau, Asif Ibrahim, as special envoy for counterterrorism and extremism.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, following the Indian general election in 2019, the MEA has demonstrated an incredible ability to pivot to new administrative structures,<sup>129</sup> free up time and space for strategic thinking by appointing empowered additional secretaries, and bring on board senior experts of the rank of additional secretary as policy advisers.<sup>130</sup>

If there is an MEA that has an appetite for risk-taking and out-of-the-box solutions, it is the one in place today. If the term “special envoy” is the problem, the position could perhaps instead be titled the senior policy adviser to the foreign minister. No matter what administrative formula works best, what will be essential, according to a person who has held the post of special envoy in the past, is a degree of “strategic clarity” on the scope of the position and the authority that derives from it, coupled with “the support of the prime minister.”<sup>131</sup>

## Mitigation Strategies: Continued Training and Investments

### The Case

In mid-November 2001, only six weeks after the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan began, a team, led by Lambah and including Arun Singh and Mukhopadhaya, was headed to Kabul to open the Indian embassy after a hiatus of five years. Singh was then a joint secretary in the MEA and later became the Indian ambassador to the United States. The embassy had been hurriedly closed in September 1996, following the Taliban's march into Kabul.<sup>132</sup> Mukhopadhaya was to serve as the first Indian chargé d'affaires in a "liberated" Afghanistan. He would return to the country as the Indian ambassador in 2013. In his two-decade long engagement with the country, the only constant feature, he argues, was the high potential for "sudden surprises."<sup>133</sup>

While a special envoy or adviser might be charged with centralizing India's approach to reconciliation, to support democratic forces within the country, it will also be critical to continue to train the ANSF and provide development assistance to Afghanistan. By supporting such forces, through the Afghan government and the administrative states, India can greatly improve its chances of mitigating the risk of capitulation and the growing risks of international and anti-Indian terrorism.

The growth of international terrorist groups operating out of Afghanistan has been a key concern for Indian officials. Between 2001 and roughly 2012, Indian sleuths focused on groups such as al-Qaeda, the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and the 313 Brigade, led by Ilyas Kashmiri.<sup>134</sup> Killed in a drone attack in June 2011, Kashmiri was a contact for David Headley, the one-time U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency informant who ran surveillance operations for the LeT in Mumbai, India's financial capital, prior to the terrorist attacks on the city in 2008.<sup>135</sup> Reportedly, even Osama bin Laden attended an "extraordinary planning meeting" in Pakistan between the ISI, LeT, and al-Qaeda on the Mumbai attacks.<sup>136</sup>

The fact that Headley received directions from the Pakistani ISI is beyond doubt.<sup>137</sup> Further, it is indisputable that both the LeT and the 313 Brigade sheltered Taliban fighters in Pakistan.<sup>138</sup> The intermingling of these organizations, as well as the permanency of the Haqqani group, continues to present a nightmare scenario for Indian agencies.<sup>139</sup> That Sirajuddin Haqqani—a designated "global terrorist" on the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation's Most Wanted list—authored an op-ed in the *New York Times* on the conditions for peace almost defies belief.<sup>140</sup>

Since 2012, Taliban leaders have claimed that it is “a given” that they will delink from groups like al-Qaeda. This, they suggest, became a lot easier after the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011.<sup>141</sup> The Taliban has been less clear about its association with the LeT, whose members Taliban commanders have often passionately referred to as “freedom fighters.”<sup>142</sup> LeT fighters have also been found on the battlefield in southern Afghanistan.<sup>143</sup> According to Joshua White, “the LeT is a marginal threat to the U.S. homeland and its treaty allies.” It is unlikely that the role of the LeT is of “major importance” in the current negotiations with the Taliban. “India,” he argues, “will need to fight for its own interests.”<sup>144</sup>

One of the main efforts of the special envoy, and the Indian government more generally, could be to convince the United States to adopt a wider view of terrorism as the negotiations with the Taliban fructify, including on questions such as the role of the LeT in Afghanistan. Though India may not immediately see outcomes from this effort, greater engagement has more upsides than remaining on the margins. Further, by engaging in a wider set of discussions on the peace talks, the envoy could ascertain the exact role that the anti-Indian Haqqani group will play in the future of Afghanistan. After all, this is a group that will, without doubt, continue to be closely associated with the ISI.<sup>145</sup>

In addition, the growth of the IS-K is of vital interest to Indian officials. Its first recorded activity dates back to 2015.<sup>146</sup> In 2019 alone, the UNAMA attributed 157 terrorist incidents to the IS-K. They resulted in over 300 civilian deaths and left more than 900 injured.<sup>147</sup> Reportedly, the IS-K includes individuals who have defected from the Taliban, former members of Pakistani militant groups like the LeT, and younger and more radical individuals who see little merit in peace. These include radicalized Indian nationals,<sup>148</sup> including one who was involved in the attack on the gurdwara in Kabul on March 25, 2020. The attackers were subsequently killed by Afghan security forces.<sup>149</sup>

The Indian operative came from Kerala, in southern India. If the IS-K continues to grow in strength, the possibility that Indians will be radicalized remains high, according to officials. The IS-K has a proven ability to radicalize individuals, such as those from India who have spent time in the Persian Gulf.<sup>150</sup> Equally, Indian security practitioners worry about the very real risks associated with returning Indian IS-K fighters.

It remains unclear who financially supports the IS-K. According to a former director in the NSC Secretariat, “the IS-K is a creature of many parts, sometimes acting with the Taliban, sometimes violently against it, sometimes prioritizing business operations, and at all times, opaque about who it takes orders from.”<sup>151</sup> After the Doha meeting, reports from the eastern Afghan province of Kunar highlighted the fact that disaffected Taliban fighters were being recruited into IS-K.<sup>152</sup> Many of these erstwhile Taliban fighters disagree with the efforts at peace led by their one-time leaders in Doha, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. “These groups of disaffected fighters,” argues White, are the “most dan-

gerous” parts of the IS-K’s growing footprint within Afghanistan.<sup>153</sup> The IS-K’s operational-level alliances are murky at best. According to Hanif Atmar, a former Afghan national security adviser, the Taliban are allied with the IS-K in the north of Afghanistan.<sup>154</sup>

In other areas, there is growing evidence of a sharp divide between the Taliban and the IS-K. In fact, according to one expert, “there are increasing numbers of credible reports that the U.S. military and the Taliban are actively coordinating operational activity against the IS-K.”<sup>155</sup> This perhaps partially explains why Trump has unhesitatingly labeled the Taliban as “tough people” who he expects will fight the IS-K alongside Afghan forces.<sup>156</sup> Whether this is actually possible in the long run after the withdrawal of U.S.-led troops is another matter altogether. Will the Taliban continue to fight the IS-K following the withdrawal? Will the Haqqanis refrain from attacking Indian assets? Will the Taliban leadership be able to honor its pledge to remove all “foreign outfits,” including the LeT, from “Afghan soil”?

### Policy Calibrations

To mitigate the very serious risks associated with these questions, whose answers are difficult to ascertain, India will need to make its support to the ANSF a priority. Although placing boots on the ground would do nothing for India, as the potential costs would massively outweigh the estimated benefits, India could continue to provide much needed military support to Afghan forces. India began training Afghan troops on Indian soil as far back as 2003 and has since then trained thousands.<sup>157</sup> India offers tailor-made courses on “Military Policing Cadre” for the Afghan National Army.<sup>158</sup> It also offers courses for capacity building and professional enhancement.<sup>159</sup> In late 2019, India provided basic weapons training and leadership skills to an all-women batch of the Afghan army and air force for the third year in a row.<sup>160</sup>

To derive the full benefits of the initiatives outlined above, according to Indian intelligence officers, India could offer a detailed “long-term capacity building” plan with a funding commitment for the next five years.<sup>161</sup> Accordingly, training will need to be designed over the long term. Paliwal suggests focusing on special operations training. India’s Special Group, he argues, could be doing much more with its Afghan counterparts.<sup>162</sup> Having studied in detail the role played by successive International Security Assistance Force commanders in Afghanistan, Loyn argues that militaries quite easily adjust their training practices to achieve maximum effect. The “configuration of the U.S. training mission in Afghanistan,” argues Loyn, changed in 2014. The United States switched from focusing on training at the level of a corps command to the training of more “granular forces,” with a view to creating pockets of specialized cadres.<sup>163</sup> This kind of specialized training could easily be conducted by the Indian military and paramilitary on Indian soil.

Further, intelligence sharing will be a critical aspect of India's requirements before it undertakes future investments in Afghanistan. Since the U.S. administration remains ambiguous about sharing details on the Taliban's compliance—essential details in any peace deal—India will need to access this information on its own. India, according to a former senior U.S. NSC staffer, “has very deep ties to the NDS.”<sup>164</sup> It will remain an essential agency for India, and actively supporting and investing in its growth is in India's national security interest.

“The Afghan agency,” argues Paliwal, “is deeply militarized, but has limited research and analysis capability.” India has trained NDS officers in the past. It could, more easily than other countries, double down on these efforts. While there is always the risk of “ISI penetration,” strong vetting could overcome this challenge, he suggests.<sup>165</sup> Apart from providing military assistance, India has also invested significantly in Afghanistan.<sup>166</sup> Thus far, India has committed \$3 billion in assistance toward development.<sup>167</sup> While Indian aid is not at the same level as that provided by the West, its efforts are widely considered to be “cost-effective and relevant.”<sup>168</sup> Indo-Afghan cooperation has also created the conditions for an economic partnership that is growing steadily. Bilateral trade between the two nations is at \$1.5 billion.<sup>169</sup> Since the commencement of an air freight corridor in 2017, over 500 flights have ferried more than 5,000 metric tons of cargo directly benefiting Afghan farmers and small traders.<sup>170</sup>

To be sure, pivoting to a development-led strategy as far back as 2001 required a degree of creativity and drive. The United States, then, did not want too deep an Indian involvement. Indian diplomats, like Arun Singh, found themselves rethinking engagement strategies that would be “least controversial” and at the same time have the potential to “achieve tremendous impact.” Development goals initially focusing on “quick delivery” were the answer. India invested in buses, provided medicines, and later invested in large infrastructure projects. These decisions, taken at a time of rapid and dramatic change, were crucial in generating the goodwill that is so often directed toward India by local Afghans.<sup>171</sup>

More recently, following the outbreak of the coronavirus, India gifted 500,000 tablets of hydroxy-chloroquine and 100,000 tablets of paracetamol to Afghanistan.<sup>172</sup> Around the same time, India also gifted 75,000 metric tons of wheat to the country. The first consignment, consisting of 251 containers of 5,022 metric tons of wheat, routed via Chabahar port,<sup>173</sup> reached Herat on April 23.<sup>174</sup> India is also readying rapid response teams to help Afghanistan (as well as neighbors such as Bangladesh and Bhutan) deal with the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>175</sup> These teams will help set up coronavirus testing laboratories and train local medical professionals to fight the pandemic.

Currently, high levels of uncertainty within Afghanistan, coupled with the virus-hit economy in India, could strengthen the argument that India should simply wait and watch before investing further. But in fact, now more than before, India should make its presence felt through further development assistance. Continuing to provide training and assistance, and even escalating their levels, is a crucially important way to achieve India's long-term goal of being able to function in a relatively stable Afghan state.

## Mitigation Strategies: Working With and Through Others

### The Case

In July 2019, addressing the World Peace Forum in Beijing, former Afghan president Hamid Karzai told a room full of diplomats and journalists that the role played by China and Russia in Afghanistan's future is of "significant importance."<sup>176</sup> Karzai, who negotiators blame for dashing the prospects for peace talks in 2012,<sup>177</sup> then went a step further. China, Karzai made plain, can play the "role of [a] guarantor of [a] peace process after [the] U.S. exit from Afghanistan." Russia, he continued, could partner with China. He concluded by stating that "India, Pakistan, Iran and others" could be involved.

Karzai did clarify that he was not advocating Chinese "boots on the ground." He was suggesting greater Chinese involvement in "more political and diplomatic terms."<sup>178</sup> What exactly he meant by that remains unclear. The statement was startling to say the least, especially to the Americans and Indians in the audience. For most observers, Karzai oversold, by a wide mark, the potential role that China and Russia can actually play in Afghanistan.<sup>179</sup>

Yet it is clear that China and Russia want in. The Trump administration's retreat from internationalism (most evident in its preference for limited multilateralism and selective trade) has no doubt left vacuums to be filled by others. In the case of Afghanistan, every time the talks led by the United States have faltered, either Russia or China has stepped in. China and Russia's "influence on the Taliban and Pakistan," one observer argues, is "critical" in the peace process.<sup>180</sup> Another put it down as "modestly helpful."<sup>181</sup> Either way, it has been important. After all, both China and Russia want U.S. troops out and a stable government to be left behind.

How can India leverage these fault lines in an increasingly fragmented Afghanistan? The Indian embassy in Kabul, the MEA more generally, and various Indian agencies as part of their routine business, of course, remain closely connected with other countries and have been engaging with them about their interactions with Afghanistan. If the above risks are to be mitigated, India must center these activities around the office of a special envoy, agree to talk with parts of the Taliban, and use every available opportunity to secure India's primary goal of a stable Afghanistan. These imperatives are a lot more urgent today than they were even a year ago, precisely because of the withdrawal of U.S. troops.

This is why, according to Sood, "everyone is in dialogue with the Taliban."<sup>182</sup> Countries are hedging their bets. Some, like Iran and Russia, pivoted to these changing realities well before the talks in Doha even looked possible. To minimize risks to its long-term engagement in Afghanistan, and with a view to further developing its own equities before the withdrawal is completed (potentially sometime in late 2021), India could deepen a number of existing relationships.

### Policy Calibrations

First, it could continue to work through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) Afghanistan Contact Group. Established in 2017, the same year India became a full member of the SCO,<sup>183</sup> the Contact Group has held three meetings (in 2017, 2018, and 2019) to discuss the process of intra-Afghan reconciliation.<sup>184</sup> India participated in the meetings in 2018 and 2019. This forum affords India the possibility of some degree of cooperation even with China.

To date, Indian bilateral coordination with China to engage the Taliban has been nonexistent.<sup>185</sup> China, which is opposed to the presence of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, welcomed the signing of the peace deal in Doha.<sup>186</sup> Following the failure of the first round of talks in Doha in 2012, Chinese leaders hosted a Taliban delegation in late 2014.<sup>187</sup> In 2019, China held two meetings with the Taliban (one in June and another in September) just as talks between the United States and the Taliban broke down.<sup>188</sup> The one objective that is common to both India and China, at least to an extent, is that both the countries oppose the growth of the IS-K.

This commonality provides grounds for a degree of cooperation. To be clear, nothing can be expected from China as far as the growth of Pakistani-supported groups such as the Jaish-e-Mohammed and the LeT inside Afghanistan is concerned. Cooperation will need to be restricted to the IS-K. There is already a mechanism through which this can happen. At an informal trilateral Russia-India-China Summit in 2019, Modi designated the promotion of counterterrorism as a key area in which the three nations could coordinate.<sup>189</sup> This platform could focus narrowly on tracking the expansion of

the IS-K, exchanging intelligence (as limited as it might be) on the group's leadership, and potentially also on tracking its sources of funding. This is, of course, a difficult proposition given China's close ties to Pakistan, but there is no reason not to invest further in a mechanism that has the blessings of the three state leaders.

Second, India can do more with Russia. Ghani remains wary of Russia's advance, especially as the ties between Russia and sections of the Taliban have grown.<sup>190</sup> But these associations with Russia are exactly the kind that India may need, which will allow it to leverage the otherwise strong ties between the two countries. Russia's approach seems to have been to support the negotiations in Doha and also open a direct and official line of contact with the Taliban. In January 2017, Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval visited Moscow with the aim of securing a place for India in Russian-led discussions on Afghanistan.<sup>191</sup> This led to India's inclusion in what came to be known as the six-party talks, convened in February 2017, to discuss the future of Afghanistan.<sup>192</sup>

In early 2019, Moscow hosted two meetings with Afghan leaders.<sup>193</sup> When talks between the United States and the Taliban broke down later in the year, Russia hosted a Taliban delegation and urged them to "relaunch the negotiations."<sup>194</sup> Following the signing of the peace deal between the United States and the Taliban, the former put out a joint statement with Russia reiterating that peace can be achieved only through "an inclusive negotiated political settlement among Afghans."<sup>195</sup> Though Russia welcomes India's participation at forums to discuss the Afghan peace process,<sup>196</sup> it has worked in a limited capacity with India, a key reason for which has been India's reluctance to publicly engage the Taliban. If this impediment were to change, and India were to invest in a long-term risk mitigation strategy, there would be greater potential for cooperation with Russia, a strategic partner that India supported in Afghanistan, even during the trying years of the 1980s.

Third, Iran has served as India's best bet for intelligence collection in southern and southwestern Afghanistan.<sup>197</sup> Despite Iran's bitter history with the Taliban, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif stated that "it would be impossible to have a future Afghanistan without any role for the Taliban."<sup>198</sup> Iran has in the recent past reportedly lent active support to Taliban factions,<sup>199</sup> possibly with a view to ensuring that it has access to a future Afghan government with potential Taliban membership. It is, according to a senior Indian official, "politically the most important country in Afghanistan after the United States and Pakistan." They "can't be trusted," argues this official, who has years of experience working with Iran, but their "contacts are extensive" and very useful to India.<sup>200</sup>

Iran, argues another official, can "provide real-time intelligence on the Haqqanis and the Pakistanis."<sup>201</sup> Indeed, as Paliwal notes, Iran's engagement with the Taliban since 2015 has played a key role in breaking the movement's coherence. "Apart from U.S. airstrikes and ANDSF [Afghan National

Defense and Security Forces] ops,” he argues, “the biggest challenge Pakistan faced in its management of Afghanistan’s militant landscape was from Iran.” In the past, India has relied on Iran to “covertly reach out to select Taliban factions.”<sup>202</sup>

However, to make the best of this relationship in the near future, India will need to strengthen its strategic ties with Iran. Consider, for instance, its response to Iran during the coronavirus pandemic. Among the world’s democracies, India has been a leader in providing supplies to different corners of the globe.<sup>203</sup> Tellingly, and at the time of writing, Iran’s request for medical supplies is currently “under process.”<sup>204</sup> India’s muted response can be attributed to a downturn in its ties with Iran. While India has consistently attempted to balance its relationships with Iran and the United States,<sup>205</sup> recent and repeated Iranian criticism of India’s domestic policies has been a point of contention.<sup>206</sup> This is a relationship that will require greater diplomatic investment on both sides—welcome in itself, but particularly important because of the role Iran continues to exercise in Afghanistan.

Fourth, while the United States is in the driving seat at least for now, as far as reconciliation is concerned, there has historically been limited coordination between the United States and India. The reason, in one sense, is simple: as one Indian official in Kabul argued as far back as 2010, “the United States has always switched on and switched off when it comes to India, here in this country [Afghanistan].”<sup>207</sup> Between 2001 and 2009, the George W. Bush administration was resistant to Indian involvement in Afghanistan.<sup>208</sup> It was the new Afghan government in November 2001 that ensured India’s return to Kabul and unhesitatingly supported India’s presence in the country.

Between 2009 and 2014, Obama’s White House invested some effort in a regional approach.<sup>209</sup> The underlying idea was simple: instability in Afghanistan, according to Obama’s point person on the new strategy, was directly connected to instability in Pakistan and vice versa. The strategy was articulated in a white paper published in March 2009. A part of the strategy—although it was not explicitly mentioned in the white paper—was to try and build bridges between India and Pakistan.<sup>210</sup>

Pressured by Pakistan, the United States brought the conflict in Kashmir back into sharp focus for the first time since the early 1990s. During his presidential campaign, Obama spoke of the need for a U.S. special envoy to ease tensions in South Asia, with a view to convincing Pakistan, as he put it, “to focus on the biggest threat . . . coming from the Afghan border.”<sup>211</sup>

The Obama team’s hypothesis was, essentially, that “the road to Kabul runs through Kashmir.”<sup>212</sup> For Pakistan, the game plan was simple. This was an opportunity to once again internationalize the Kashmir dispute.<sup>213</sup> Endless track 1.5 and track 2 meetings were conducted in London, Oslo, Dubai, Istanbul, Berlin, Bangkok, and other places to support this process. The aim was to test the Kashmir-to-Kabul thesis, as well as explore the potential for peace in Afghanistan.<sup>214</sup>

These talks played a significant role in bringing important and challenging ideas to the table for consideration between Indian and Pakistani influencers and officials. They ultimately led to roundtables outside of Afghanistan, such as the one between Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef (the former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan) and Indian, Afghan, Pakistani, British, and American officials, former officials, and experts in London on the potential for reconciliation.<sup>215</sup> Zaeef had earlier, at Kabul University, organized a meeting between Taliban representatives and American officials.<sup>216</sup>

These discussions helped build bridges where none existed. But they also made clear that the idea of solving the Kashmir problem, with a view to easing Pakistani anxieties in Afghanistan, was simply too complicated. The effort paid no dividends. As the officials tried to follow through, all the approach did was aggravate relations between the United States and India, which blocked the strategy,<sup>217</sup> and also the United States and Pakistan, which remained disappointed by its failure. But as late as 2015, despite these failures, Obama-era officials argued that more should have been done to stabilize the region “by balancing power between India and Pakistan.”<sup>218</sup>

This context is crucial for anyone seeking to understand how Indian officials who have long worked on Afghanistan view the United States with regard to India’s interests in Afghanistan today. There is little doubt that much of Indian development activity in Afghanistan, from building roads to running hospitals, was possible because of the stability provided by the U.S.-led military footprint in the country. This they readily accept. But when it comes to actual cooperation today, the situation leaves much to be desired. According to White, “more could be done” to “coordinate the supply of military hardware to the ANSF.” Coordination on this front has been the practice in the past, argues the former director in the U.S. NSC.<sup>219</sup>

Everyday diplomatic engagement will, of course, continue on Afghanistan, in New Delhi, Washington, and Kabul. If, as this paper has suggested, a special envoy or senior adviser were to be appointed, more could be done to stay regularly in touch with both Khalilzad and his office as well as different parts of the U.S. administration focused on Afghanistan. At present, the engagement appears to be sporadic and very public. Following his calls with the Indian foreign minister, Khalilzad does not miss the opportunity to untactfully tweet about it or publicly declare that he “welcomes Indian engagement in regional and international efforts.”<sup>220</sup>

On a visit to New Delhi in May 2020, Khalilzad met with Foreign Minister S Jaishankar and Doval and noted that a key focus of his discussion was to get India to “take a more active role in the peace process.”<sup>221</sup> True to style, Khalilzad publicly stated that India is an “important force” in Afghanistan and even suggested that India should engage with all the key Afghan players, including the Taliban.<sup>222</sup> Speaking to sections of the Taliban might be necessary for India but not because of the U.S. imperative to sign onto an agreement with the view to withdraw from Afghanistan.

Despite the limited nature of cooperation on Afghanistan, and notwithstanding the recent historical contours that shape this process, there are three common aims and areas of interest between India and the United States: the desire for stability in Afghanistan, the need to identify the IS-K as the enemy, and the need to ensure that Afghanistan should not be used as a launch pad by international terrorists. The three areas of divergence and difference are the United States' reliance on Pakistan, its increasing reliance on the Taliban, and its muted response when it comes to Pakistani terrorist groups such as the LeT.

Keeping these convergences and differences in mind, the contours of which are unlikely to change in the near future, limited cooperation is more than possible today. Further, agreeing to speak to certain sections of the Taliban, appointing a special envoy to remain constantly connected with the multiple stakeholders on Afghanistan, and leveraging the close relationship between Modi and Trump—to the extent that this is possible—will be imperative when India designs its own path.

## 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 paper 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),<sup>223</sup> 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.”<sup>224</sup>

The Modi government has shown that it can “look beyond dogma,”<sup>225</sup> 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.<sup>226</sup> As

Jaishankar states, “Evidence strongly supports the view that India has advanced its interests effectively” precisely “when it made hard-headed assessments of contemporary geopolitics.” He adds, “Taking risks is inherent to the realisation of ambition.”<sup>227</sup>

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.<sup>228</sup>

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## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the following for their detailed reviews of the paper and their generous time corresponding with us on the same: Ambassador Rakesh Sood, Shakti Sinha, Ambassador Gautam Mukhopadhaya, Ambassador Amar Sinha, Ambassador Arun Singh, David Loyn, Joshua White, Avinash Paliwal, Christopher Clary, Suhasini Haidar, Abdullah Khenjani, Dawood Azami, and others in the United Kingdom, the United States, Afghanistan, and India who wish to remain anonymous.

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