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## Return of the Taliban and Evolving Socio-Political Milieu in Afghanistan: Implications for Indian Foreign Policy at 75

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### Abstract

In International Relations one cannot afford to lose sight of facts and that Afghanistan is changing is a fact of primacy and importance. This paper aims at providing a brief historical background to the Second Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, assessing and analysing the evolving socio-political scenario in the country between August and early October, 2021 before going on to present a roadmap prefiguring Indo – Afghan diplomatic options for the near future involving strategies of political recognition, trade, aid and soft power diplomacy, domestic capacity building at home as well as working with and through others in wake of such a stimulating development in world politics whose implications are likely to transcend the immediate.

**Keywords:** *Historical background, Socio-political dynamics, Political recognition, Trade, Aid and soft power diplomacy, Domestic capacity building, Working with and through others*

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### 1. Introduction

From Politics to the Pandemic, the world seems to be in a continuous flux, a product of rapid change and evolution South Asia seems no exception. If the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the British Imperial century, 20<sup>th</sup> the American Century, the 21<sup>st</sup> is certainly to be labeled as the 'Asian Century' aided by rapid economic progress and increased importance in global affairs catapulting the region to centrality in the arena of International Relations positing India and China as 'emerging world powers'. The rapid turn of events in Afghanistan with the advent of the Taliban 2.0 regime has captured the 'imagination of the world' vindicating, validating and reinforcing James William Fulbright's suppositions that "The cause of our difficulties in South Asia is not a deficiency of power but an excess of the wrong kind of power...". What led to the Second Taliban takeover? How has it impacted the country's socio – political milieu and its ties with major powers? What are India's options for diplomatic reconciliation with regime change in Afghanistan and how does it shape the contours of Indian Foreign Policy at 75? seem extremely vital questions awaiting answers.

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## 2. Literature Review and Methodology

Samuel P Huntington's pioneering work, "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order" embracing the 'civilizational paradigm' in hypothesizing a post-Cold War order with waning Western cultural hegemony in an inevitably multicultural world characterized by civilizational clashes, religion becoming a societal factor filling the vacuum created by a loss of political ideology. People "need new sources of identity, new forms of stable community, and new sets of moral precepts to provide them with a sense of meaning and purpose"—religion is able to meet these needs, the Afghanistan crisis may well be located in the interstices of Huntington's theorization of an unavoidable clash between the Islamic and Sinic civilizations and the West in absence of the common enemy of Communism. What explains the current developments since the second Taliban takeover, how far back in history one has to go in history to trace these developments, an overview of Thomas Barfield's "Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History", a 1970s ethnography of the land and its people, examining the pre-modern and modern forms of political regime and most importantly frequent interventions by foreign powers and the international community best understanding the country's problems by exploring whether they fit past patterns or where they break from them further cross-referred with Rashid Ahmed's "Descent into Chaos: The United States and Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia" reflecting America's foreign policy shortcomings in unleashing forces which it can no longer control not only attempting failed nation building projects but also converting them into global crisis zones which when corroborated with K P Fabian's account of "Afghanistan's Chequered History" shall apprise one with answers in painting a backdrop to contemporary developments demonstrating the vitality of the historical approach as a natural methodological outcome in view of largely unaltered underlying social structures wherein the past continues to be a reliable guide for the future.

Tracking momentous developments in wake of the hasty USA withdrawal and the spontaneous advance of the Taliban has required reliance upon media reportings—newspapers, digital media clippings as well as publications in reputed *International Affairs* magazines in addition to first hand narratives/interviews with activists on the ground including the likes of Mahboub Seraj as well as several seminars/webinars held by prominent scholars in the discipline around this time (August – October, 2021) to fill in the apparent temporal gaps in established literature, seemingly imperative in taking stock of the emerging contemporary socio economic scenario with particular reference to the cases of women, children and minorities under changed political realities exploring the linkages between body social and politic and in turn placing it within the larger realm of international relations lending an inter-disciplinary dimension to the research. An assessment of the concerns and priorities on the home front in both Afghanistan and India guided by neo-realist maxims for the 'domestic remains inseparable from the global' coupled with power play of major external actors—State and non-State, international as well as regional organizations across the world identifying possible areas of shared interest and cooperation thereby constantly reconciling and synthesizing between the neo-realist and neo-liberal paradigms, drawing upon enriching and engaging perspectives of scholars, diplomats and security experts including G Parthasarathy, Anil Wadhwa, Mohammad Zeeshan, Rudra Chaudhuri *et al.* reworking and customizing their frameworks to suit the needs of time in shaping the very contours of a possibly nuanced yet comprehensive wait and watch foreign policy between India and a Taliban 2.0 governed Afghanistan navigating through perilous diplomatic waters.

## 3. Historical Backdrop and Tracing the US Intervention

Serving as a 'corridor of strategic importance' linking South Asia with Central Asia and the Middle East, Afghanistan has remained a 'chessboard for the major powers'. Indeed the very regional categorizations are not natural or cartographical; they resemble a Eurocentric worldview—more Americanized in sync with contemporary IR vocabulary. Having witnessed the rise and fall of several dynasties popularly termed as the 'Graveyard of Empires', Afghanistan hasn't remained insulated from the conquests of Genghis Khan, the Mughals and conflict with the British as evident during the Anglo-Afghan Wars finally being recognized as the Emirate of Afghanistan in 1919, the starting point of Afghanistan's journey as a sovereign independent State. Trapped in the quagmire of the geo-political compulsions of the Cold War era, the Soviet intervention in 1979 proved to be the last nail in the coffin for 'detente' triggering off the New Cold War—the Reagan Administration proclaimed 'detente to be dead'. Financing an ethnic Islamic militia, the Mujahideens against the Soviets monetarily and otherwise, following the Civil War of the 1990s in a post Cold War era facilitated the entry of the First Taliban Regime (1996-2001). Influences external and beyond the seas continued to linger whereby an allegedly Taliban (the word meaning 'Students'—initially a product of students of hardliner

madrassas in neighboring Pakistan) sheltered Al-Qaeda led by Osama Bin Laden which masterminded the '9/11 Terror Attacks'—the deadliest attack on US soil since Pearl Harbor with a newly elected US President George W Bush launching the War on Terror followed by dismantling of the Taliban regime and a US military takeover with an interim Government in place—the advent of the longest War in US history.

#### **4. Timeline of Major Events Leading to the Second Taliban Takeover**

With Laden killed in a US military strike under the Obama regime, the then US President had promised to halve the troops by the time he left office in 2017 with the Trump Administration concluding the Withdrawal Deal (Doha Talks) in 2020. President Biden who assumed office in January, 2021 set August 31, 2021 as a 'non negotiable target' for a complete withdrawal declaring that the 'US and the World need to get their priorities right : the purpose in Afghanistan was counter-terrorism, never nation building'. As the withdrawal of US and NATO forces began, the Taliban moved swiftly and rapidly at lightning speed stunning the globe as city after city fell to the Taliban conquest with the local officers and soldiers reportedly bombarded with messages to surrender without a fight as the victory of the Taliban seemed inevitable plummeting their morale eventually going on to capture the capital of Kabul, in the evening hours of Indian Independence Day with images going viral on social media. The last two weeks of August witnessed 'frantic frenzies of people' especially Government Employees, Military Officials, US Diplomats, foreign nationals and students fleeing the country desperately as the horrors of Taliban 1.0 came back to haunt them. By then, the Elected Government had already collapsed and President Ashraf Ghani embraced the 'escape route seeking refuge outside the country'. Even Afghan nationals including minors and kids boarded planes not sure of their destination storming the tarmac of the Kabul Airport as thousands remained stuck during the evacuation process clearly hinting at an 'imminent humanitarian crisis'. Not just the US, other countries of the world were flying back their citizens too as air travel hadn't been suspended including Indian Aircrafts like C-17, C-130J airlifted more than 400 people as many others were intercepted on the way by the Taliban. The deadly explosions on August 26, 2021 which left hundreds of Afghans and at least 13 US soldiers dead, were condemned by the United Nations Security Council generating a 'red alert for combatting terrorism'. With the Islamic Republic in Khorasan Province (ISKP), another extremist terror outfit claiming responsibility for the bloodbath on the last Thursday of August, the US retaliated just two days later with a drone strike against members of the Islamic State (IS).

It would be erroneous to project the 'advance of the Taliban as unrestricted and unopposed' as protestors including women hit the streets symbolic of their defiance. The Northern Alliance and National Resistance Front headed by Ahmad Masoud and Amrullah Saleh, former Vice President and proved to be the 'last pillars of resistance', determined and unyielding in putting up a tough fight against Taliban capture of Panjshir located in northern Afghanistan thronged with mountainous terrain and craggy valleys but the 'rebellions were crushed brutally and mercilessly' as the Taliban celebrated the exit of the last US soldier hailing the moment as 'historic' followed by a victorious conquest of Panjshir in early September with life coming full circle replicating the Taliban takeover 25 years back. After a round of hectic parleys, the Interim Government—an all male cabinet was announced accommodating most factions of the Taliban with the religious preacher Hibatullah Akhundzada as Supreme Leader marking the advent of a new chapter. These events cannot be understood and analyzed in isolation for they are often closely intertwined with the evolving socio-political dynamics quintessential to contextualization and shaping of perspectives, allusions to which are sometimes evident and manifest while at other times, amorphous and latent.

#### **5. Interim Government Formation and Emerging Political Dynamics—Linkages to Body Social**

On September 7, 2021 the Taliban regime announced the formation of an Interim Government seeking to adopt the 1964 Constitution once prevalent under Muhammad Zahir Shah, the longest serving Emperor of Afghanistan since the foundation of the Durrani Empire. A conglomerate Cabinet of Old Guard and veteran hardliners came into being, many of whom had occupied important positions under the previous Taliban Regime with Mullah Hasan Akhund as Prime Minister and co-founder Abdul Ghani Baradar as his Deputy. Dominated by ethnic Pashtun's with some representation for the Tajiks and Uzbeks who seemed to have bolstered the ranks of the Taliban in recent years, the compromise was limited to accommodation of the various factions and units within the Taliban itself. Moreover, this Constitution once envisaged to be a document for 'Socio-Economic Modernization', its vulnerabilities in terms of political realities were evident within a very

short span of time eventually leading to its disbandment resulting in serious loss of political momentum seems to have made it's way back under the Taliban Regime as an interim arrangement with its effectiveness remaining a time-tested phenomenon.

Confident of acting as a catalyst for change, the tenure of the Interim Government and whether elections would be held at all remain 'doubtful validities' with no official confirmation regarding the same. Seeking to replicate an Iranian Model of Government and Governance, where the Religious Leader reigns supreme even in matters of administration and Statecraft, the role of 'Political Islam' remains unrefuted and undeniable not just in shaping the larger societal culture but even in matters of law making and interpretation by the State, the influence of the Sharia has reigned supreme acting as a 'legitimizing force' often manipulated to serve the interests of the ruling elites. No wonder, the Afghanistan of today is more than just a Theocracy with a religious affiliation, officially declaring itself as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan reverberating the influence of Islamic laws, values and norms in society, culture, economics and politics at large. The statements by the official spokesperson caught the entire world in utter disbelief as Zabiullah Mujahid exuded confidence and promised that this Taliban regime would be different from the 1990s hailing the era as one of 'true Independence' for the country but at the same time made it amply clear that it were the 'fighters' who would be the decision-makers in heralding a peaceful transition sending out a message to nations around the world to resume trade activities, engage in diplomacy and requested humanitarian organizations to return to Afghanistan as their presence seemed to be the need of the hour.

Domestic and International Politics are not 'rigidly separated entities' rather in an age of Globalization, the lines of distinction are getting blurred with every passing day. The declarations observed from the 'lens of a realist worldview' are not completely altruistic and without political reasons because for a country undergoing severe economic turmoil with 80% of the funds coming from the International Community, isolation is something the present dispensation could ill-afford with the scenario further problematized given continuous warfare and an impending humanitarian crisis. Providing assurances of making amends where required, proclaiming at least verbally of not using 'the territory of Afghanistan for perpetrating terror' adding to the paradoxes and dilemmas for the major players with such pronouncements coming from a regime evidently identified with 'violence and militancy'.

While the US hit out at the newly formed Government as one comprising of Ministers most of whom are 'blacklisted for terror by the UN', accused of plane hijacks and criminal conspiracies against security of other States with Haqqani, the Interior Minister on the 'Most Wanted List' of the FBI hinting at serious reservations and apprehensions of America while the European Union has remained similarly sceptical setting out respect for rights and guarantee for security as the basic conditionality for engagement. With 'promises falling short of accommodation of women and minorities' which left even the Iraqis 'nervous and fearful', the only comforting words came from Pakistan where the Prime Minister Imran Khan eulogized the 'Freedom from Slavery' with Beijing playing a crucial tactical role in supporting the Taliban regime while having overtly denied any direct involvement. Even Russia hasn't been averse to the Taliban takeover but is treading its path cautiously declaring that it is 'too early for a decision' whereby reactions around the world is driving the Geo-Politics of the contemporary times proving to be extremely vital when looked at from the perspective of its larger impacts and implications on Indian Diplomacy and Regional Security in South Asia.

The announcement of a 'Government in exile' with Amrullah Saleh as the Acting President in end September only adds another major twist to the political trajectory of the nation in the last 2 months, there is certainly more to follow. Afghanistan is thus far from a 'final settlement', the closure of one chapter is paving the way for the writing of a new chapter as the emerging political dynamics would vindicate—a very happening phase that could determine the destiny of South Asia and shape the world order at large. Whether these Political Dispensations are recognized as 'legitimate' and the world responds to their calls is a different question altogether, the embryo in the seed has just started germinating, expected to keep scholars, diplomats and people around the world engaged for quite sometime to come.

The quantum of available knowledge in the world is so huge and voluminous that no man can possibly acquire and assimilate all, therefore for reasons of practical convenience and specialization subject matter has been divided into a number of Academic Disciplines but reality doesn't operate on similar terms—the social, economic, cultural and political flow into one another creating a milieu nowhere so apparently and palpably as South Asia where politics circumscribes and handholds everything else—opening the floodgates for focusing on certain fundamental social issues concerning Afghanistan of today. A country having a poor track record

of human rights and restricted media freedom—44% of civilian casualties in war crimes are women and children besides being victims of ‘heinous crimes’ like assault, torture, murder and rape. The socio-economic indicators offer a glimpse of the ‘deplorable situation’ being one of the poorest countries of the world with low per capita income—an understaffed and underdeveloped healthcare and education system further crumbling down given the magnifying effects of the Pandemic. The average years of education for women is as dismal as 1.9 years with 40% youth not in school or employed. Surveys conducted by UN Agencies over the past decade reveals that from civil liberty to political freedom, infant and maternal mortality to life expectancy parameters the best ranking for the country hovering around 170s among 193 countries but like every cloud has a silver lining, not all seems lost. Over the past two decades, large number of women have entered the arena of higher education coupled with considerable infrastructural development—prospects after Taliban takeover don’t seem ‘brighter’ rather in certain areas the progress of the last decade seems untraveled in a matter of few weeks prompting us to sharpen the focus to address the questions of women, children and minorities in a societal setup where the ‘name of Islam’ has seemingly assumed centrality.

## 6. The Question of Women

As the world watched in complete shock the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, Nobel Laureate Malala Yousafzai voiced her deep concerns for women, children and minorities under a Taliban regime. When the Islamic Movement was at its height of power in the 1990s women were not just barred from public life, their ‘very existence’ was at stake under the repressive and regressive socio-political order. For an Afghan women community who had made commendable strides in the past two decades and looking forward to greater achievements—the Taliban comeback brought back the nightmares of childhood and for young girls a dark shadow from their mother’s past. Schools have been re-opened only for boys, male and female students have been segregated at universities with a curtain and the all embracing black niqab/burqa is back as the dresscode in the public realms. The promises of ‘freedom for women’ rings hollow on the ground-protection of women under the rubric of the Sharia has its own set of limitations and restrictions, experiences around the world have been a clear pointer in this regard.

Since their comeback, women’s rights have been steamrolled in at least 34 areas as per a report from the Human Rights Watch—female employees have been asked to work from home given the apprehensions of ‘mistreatment and manhandling’, there have been mass entrenchment from jobs and sport activities have been banned. High profile women journalists and activists are the worst hit as the regime seeks to intimidate them. Prominent social activist Mahboubia Seraj that in quest for the ‘ultimate paradise’, democracy and human rights have been dangerously jeopardized with women completely wiped out of the ‘political realm’ with an all male cabinet, special prosecution cells and courts for women’s redressal seem to have disappeared overnight requiring every analyst to look beyond the facade of proclamations—‘our sisters and men have equal rights’ and discover the harsh realities as most questions regarding women’s rights remain vague and ambiguous, seemingly the most preferable stance when consensus on socio-political arrangements is clearly lacking. This is not all as local units run a ‘shadow regime’ some of which are moderate while the others continue to dictate women’s movements in many parts of the country and subject them to the most brutal forms of repression including stoning. Despite the bans and restrictions, women have come out in streams to protest in cities like Herat but were compelled to disperse after rounds of open firing. Trusting the Taliban with women’s rights and socio-economic status would be too risky an endeavor—their natural inclinations are known and hence the role played by the UN, International Organizations and the World Community would be vital in recognizing and safeguarding these ‘suppressed voices’.

## 7. The Fate of Children and Minorities

Sustained conflict and warfare has perennially engaged Afghanistan in a bloodbath, survival and life chances of children being one of the toughest when compared to other countries may only get aggravated under the Taliban. The count of child casualties seems to be the highest with over 30,000 minors killed and maimed in the last two decades. Plagued with acute food insecurity and reeling under the effects of an economic turmoil, a deteriorating education and healthcare system is victimizing the children worst with malnutrition induced deaths reported hinting at a ‘dark future’ with greater danger looming for the girls. Boarding flights unaccompanied by adults, separation from the family has remained a painful enduring experience depriving innumerable minors of their ‘childhood’ as highlighted in recent reports of UNICEF. For a militant group which has boldly violated UN Conventions so far, the indoctrination and recruitment of children as young as

6 year old as suicide bombers trained in detonation of explosives and their deployment as frontliners, such instances maybe only stimulated under a 'Taliban in power', the world ought to initiate measures to end the use of child soldiers in the quest for ameliorating the 'deplorable state of human rights'.

Michelle Bachelet, the UN Human Rights Chief has expressed deep concerns over the 'destiny of minorities and children' in an Afghanistan which is predominantly Sunni Muslim by faith, the Hazaras a Shiite Muslim community who constitute around 9% of the population had been the targets of brutal repression—forcefully converted, married off and even persecuted under the previous Taliban regime, continue to live in the 'shadows' apprehensive of the future. Only in last July, 'spine chilling cold blooded murders' and open firings against this minority sect has triggered speculations that the Taliban's treatment of minorities may only be a replication despite accommodation of certain ethnic minorities in the Interim government. The Hindus, Sikhs and Christians who form a minuscule 0.3% of the population have either sought refuge in India or shifted to other countries of the world—conflict and migration resulting in a natural corollary generating another refugee crisis for nations of the world most of whom have prioritized evacuation and safety of their citizens over continuance of diplomatic relations with a Taliban ruled Afghanistan where the 'socio-political fault lines' have left deep scars which are now wide in the open but many who cannot afford the 'luxury to move out' are still left behind in these precarious circumstances where extensive conflicts between foreign powers and the fundamentalist militant groups has implied 'progressive shrinkage of political space for the civilian Afghan'.

Having witnessed the transition from bipolarity to unipolarity and now multipolarity, in the words of Dr. S Jaishankar (External Affairs Minister of India and Former Foreign Secretary) it is keeping this in mind that strategies cannot remain static in pursuit of attainment of constant goals inevitably turning to an assessment of the Indian response, an emergent power center in the contemporary world to a development which could well define International Relations of 21<sup>st</sup> century South Asia—analyzing the threats and the unfolding situation with a view of chalking out the possibilities aiding the formulation of a coherent diplomatic blueprint for the future often opening up new questions and debates for exploration and future research.

## **8. A Diplomatic Pathfinder for India**

"Your neighbor is your enemy, your neighbor's neighbor is your friend"—Kautilya's words perhaps had been the guiding mantra for New Delhi- Kabul Bonhomie in the last two decades where both nations proclaimed their ties to be as 'ancient as history'. From being perceived as 'black acts of deception and deceit' to a prerequisite in maintaining the Balance of Power, the trajectory of Diplomacy has been long and unwinding, Indo-Afghanistan ties under the new regime will only boost diplomatic vitality in the modern times. With expansion of communication channels and the IT Revolution in addition to the increased role of public opinion, Diplomacy is no longer limited to Addressing the UN or undertaking State visits, it is evolving and all—encompassing a product of political, economic, social and cultural realities we are faced with everyday. For India, which has witnessed strained ties with Taliban 1.0, the events in Afghanistan have been a concern and could spell fresh trouble unless it plans to recalibrate its strategies and policies in sync with the unfolding situation. For Taranjit Singh Sandhu, Envoy to the US -India wasn't kept completely on board with regard to the withdrawal deal despite US assurances and now that Taliban Regime is once again a reality, it was caught unprepared and off guarded where a 'policy flip flop' could cost it heavily on the diplomatic front. The initial process of evacuation and calling diplomats back to New Delhi has worked 'decently well' but a far arduous challenge faces India now—its strategies for the long term. With a new axis often labelled as an 'Anti Quad': China-Pakistan- Iran-Russia operating and favoring a Taliban regime despite denying such possibilities openly, India could be left 'diplomatically isolated' in South Asia, there are surely better and worse options but their usage would be mandated dependent on the scenario. How India reacts to this power play and diplomatic maze would definitely rest on an assessment of the major threats and risks threatening India's security and stability of the Indo-Pacific with the fine lines between the extremes of the continuum exposed as one dives into a nuanced analysis.

The foremost threat which looms large encompasses challenges to national security and territorial integrity in general and Kashmir in particular. The epicenter of 'violence and insurgency' since Indian Independence-Kashmir remains vulnerable with 'targeted killings' already having started way back since the 2019 Pulwama Attacks with the suicide bomber rejoicing at the very possibility of a US withdrawal motivating such a deadly strike, the Taliban takeover could further bolster the Islamic fundamentalist groups who have proactively favored an 'Independent/Azad Kashmir'. In the wake of abrogation of Article 370 by the Indian Government and in context of Acting Interior Minister Haqqani's call for unity among Islamic outfits being extended to

Kashmir, threats are already viable in many 'contested areas' where the possibilities of clashes between a 'Nationalist Government' in India and a 'Fundamentalist Regime' in Afghanistan cannot be completely undermined flowing into a corollary threat, i.e., Terrorism which could assume new forms and dimensions globally. A victim of multiple terrorist attacks, this could prove to be a 'thorn' in diplomatic negotiations where the usage of Afghanistan's territory for Terrorist activities including provision of shelter to outfits like the Jaish-e-Mohammad and the Lashkar- E-Taiba who have upheld an 'Anti India rhetoric' could spell fresh trouble for the country. The third and most vital threat is triggered once India stands at the risk of losing its geo-political advantage, having been one of Afghanistan's largest development partners investing over 200 billion—the country is now under Taliban control. Former Diplomat G. Parthasarathy conceives it as a 'big setback for India' and a 'huge win' for Pakistan which could now consolidate its base.

Islamabad's all weather friend Beijing would surely support such endeavors already planning to extend the Belton Road Initiative through Afghanistan, indulging in 'wolf war diplomacy' eyeing the mines and lithium resources while Russia and Iran rejoice as the tables have turned on the US with the superpower hastily retreating from the region. Foreign Policy Experts—Raghavan and K. C. Singh offer an alternative for the 'grass is not always greener on the other side'—the Border Issue has remained porous between Afghanistan and Pakistan too and refusal of the Taliban to accept the boundaries of the Durand Line could spell fresh dilemmas for Pakistan despite the overarching influence of the IS only injecting a fresh lease of life where India could seize the opportunity to project itself as a more reliable partner while deepening its ties with the West, the newly formed AUKUS could be another vital ally and India should grab the opportunity. The three broad options before India would be to recognize the Taliban Government and resume Diplomatic operations either unilaterally or in sync with its close allies, not compromise on its stance and refuse to recognize a regime unless democratically elected or embrace a more gradual 'Wait and Watch Approach' acting according to circumstances while maintaining diplomatic cordiality with a 4-fold strategy stimulating the formulation of a coherent diplomatic blueprint serving as 'means to the end' opening up Gateways to the Future.

Complete indifference towards the new regime and 'absence on the ground' for a long time could cost India heavily. Therefore the wiser option is to stay connected and keep talking to the Taliban, opening up channels of diplomatic communication which doesn't necessarily imply restarting a full time Embassy at the moment. There is good reason to believe that the Taliban may not be naturally averse to such plans or always antagonistic to Indian interests, instead given the 'hapless situation' in the country they have professed interest in continuing their relations with India and called upon it to resume International Flights, India should know when and how to seize the moment. There remain viable problems though for the Taliban is 'a divided house with multiple factions' and then there are Anti Taliban elements who have been key allies in the past and could be vital in the future too —India has to walk a 'tightrope' and strike the right balance. Nevertheless, the Indian Envoy Deepak Mittal has held talks with the Political Office of the Taliban and reached out to nationalist factions of the Taliban who are anti-Pakistan, seemingly a good start so far as 'Wait and Watch' is concerned. The best recommendation in this regard would be a 'Special Envoy' with political backing of the Government and a dedicated support team to work full time on Afghan Diplomatic Negotiations and bring the parties to a discussion table to iron out differences on critical issues where 'consensus seems possible'. The second and the third strategies should be a continuous process to enhance the prospects of the first. Scholar Rudra Chaudhuri correctly suggests, "Diplomacy can never succeed unless you indulge in domestic capacity building"—the policy of trade, aid and investment should continue not always directly with the regime but through International Organizations and the World Community where possible. In times of the Pandemic, India's supply of medical equipment and Vaccine Maitri could prove to be a 'boon in disguise' an aid indispensable to every Nation and Afghanistan requires all the more to sustain it's people in this 'hour of crisis'. Indo-Afghan ties have been more about soft power deepening the economic, social and cultural ties, it is important to introduce a 'military and strategic perspective'—the third strategy.

While providing training and equipment to the Afghan National Forces is more of 'romanticizing in a what if of history', the present circumstances necessitate India to better equip itself militarily and enhance its strategic potentialities keeping in mind the possible threats—development of Indigenous Missile Trackers like INS Dhruv are clearly in line with this. Building capacities on the home front, allows the country to engage in diplomatic negotiations from 'a position of strength' with deterrence keeping many threats at bay. India needs to assert through the Global Community that observers will have to be appointed for ensuring proper channelization of funds such that the experiment doesn't turn out to be a 'Frankenstein Monster' which comes back to haunt India at a later stage and set 'conditions' for proceeding onto the next stage with non negotiable

goals of respect for human rights and representation of women and minorities coming first, a possibility only when one collaborates collectively and posits one's strength viably leading to the advent of Collective Mitigation Strategies—Working with and through other countries, the fourth alternative. Despite 'unreliable partnership of Pakistan and China', an attempt needs to be made to figure out if common interests and convergences exist facilitating a certain degree of cooperation as evident in the SCO Summits (Shanghai Cooperation Organization). India stands to gain much more from Russia—a traditional ally and with the Russian Envoy visiting India stating it is 'too early for a decision on Taliban' the prospects seem brighter while Iran could be a crucial 'intelligence and strategic partner', hence it would be in India's best interests to lure this country away from an anti India stance. The best hopes include solidification of ties with the West and a more flourishing relationship with the US ironing out the differences where applicable.

The first in person meeting of the QUAD Leaders in end September was a clear indication in this direction mandating that no QUAD Member would unilaterally take a step in recognizing the new regime or provision of aid besides holding the Taliban collectively accountable for rights of women, children and minorities clearly converging on issues of tackling Terrorism and Militancy as well. A strong resolution calling on the Taliban to prevent 'Afghan soil from becoming a Launchpad of Terror' as passed in the United Nations Security Council (2593) under the Indian Presidency, with all members voting in favor (Russia/China abstaining)—a major development signaling that India could well play a lead role in crafting the World Strategy with support from the US in a region where its intervention has remained limited so far compared to its neighbors. It's just the beginning, observers need to 'wait and watch' too.

## 9. Conclusion

India's Diplomatic Response is likely to revolve around either of these key strategies or a 'rainbow combination' mitigating the paradoxes as required going by the time tested 'Case by Case Approach' of Indian Foreign Policy which merits an adhoc diplomatic stance-engagement, sanctions or disengagement given the fluid situation and the unfolding realities but then the country cannot afford to remain a 'dormant spectator' allowing things to completely 'slip out of its hands' escalating risks to a dangerous level ultimately proving to be fatal. India has undertaken bold actions in the past and the Modi Government is no exception—it should respond with agility to secure India's best interests. Every strategy has associated risks, taking 'moderate risks' with a net assessment of costs and benefits therefore remains fundamental to realization of ambitions in contemporary geopolitics.

Flowing from a tripartite interplay of Geo-Political factors being located at the 'crossroads' of South Asia, Central Asia and West Asia combined with great power politics in an increasingly 'oligopolar world' and the reluctance of nations to engage in longdrawn asymmetric warfare has further expanded the possibilities emerging out of this multidimensional and multifaceted 'Afghan Imbroglia' as Professor Anindya Jyoti Majumdar puts it. The immediate challenges for India will be to mitigate conflicts through dialogues including back channel diplomacy and providing humanitarian aid besides shielding itself against Terrorism and its surrogates but then the Taliban sway is not absolute, the Islamic State Khorasan Province is a staunch enemy besides other 'local opponents' which further complicate India's options. There have already been reports of Akhundzada and Baradar being 'out of the public eye' for considerable duration and being 'victims of internal power struggle'. Having gained considerable goodwill among Afghans through its developmental aid including the construction of the Parliament Building and the Salma Dam (spending more than \$3 bn), India failed to create enough 'pro-elements'. The writing on the wall is clear and unambiguous- Soft Power politics alone cannot work wonders. While most diplomats despite their scepticism, sense that the chances of a full-blown conflict between India and Afghanistan is minimal at the moment, there is another section positing that India has nothing to lose by recognizing the new regime—dejure/defacto recognition is a separate debate but then major risk factors and political compulsions on the home front makes it 'easier said than done' where 'recognition' would preferably be used as a 'diplomatic tool' to seek greater leverage in return. With the UN leaving the matter to 'bilateral compromises', the viability of International Organizations in dealing with this issue will be an interesting development to look out for while 'changing world equations' puts fresh question marks on the effectiveness of associations like the BRICS especially with regard to 'strained ties' between India and China and with Russia to some extent as well. Bad judgment results in experience, good judgment results from experience requiring institutionalized mechanism for scenario planning, anticipating situations and presenting a menu of policy options to choose from backed by a full time, dedicated team of experts involving



many more stakeholders than just the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) as pragmatic steps seem necessary for survival and dictating the course of events at crucial points of time.

The attempt here is not to test a hypothesis as to whether Indo-Afghan ties would flourish in the future for it is premature to even arrive at a hypothesis at this juncture. Beauty of research in the Social Sciences lies in raising more questions than it answers, contemporary Afghanistan is surely another case to reckon with—how will the world community act with regard to recognizing the Taliban Regime, what are the causal factors which will prompt this trend and what ought to be India's reaction/policy in these circumstances shall prove to be questions at the very foundations of future research. This essay is a sincere attempt in this direction with reference to a theme: absolutely contemporary in nature exploring the socio-political dynamics encompassing a very happening phase that could determine the destiny of South Asia, stability of the Indo-Pacific and shape the world order at large holding larger implications in terms of 'global peace'. Whether the world community of nations respond to the call is different questions altogether, India should learn from the past, act in the present in anticipation of a brighter tomorrow. Afghanistan's future is far from certain as the 'embryo in the seed' has just started germinating, intriguing and engaging not just scholars, diplomats, world leaders but also people around the globe and will continue to stimulate them for quite some time to come.

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