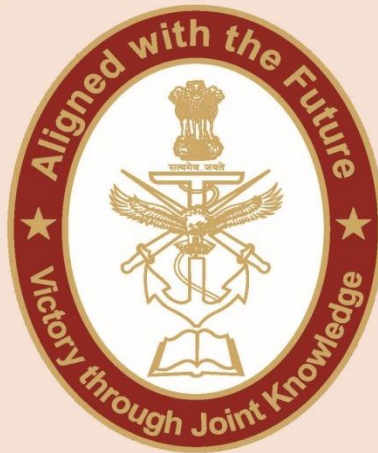


# CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



## CENJOWS

**AFGHANISTAN  
HURLING TOWARDS A  
CIVIL WAR: INDIA'S  
SHRINKING OPTIONS**



**Lt Gen Dushyant Singh, PVSM, AVSM (Retd)** was commissioned into the 'Ninth Bn of The Maratha Light Infantry Regiment' in Dec 81. He is an alumni of NDC, DSSC, CDM & Naval Post Graduate School California, USA.

### America's Exit from Afghanistan

On July 3, US forces evacuated the famous Bagram airbase, which had been the key and the strongest base of the US counter-terrorism operations across Afghanistan for the past 20 years. The troops of the US Special Operations Force based at this base carried out 24x7 military action against Al Qaeda (AQ), Islamic State (ISIS), Taliban and other terrorist groups. At the same time, the Taliban and all the terrorist organizations supporting it have also waged a very effective guerrilla war for the last two decades against the American Defence Forces, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the Afghan National Defence & Security Forces (ANDSF) of the Republic of Afghanistan. There are three main reasons for the success of Taliban. The first is the presence of snowy and dominating Hindukush and Pamir mountain ranges of the eastern and north-eastern regions of Afghanistan. The rolling hills, rivers, streams along the foothills of the two mountain ranges in central highlands further assist the Taliban militants in waging an effective guerilla warfare. See the map in figure 1 below.

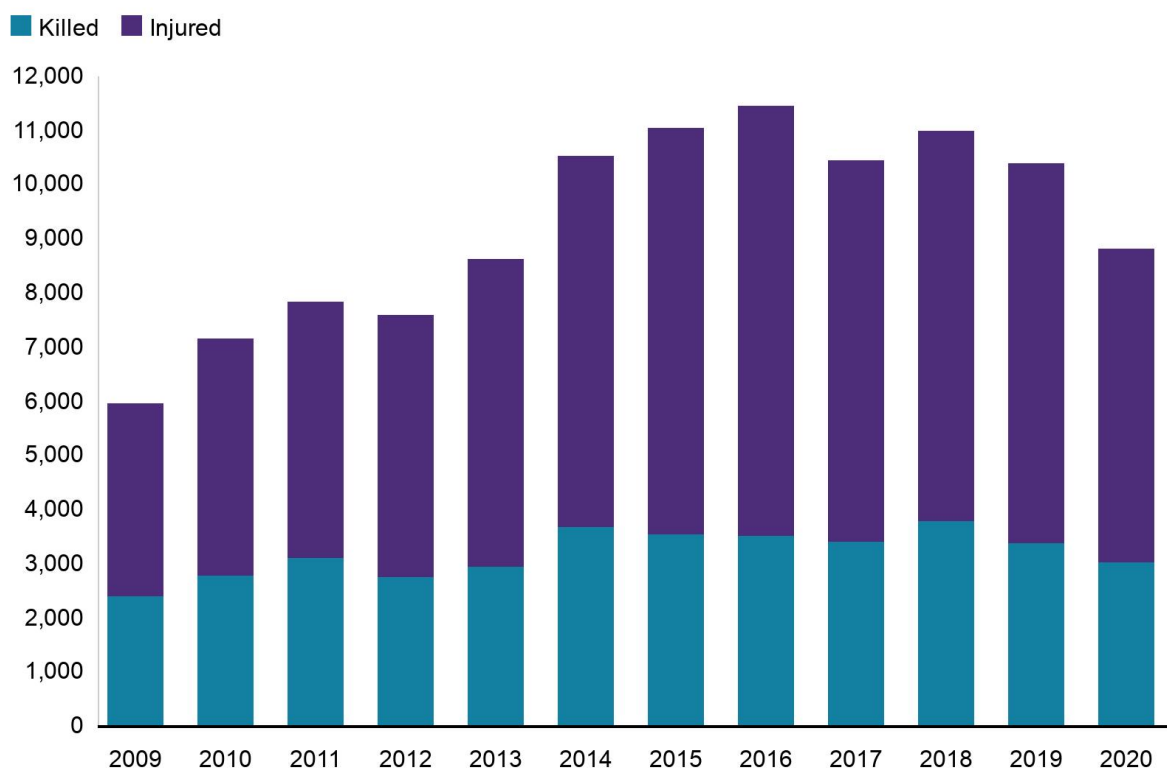


The second reason has been the synergy and cooperation by various terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan with Taliban. Among other reasons, one of the important reasons for this cooperation is the Pakhtuni code of conduct. Under this code, all the Pashtuns are motivated to forget their mutual enmity and wage war against the external enemy i.e. America and its Afghan ally Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The principle of this Code is; First, "I against my brother, me" and my brother against our neighbour, me and my village against the neighboring village and my tribe against another tribe, me and my country against another country." Similarly, there is another code of conduct based on three principles, first, "*melmastiya (hospitality)*", second, "*badl (revenge)*" and surprisingly there is no time limit for revenge; in fact some vow to follow it till the doomsday and the third is "*Nanavati (giving shelter)*" even if he is your enemy. These codes of conduct and principles have created a culture of permissibility in the Afghan Society for External Terrorists. They get unhindered refuge in Afghanistan under the umbrella of the Taliban. The third major reason is the strong support of Pakistan's intelligence agency ISI (Inter-Services Agency) to the Taliban, especially the Haqqani network, which is an important component of the Taliban and there are some unconfirmed reports that suggest that the Haqqanis are over shadowing the Taliban. The fourth main reason is the gradual migration of American forces from Afghanistan; especially the abandonment of Bagram airbase, due to which the condition of the Afghan Defense Forces has become even more critical. It is to be

noted that for the last 20 years, fighter jets, drones and cargo planes had flown continuously for counter-terrorist operations day and night from the twin runways of Bagram. This base was so important for counter-terrorist operations that the last three US Presidents chose to visit this air base only to meet the US troops. The gradual withdrawal of US forces since 2014 has been a major factor in the growing power of the Taliban and the increasing violence in Afghanistan. The graph below shows the increasing level of violence in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2020. The dip in figures for 2020 could be attributed to COVID conductions.

### Total civilian casualties in Afghanistan

2009-2020



Source: UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

BBC

### Changing International Equations in the Region

With the withdrawal of troops from the Bagram Base, only 2500 to 3000 American soldiers are left as on date in Afghanistan. Ultimately, the US is likely to leave behind only 650 personnel. As the US troops are thinning out, the present government of Afghanistan is getting weaker, consequently, the Taliban is claiming to dominate almost 90% of the area in Afghanistan. It is also believed that America is likely to withdraw its troops before the stipulated time limit. For this reason, the Taliban is assuming that the power of Afghanistan is going to come in its hands soon. This also explains why the Taliban is inviting China to invest in Afghanistan. Along with this, the possibility of China-Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran polarization has increased

significantly. The improvement in Sino - Iran relations is likely to hasten this polarization. This alliance may become even more stronger if Turkey and Russia join the party. Emergence of such an equation is fairly high as Turkey enjoys good relations with Pakistan, while China's relations with Russia are also reasonably smooth. These two countries can become the catalyst in realising this alignment. Hence one cannot rule out a direct or an indirect alignment between China-Pak-Afghanistan-Iran-Turkey and Russia over Afghanistan. *This form of polarisation can make India's strength in this region very weak from a military and economic security perspective.*

India will have to stop this equation from taking shape at any cost because if this happens then India faces the consequences of losing its investment of about three billion dollars in Afghanistan besides, AQIS, ISIS and Pakistani terrorists training their guns towards Kashmir. Apart from the above difficulties, if the current Afghan government loses power, then a large number of Afghan population may migrate to India. It should be noted that as per UNHCR, there were about 40,000 Afghan refugees in India till 2019 . These figures are likely to only increase given the current security scenario. There are increasing reports of people migrating from Afghanistan to various parts of the world in large numbers or seeking alliances. Sensing existential danger to its survivability, the Government of Afghanistan has requested for military assistance from India and many other countries. [Towards this end India has recently delivered a consignment of 122 mm gun ammunition to Afghanistan by C17.](#) If true, in my opinion it is a smart move. We should come forward and help the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as much as possible not only from the point of view of India's national interest but for the larger good of the people of Afghanistan especially the women and children who would be deprived of modern education, growth, peace and stability should there be Taliban rule in the country. I am affirming this based on past precedence. One may recall that even after the Soviet Union left Afghanistan, the Najibullah government lasted for four years because the Soviet Union continued to provide economic and military aid to it. It was only when the Soviet Union assistance dried up due to its breakup that the Najibullah government could be defeated at the hands of the Taliban. Therefore, if we continue to provide financial and military aid to Ghani's government, by taking on board America, Britain, France, Australia and Japan, then the dream of the Taliban may get shattered. There are reports in Pakistani Media that Taliban have expressed their displeasure on the Indian action to militarily support Ghani Government. [Pakistan also seems to have been rattled if one were to believe the statements coming out of Pakistan following this report.](#)

## **Possibility of UN Intervention**

There could also be a scenario where due to the military assistance from friendly countries in the form of economic, military and Intelligence support, the current government is able to ward off the takeover of Afghanistan by Taliban leading to a situation of stalemate. This may then start a demand in the international community to seek UN intervention. Also, China is unlikely to veto the intervention as in a stalemate situation, Chinese investments in Afghanistan would also get adversely affected and to protect its economic interests, a UN intervention would be a more lucrative option than putting its own boots on ground in a country like Afghanistan. In fact given the history of USSR and US intervention in Afghanistan and the reverses that China has faced in Doklam and Galwan it is likely to actively promote an International military force under the aegis of the UN to secure its economic interests in Afghanistan. India will then have to weigh its options very carefully whether it should be part of such a UNPKF in Afghanistan. Such a scenario may appear outlandish at this stage but cannot be ruled out and we need to prepare in advance for it as a hedging strategy.

## **India's options**

The rapidly deteriorating internal security situation of Afghanistan is pointing towards a fierce civil war. The current situation reminds us of the 1990s. As in the 90s, this time also it seems that there will be a prolonged civil war in Afghanistan in which ultimately the Afghan people will be the end sufferers while China and Pakistan may be able to secure their national interests. At this juncture it would not be wrong to say that the future of Afghanistan looks absolutely unpredictable and bleak. In such a situation, India has very limited options left. First, it would be in our national security interest to prevent the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan as the dominant component of any future ruling dispensation. A government of National Reconciliation is the only viable and peaceful way forward. In order to ensure this, we need to provide all possible military assistance to the current Afghan government in collaboration with friendly countries with similar ideologies.

The second step would be to prevent Russia and Iran from joining the China - Pak - Taliban ruled Afghan polarization. Diplomatic maneuvers would play an important role in achieving this. It can be expected that our Foreign Minister must have discussed this matter with Russia during their recent meeting. At the sametime we will have to strengthen our hold on Chabahar and Jask ports to prevent the ever increasing influence of China into Iran. Keeping the US position on Iran in mind, we will have to move very cautiously while dealing with Iran by adopting an issue based approach towards Iran as our economic and energy security issues are deeply keyed

into Iran. Pakistan and China are important aspects of this polarization. In my opinion, we have to deal with disrupting their synergy through smart security moves by taking a leaf out of the Chinese strategy of 'Unrestricted warfare'. In this direction we have to support the enemies of Pakistan like Balochistan. As far as China is concerned, we need to highlight the China's atrocities against Uyghur Muslims at the international level, step-motherly treatment of Tibetan Buddhist people, cultural genocide, China's undemocratic attitude in Hong Kong and support the Taiwanese cause. The time has come to dump the 'One China Policy'. But to strengthen these narratives, we will have to bolster our intelligence systems. We also need to expand the QUAD by including France, Britain and friendly countries of SouthEast Asian Nations such as Vietnam, Thailand, Philippines, Singapore and Indonesia. Afghanistan is currently a challenge not only for India but for the whole world and we have to face and solve this challenge together. The Comprehensive National Power (CNP) of our country, which includes military power, will have to be expanded. And finally, should there be an opportunity for a UN intervention in Afghanistan, it would be in India's interest to be part of this development. Passivity is unlikely to achieve our aims and objectives. However, for such an eventuality to be successful, the military will have to be prepared and ready. Chanakya Niti of, "*Saam-daam-dand-bhed*" is the only way ahead for India if it has to secure the national interests of the country.

### **CERTIFICATE**

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication / web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

**Disclaimer:** Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.