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Two Years Of Taliban 2.0: Takeaways For India

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<https://southasianvoices.org/two-years-after-taliban-takeover-what-is-indias-afghanistan-policy/>

August 15, 2023, marked two years since the Taliban stormed to power in Afghanistan. In this period, Afghanistan's humanitarian situation has deteriorated markedly, with women bearing the brunt of the decline. India doesn't officially recognize the Taliban regime but has engaged with the group [1]. India has adopted a cautious approach in its dealings with the Taliban, continues to provide aid, monitoring its disbursement through a "technical team" that has been stationed in Kabul since June 2022.

Comments

The Indian government's cautious approach raises the question: What can India do to further help the people of Afghanistan? Supporting Afghans and enhancing people-to-people ties is an important attribute of the bilateral relationship that has taken a backseat. While India's provision of aid is noteworthy, the government can, and must, do more for the Afghan people [2].

Afghanistan's Civil War

The Taliban have doubled down with its authoritative rule over Afghanistan since the withdrawal of U.S. forces two years back [3]. A national resistance movement emerged immediately after with the hope of ending the Islamic regime in Kabul. The Taliban's growing repression, contrary to their assurances after seizing power in August 2021, has not stopped the National Resistance Front (NRF) from continuing operations against Taliban rule [4]. The NRF is involved in a campaign to gain greater international recognition and support for their efforts to fight the Taliban [5].

The NRF, led by Ahmad Massoud, remains the most formidable Afghan resistance unit fighting the Taliban, and its leader has vowed to continue the fight even after the loss of its rear base in the Panjshir Valley which the Taliban recaptured in September 2021 [6]. Currently, the Taliban finds itself entangled in multiple internal conflicts. Among these challenges, the Taliban likely views the NRF as a particularly substantial threat, given its recognition and inclusion of notable political figures. The Taliban have been able to highlight a few key figures within the NRF, but the group has had some success as well, and the asymmetric tactics they use on the battlefield resulted in the loss of a few notable Taliban commanders [7].

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NRF attacks declined in the first half of 2023 compared to 2022 but have since increased from roughly one attack or fewer per week in the first half of 2022 to multiple attacks a week in the second half of 2023 (July–August) [8]. Operationally the NRF has shifted from concentrating operations in the Panjshir Valley in 2022 to seize control of territory from the Taliban, to in 2023 focusing attacks in rural areas in provinces neighbouring Panjshir, to undermine Taliban governance and control in those areas [9].

To mark the two-year anniversary of the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, the NRF urged neighbouring nations to avoid establishing strategic or formal relations with them. Although the Taliban have not received recognition worldwide, the NRF also lacks external backing to fund its efforts, a key ingredient to sustaining a successful insurgent campaign [10].

Resistance from the NRF remains spirited but is contained to certain pockets of the country. While total NRF attacks are down in 2023 compared to 2022, this could possibly be due to a shift in operations and strategy. The NRF also lacks cohesion with other opposition groups, which makes combating the Taliban even harder. Two years into their nascent insurgency, there is little hope that the NRF, along with other opposition groups, can topple the Taliban government [11].

The NRF has been in a two-year campaign to gain greater international recognition and support for their efforts to fight the Taliban and has stepped up its political activity, holding two conferences in Austria and Tajikistan with various opposition groups and members of the Afghan Diaspora in the hopes of organizing a unified political opposition and outlining a democratic alternative for Afghanistan's future [12].

Daesh/ISIS

Since 2021, after the Taliban regained control, Daesh/ISIS has targeted Taliban officials and Afghan clergy, claiming ownership for the frequent assaults including the attacks on the mosques [13]. Highlighting the documentation and shreds of evidence, Taliban leadership allegedly attributed Pakistani citizens playing an active role in Daesh/ISIS strikes in war-torn Afghanistan [14]. The increase in internal conflicts has positioned the Taliban in a precarious position [15].

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Source: India Today

After two decades of battling their own uprising, they are struggling to guarantee stability while adhering to the US-Taliban Doha Agreement [16], prohibiting entities from exploiting Afghanistan to harm the well-being of America and its NATO partners. The Americans have not teamed up with the Taliban to attack ISIS-K, nor are they sharing intelligence material with them [17]. On the contrary, the Taliban is battling the outfit on their own conducting regular operations and night raids against ISIS-K [18]. These operations typically target civilians suspected of harbouring or assisting ISIS-K militants, with the Taliban beating and arresting individuals without proper trial.

These operations typically target civilians suspected of harbouring or assisting ISIS-K militants, with the Taliban beating and arresting individuals without proper trial. At instances, Taliban have forcefully abducted or executed inmates in certain circumstances, discarding or exhibiting corpses in open spaces [19]. The Taliban is currently dealing with insurgencies viciously which has evoked a lot of bitterness within the region, resulting in more recruits to join ISIS-K [20].

Reports allude Pentagon's confidential papers labelling Afghanistan primarily as an outpost for ISIS-K and as a rising danger to America, Asia, and Europe [21]. However, the Taliban has dismissed the allegations stating that Afghanistan has complete authority across the nation and prohibits any outfit to utilise Afghanistan as the haven for others [22]. Further, the Taliban has maintained that ISIS-K has been severely harmed and is currently in the midst of being eliminated [23].

Lingering Dark Clouds – Social Injustice

With the Taliban on the wheel, human rights have largely taken a backseat. Since the Taliban retook power, girls over the age of 12 have been mostly left out of schools [24]. For most Western countries, the ban is a main obstacle to any hope of formal recognition of the Taliban regime. The Taliban, who say they respect rights in line with their strict interpretation of Islamic law, have shut down beauty parlours, prohibited women from entering parks and restricted women's movement without male accompaniment in Afghanistan [25]. But most Muslim-majority countries and Islamic scholars have rejected the Taliban's stance on women's rights [26].

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Amnesty International alleges the Taliban have committed war crimes and other gross violations of international law against civilian population in Panjshir. Some of the Taliban's brutal tactics include extrajudicial executions, torture, hostage-taking, unlawful detention, and the torching of civilian homes [27].

Journalism, which flourished under the two decades of rule by Western-backed administrations, has been severely repressed [28]. Human rights organisations have expressed concern about the incarceration of media workers and civil society activists, including notable education advocate Matiullah Wesa [29]. According to Human Rights Watch, the Taliban's strict restrictions on local media, which include preventing international media broadcasts, have made it difficult for Afghans to get information and no one can report critical information without fear of arbitrary arrest and detention [30].

The Taliban have not commented in detail on these issues, but they claim that their law enforcement and intelligence agencies investigate suspicious activities to 'seek explanation [31]. On the flip side, there has been a reduction in corruption that emerged following the influx of Western funds after the removal of the Taliban in 2001, according to the UN special [32].

Poppy Ban - Implications

Additionally, there are indications that the implementation of a Taliban prohibition on the cultivation of poppy has resulted in a significant decrease [33] in poppy production in the region that has consistently been the world's largest producer of opium, a trade which the Taliban profited from in the past [34]. However, the increase in methamphetamine smuggling in Afghanistan and the surrounding area, despite the Taliban's efforts to reduce heroin trafficking since the takeover, indicates a significant change in the illicit drug trade and requires immediate focus [35].

Water Wars

The canal construction to divert water from the Amu Darya, which forms the boundary between five dry Central Asian provinces have already caused triggers between Afghanistan & Central Asia region [36].

Earlier Afghanistan and Iran exchanged lethal shots over the issue of international water distribution [37]. Ongoing canal and dam projects could lead to an international crisis with Europe, China, and Russia, unlikely to remain spectators.

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A Humanitarian Crisis

The nation is in the grip of a huge humanitarian catastrophe as a result of decades of conflict, frequent catastrophic weather occurrences, corruption, and widespread unemployment. Many occupations have been lost, particularly those occupied by women, who were often the sole wage earners in their households [38]. Thousands of Afghans who fled the nation are still living in poverty in countries like Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, and Turkey [39]. Despite being rated as one of the nations facing severe climate crisis, its exclusion from COP 27, gradually pushes the Afghan people towards a death without adaptation strategies in place.

A drop in development funding has reduced work prospects, and the UN estimates that over two-thirds of the population requires emergency aid to live. The international community funded over 80% of the previous Western-backed Afghan government's budget [40]. The now-terminated financing funded not just hospitals, schools, and companies, but also government organisations. Locust infestation, multiple droughts, a dearth of healthcare facilities, and the COVID-19 outbreak have all exacerbated Afghanistan's already grave position. Aid agencies are now providing even the most basic requirements, such as medical treatment. Afghanistan is experiencing a persistent reduction in household income, and international banking restrictions [41].

Reconciliation Efforts

The Taliban Movement imposed its authority via force and made no compromises to public desire. In power, the Taliban have pursued their own brand of tribal-ethnic politics. Three of Afghanistan's four largest ethnic groups (Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek), which make for the bulk of the population, have been barred from holding political office. Pashtuns have major influence in the Taliban regime. However, the bulk of Pashtuns are likewise barred from leadership since positions of responsibility are only awarded to clerics seen to be faithful to the organisation. By rejecting pluralism and pursuing a de facto strategy of ethnic dominance, the Taliban are driving a new era of war. With much of the Taliban's support drawn from its claims to offer security and justice that were in short supply under the previous government, the continuation of devastating terror attacks is undermining the highly fragile legitimacy of the Taliban authorities. Afghanistan is still grappling with the unsolved task of crafting an inclusive political solution and establishing the environment for long-term peace and reconciliation. The Taliban has yet to construct a new inclusive government to replace the current very exclusive 'caretaker' government, which includes Taliban members, primarily Kandahari, and token representation from other ethnic groups in small cabinet seats. In response to UN Security Council pressure to be more 'inclusive, representative, and unified,' the Taliban stated, "We are ready for inclusivity but not selectivity.[42]"

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Taliban's Outreach

For its part, the Taliban has made serious efforts to engage India. The regime, which is diplomatically shunned and economically isolated, has sought for continued developmental assistance from India [43]. The Taliban are discussing economic opportunities with the Chinese and Kazakh in the region. The first significant contract signed by the Taliban government with a foreign business since regaining control was with a privately managed Chinese oil company, Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Co (CAPEIC), in January 2023 [44]. The Taliban are expecting that the achievements would lead to global acknowledgement and a release of approximately seven billion dollars in central bank assets blocked at the US Federal Reserve Bank of half which was subsequently given to a Swiss trust. Further the Chinese appointment of its ambassador to Taliban controlled Afghanistan. The financial sector has not crumbled as many predicted following the Taliban's foothold. The World Bank recently declared that Afghani has gained some momentum against major currencies. Clients who made personal deposits prior to August 20, 2021, may retrieve more funds and a large pool of government staff is getting compensated. The revenue generation was strong and that, amid a shortage, the bulk of essentials remained in store.

Relations With Pakistan – Severe Headwinds

In the initial weeks following of the Taliban takeover, Pakistan petitioned to give emergency aid and lift sanctions against Afghanistan to avoid another humanitarian crisis [45]. However, a lot has transpired in one year's time and Islamabad is currently concentrating its efforts on combating terror across the border and stopping Indians from building a footprint in Afghanistan [46]. Apparently, the Taliban regime has failed to alleviate Pakistan's unique foreign policy problems [47]. The extent of terror activities throughout Pakistan has surged by a staggering 51% with Al-Qaeda, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, and the Islamic State in Khorasan among the key terrorist organisations having a strong foothold in Afghanistan [48].



Source: Al Jazeera

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Appeals for foreign assistance for Afghanistan are currently swapped for measured scepticism. The euphoria over the Taliban win has given grounds to a sobering realisation that the developing state of security amid Taliban authority implies that Pakistan's episodes of terror are far from cessation [49]. Pakistani Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif declared in a speech to the UNGA that he echoed the world's worries regarding terrorist groups based in Afghanistan [50].

The Taliban additionally want autonomy from Islamabad's influence on its policy matters to diminish and has expressed an interest in strengthening relations with Delhi by resuming trade [51] and humanitarian supplies. They have recently voiced interest in obtaining India's assistance in training Afghan forces [52]. A further manifestation of the Taliban's desire to harm Pakistani objectives is through backing the development of the Chabahar Port initiative in Iran, which was designed to counter Pakistan's Gwadar Port [53].

India's Approach Towards Taliban 2.0

In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover, India's approach appeared to be reactive [54]. It shut down its Kabul embassy in August 2021, initiated a rescue operation, and limited its interactions with the Taliban to the delivery of aid [55]. Stationing a "Technical Team" in Kabul was one of the first public steps that the Indian government took towards engaging with the Taliban. This step indicates that India recognizes the political realities on the ground and knows that its presence in Afghanistan will have to be mediated through the Taliban. In the two decades since 2001, under the security umbrella provided by the United States and its allies, India made considerable investments amounting to over USD \$3 billion for the welfare of Afghan people [56].

Underpinned By Support For Afghans

India's cautious approach in engaging the Taliban is justified given its twin related concerns about security threats emerging from Afghanistan and the Taliban regime's relationship with Pakistan [57]. Issues include problems around visa-issuance, renewal of visas for Afghan students in India, challenges faced by Afghani citizens currently in India, and the uncertainty faced by Afghan refugees in India [58]. Afghan citizens from all walks of life, from students to politicians, have seen India as a close partner. In the past, India has also actively sought to strengthen ties by supporting MoUs between "Indian women and Afghan women-owned companies and organizations" and providing a home ground for Afghanistan's national cricket team, on top of the substantive developmental and humanitarian aid it already provides [59].

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By rectifying the challenges currently faced by the people of Afghanistan, and especially its students, India, as a key player can support the next generation of Afghans. There exist mechanisms through which people-to-people ties can be reinstated. Some ways this can be done include reissuing visas for students who were already studying in India, granting visas to Afghans who wish to pursue their education in India, reinitiating and supporting bilateral cultural ties, and welcoming Afghan artists and sportspeople.

Challenges

Even though India has provided \$24 million in aid to Afghanistan for 2022-23, the Indian government remains concerned over security risks arising from the region [60]. Incidents such as terrorist attack on a Gurudwara by Daesh, demonstrate that terrorist outfits in Afghanistan can and will harm Indian interests [61].

Another crucial concern for India is the Taliban regime's proximity to Pakistan [62]. While this is a valid concern given the deep historical links between Pakistan and the Taliban, there have been some notable issues between the two actors including disagreement over a contested border and Pakistani concerns about the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Taliban's ties with this group [63]. There is no force at present large enough to keep up with the Taliban in check. They have avoided internal strife by unwaveringly uniting behind their unflinching leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada. They have also kept a faltering economy afloat, in part by having investment talks with capital-rich regional countries - despite the global community's lack of legal recognition.



Source: Global Village Space

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Pathways

For India, which has consistently seen challenges emerge within its neighbourhood in the recent past, the current Taliban rule presents another test. Implementing the suggested policies remains a challenge given the Taliban's adherence to Sharia law and severe restrictions around the movement of women [64].

While this presents a serious impediment to enacting the recommended policies, it is useful to highlight two factors that might influence the Indian government's approach. First, ensuring strong people-to-people ties between Afghanistan and India is in India's long-term interests. In the past, India has benefited from its ties with Afghan elites and there exists considerable goodwill towards India among Afghan citizens. Furthermore, India's association with the Taliban is motivated by its desire for Central Asian influence.

The Central Asian Republics have grown in importance for India since 2015. The Modi administration has endeavoured to strengthen ties with all five countries during its second term. With its involvement in the region, it proved critical for India to develop its Afghanistan engagement.

Second, India can emphasize that its renewal of mechanisms that foster greater people-to-people ties is only a return to a status quo for India, notwithstanding who holds power in Kabul. India has a strong track record of aiding Afghan citizens. Given the Taliban's appeal for better ties, the Indian government can leverage its position to reinstitute ways for greater people-to-people ties [65].

India has the capability to ensure that people-to-people ties are tended to even as it ensures that security threats from the region are minimized. To actualize this capability that exists in theory requires political will and creative diplomatic initiatives. For a country that constantly invokes its "civilizational relationship" with the Afghan people, it is in India's interest to ensure that it remains proactive, and not reactive, when it comes to Afghanistan.

By
Col Ajay Thakur, VSM
Senior Fellow, CENJOWS

By
Ms Anamitra Banerjee
Research Assistant, CENJOWS

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