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AFGHANISTAN: THE GRAVEYARD THAT BLED INTO KASHMIR

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Afghanistan: The Graveyard That Bled into Kashmir

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Abstract

The paper analyses the way in which Afghanistan's long-drawn conflicts, fuelled by successive US interventions has impacted and spilled over into India's security calculus particularly Jammu & Kashmir. The paper locates Afghanistan as the "graveyard of empires," where foreign involvement turned into persistent instability that allowed transnational jihadist networks to prosper. The resurgence of the Taliban, Al-Qaeda's perseverance and ISIS-K further transmuted Afghanistan as a nerve centre for terrorist insurgence sliding into Kashmir under Pakistan's tactical patronage.

The US-led intervention destabilized the region and led to a chain of unintended consequences whose aftermath India is still living with. Cross-border terrorism, drug smuggling from the Golden Crescent and infiltration of foreign terrorists into Kashmir are amongst them. From the battlefields of Afghanistan to the valleys of Kashmir, it follows this trajectory, emphasising that India's security challenges are strategically enmeshed in global obligations. Therefore, it highlights India's need for altering its

security position by balancing counterterrorism practices with regional diplomacy as the instability in Afghanistan seems inseparable from Kashmir.

Introduction & Historical Context

Afghanistan's reputation as the "graveyard of empires" is not merely a rhetorical flourish but a historical reality that has shaped the trajectory of South Asian geopolitics for centuries. From the British colonial campaigns of the nineteenth century to the Soviet Union's disastrous intervention in 1979 and the United States' prolonged occupation beginning in 2001, Afghanistan has consistently resisted external domination. Each foreign power that sought to impose order upon Afghanistan found itself ensnared in a quagmire of tribal resistance, rugged geography, and shifting alliances. Yet Afghanistan's significance extends beyond its own borders. The instability generated by decades of war has repeatedly spilled into neighbouring regions, most notably Pakistan and Kashmir, reshaping South Asia's security architecture and creating enduring challenges for India's national security (Peimani 2001, 12).[1]

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, launched in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, was initially framed as a counterterrorism operation aimed at dismantling Al-Qaeda and removing the Taliban regime that sheltered Osama bin Laden. Within weeks, the Taliban were ousted from Kabul, and Washington declared victory. However, the war quickly evolved into a long-term occupation, with Washington investing over $2.3 trillion and losing credibility as a stabilizing force in South Asia (Watson Institute 2023, 4)[2]. The intervention not only destabilized Afghanistan but also altered the strategic balance in South Asia, empowering Pakistan's military-intelligence establishment and inadvertently fuelling insurgency in Kashmir.

Cold War Foundations of U.S. Policy in South Asia

Before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, U.S. engagement in South Asia was limited and often inconsistent. Washington's primary ally was Pakistan, which aligned itself with American anti-communist policies and received substantial military aid. Rais Ahmad Khan notes that "during the late sixties and seventies, amidst the Vietnam War and détente with both China and the Soviet Union, the U.S. largely

disengaged from South Asia. It allowed the region to be influenced by the Sino-Soviet rivalry as long as neither sought absolute dominance" (Khan 1987, 66).[3]

India, by contrast, pursued a policy of non-alignment, frustrating U.S. policymakers who viewed New Delhi's ties with Moscow as a challenge to American influence. Alexander Evans observes that "South Asia was initially seen as a peripheral player in global politics" (Evans 2012, 31)[4]. Washington's preference for Pakistan over India, particularly in contentious border disputes and outright conflicts, deeply vexed Indian leaders throughout much of the Cold War (Evans 2012, 34)[5]. Smaller states such as Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka were largely peripheral in U.S. strategic thinking, except insofar as they could be leveraged against Chinese expansion (Evans 2012, 35).[6]

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 marked a turning point. For Washington, Afghanistan became a Cold War battleground, with the CIA funnelling billions of dollars in weapons and training to the Afghan mujahideen through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). This partnership entrenched Pakistan's role as a conduit for terrorist networks, a dynamic that would later bleed into Kashmir. As Zahoor Ahmad Wani notes, Pakistan's policy toward Afghanistan was guided by three considerations: domestic instability, terrorism, and strategic depth vis-à-vis India (Wani 2022, 627).[7]

The 2001 U.S. Invasion and Its Aftermath

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 transformed Afghanistan from a peripheral theatre into the epicentre of U.S. foreign policy. The Taliban's refusal to hand over Bin Laden prompted Washington to launch Operation Enduring Freedom, toppling the regime within weeks. Yet the subsequent occupation revealed the limits of American power. The U.S.-backed Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, established in 2004, struggled to assert legitimacy, while insurgents regrouped across the porous Pakistan-Afghanistan border (Guihong 2008, 154).[8]

Pakistan's dual role as both ally and spoiler became increasingly evident. While Islamabad cooperated with U.S. military operations, it simultaneously allowed Taliban factions to operate from its territory, calculating that a friendly regime in Kabul was essential to counter Indian influence. This duplicity strained U.S.- Pakistan relations

and deepened mistrust, particularly as drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas fuelled anti-American sentiment (Chandio and Khuhro 2019, 388).[9]

The Watson Institute's *Costs of War Project* estimates that the U.S. expended $2.313 trillion on the war, encompassing operations in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, and that the conflict directly caused 243,000 deaths (Watson Institute 2023, 4)[10]. These staggering figures underscore the scale of America's commitment and the devastating human toll of its intervention. Yet despite this investment, Washington failed to achieve lasting stability. The Taliban's resurgence and eventual return to power in 2021 highlighted the futility of America's two-decade occupation.

Spillover into Kashmir

The Afghan jihad of the 1980s created militant pipelines that later fed terrorist infrastructure in Kashmir. Fighters trained in Afghanistan, armed with U.S. supplied weapons, and radicalized by Islamist ideology found new battlegrounds in Indian-administered Kashmir after 1989. Hooman Peimani notes that "the Afghan war created a reservoir of experienced fighters who, once the Soviet Union withdrew, sought new theatres of jihad. Kashmir became one such theatre, facilitated by Pakistan's intelligence apparatus" (Peimani 2001, 45).[11]

Groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed drew inspiration and logistical support from Afghan networks, embedding the Kashmir conflict within a broader transnational jihadist movement. The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 intensified this dynamic. As Taliban fighters were displaced, many sought refuge in Pakistan, where they mingled with Kashmiri militants. The ISI facilitated this convergence, viewing Kashmir as the next frontier for proxy warfare against India. Thus, Afghanistan's instability directly bled into Kashmir, transforming a localized insurgency into part of a global jihadist struggle.

India's Strategic Dilemma

For India, the U.S. invasion presented both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, New Delhi expanded its presence in Afghanistan, reopening its embassy in Kabul and investing in reconstruction projects. Wani highlights that "following the downfall of the Taliban regime in 2001, India expanded its presence in Afghanistan, reopened its embassy in Kabul, reestablished four consulates across the country, and

actively contributed to the reconstruction efforts in this war-torn nation" (Wani 2022, 622)[12]. On the other hand, Pakistan's empowerment through its role as Washington's frontline ally undermined India's security in Kashmir.

The U.S. reliance on Pakistan for logistical support meant that Washington often overlooked Islamabad's sponsorship of terrorism, leaving India to bear the brunt of cross-border terrorism. Evans underscores that "the altered regional dynamics post-invasion led the United States to adopt a more comprehensive and strategic approach toward India, recognizing its significance in the South Asian context" (Evans 2012, 34)[13]. Yet this recalibration did little to mitigate the immediate security challenges India faced in Kashmir, where Afghan trained terrorists continued to infiltrate across the Line of Control.

Therefore, the historical trajectory of Afghanistan demonstrates how external interventions have consistently destabilized the region and spilled over into neighbouring conflicts. The U.S. invasion of 2001, while aimed at counterterrorism, ultimately empowered Pakistan's terrorist networks and intensified insurgency in Kashmir. For India, the challenge lies in navigating a security environment where Afghanistan's instability and Pakistan's duplicity converge to undermine its sovereignty. As the subsequent sections will demonstrate, the Afghanistan-Pakistan nexus has created enduring strategic ripples that continue to shape India's security challenges in Kashmir and beyond.

The Afghanistan-Pakistan Nexus and Kashmir Spillover

The Afghanistan-Pakistan nexus has been central to the evolution of terrorism in South Asia. Pakistan's strategic calculus, rooted in its rivalry with India, has consistently sought to use Afghanistan both as a buffer state and as a training ground for proxy warfare. The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 intensified this dynamic, as Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) exploited the chaos to redirect terrorist energies into Kashmir. This convergence of Afghan jihadist networks and Kashmiri insurgency created a transnational pipeline of terrorism that continues to challenge India's security architecture.

Pakistan's Strategic Depth Doctrine

Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan has always been shaped by its quest for "strategic depth" against India. The doctrine, articulated by military planners in Rawalpindi, envisioned Afghanistan as a rear base that could provide Pakistan with strategic depth in its rivalry with India. As Connah argues, "Pakistan's military establishment viewed Afghanistan not merely as a neighbour but as a strategic hinterland, essential for offsetting India's conventional superiority" (Connah 2020, 44).[14]

This doctrine became particularly salient during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The ISI, acting as a conduit for U.S. and Saudi support, trained and armed thousands of mujahideen fighters. These networks, once established, proved difficult to dismantle. Instead, they were repurposed in the 1990s to support terrorism in Kashmir. Hooman Peimani notes that "the infrastructure of jihad created in Afghanistan during the 1980s was transplanted into Kashmir, where Pakistan sought to replicate the Afghan model of resistance against India" (Peimani 2001, 47).[15]

ISI and the Militant Pipeline

The ISI's role in facilitating militant networks cannot be overstated. During the Afghan jihad, the ISI coordinated the distribution of weapons, training, and financial support to various factions. After the Soviet withdrawal, these assets were redirected toward Kashmir. The PRIO paper on South Asia emphasizes that "Pakistan's intelligence services deliberately nurtured groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, providing them with training camps in Afghanistan and logistical support for operations in Kashmir" (PRIO 2011, 22).[16]

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 disrupted Taliban control but did not dismantle the militant infrastructure. Instead, many fighters fled across the border into Pakistan, where they were absorbed into existing networks. This influx strengthened the militant pipeline into Kashmir. As the *Prepp Institute's Analysis* notes, "the displacement of Taliban fighters after 2001 created a convergence of Afghan and Kashmiri militants, facilitated by Pakistan's intelligence apparatus" (Prepp 2023, 3).[17]

Proxy Warfare in Kashmir

The Kashmir insurgency, which erupted in 1989, was initially driven by local grievances. However, the involvement of Afghanistan trained terrorists transformed it into proxy war. Fighters who had honed their skills against Soviet forces brought advanced tactics, weaponry, and ideological fervour to Kashmir. Lashkar-e-Taiba, in particular, adopted strategies reminiscent of Afghan jihad, including suicide attacks and mass-casualty operations (Peimani 2001, 52).[18]

Pakistan's sponsorship of these groups was part of a broader strategy to internationalize the Kashmir conflict. By framing it as part of the global jihad, Islamabad sought to attract foreign fighters and legitimize its involvement. Connah observes that "Pakistan's manipulation of jihadist narratives allowed it to portray Kashmir not merely as a territorial dispute but as a religious obligation, thereby ensuring a steady flow of recruits from Afghanistan" (Connah 2020, 61).[19]

U.S. Intervention and Its Unintended Consequences

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was intended to dismantle terrorist networks, but it inadvertently strengthened Pakistan's leverage. By relying on Islamabad for logistical support, Washington empowered the very institutions that were fuelling terrorism in Kashmir. Zhang Guihong notes that "Pakistan took centre stage in the U.S. agenda, abruptly halting the steady progression of U.S.-India relations" (Guihong 2008, 154).[20]

Drone strikes and cross-border operations further strained U.S.- Pakistan relations, but they did little to curb the ISI's support for Kashmiri militants. Instead, Pakistan used its role as a frontline ally to extract concessions while continuing its proxy war. The Observer Research Foundation (ORF) report highlights that "the U.S. refusal to confront Pakistan's duplicity allowed militant networks to thrive, with Kashmir becoming a primary beneficiary of Afghan instability" (ORF 2023, 12).[21]

Impact on India's Security Architecture

For India, the Afghanistan-Pakistan nexus created a multidimensional security challenge. The influx of Afghan-trained terrorists escalated violence in Kashmir, while Pakistan's duplicity undermined diplomatic efforts. The Delhi Police's counterterrorism reports emphasize that "Afghan-origin weapons and tactics were repeatedly identified

in Kashmir operations, underscoring the transnational nature of the insurgency" (Delhi Police 2024, 7).[22]

India's attempts to deepen its presence in Afghanistan, through reconstruction projects and diplomatic engagement, were partly aimed at countering Pakistan's influence. Yet these efforts were constrained by the U.S. reliance on Islamabad. As Evans notes, "India's role evolved within the region, but the recalibration of U.S.-India relations differed from the pronounced shift witnessed in U.S.-Pakistan relations" (Evans 2012, 34).[23]

Thus, the Afghanistan-Pakistan nexus has been the primary conduit through which Afghanistan's instability bled into Kashmir. Pakistan's strategic depth doctrine, operationalized through the ISI, ensured that militant networks created during the Afghan jihad were repurposed for proxy warfare against India. The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, while aimed at counterterrorism, inadvertently strengthened Pakistan's leverage, allowing it to sustain terrorism in Kashmir. For India, the challenge lies in confronting a transnational pipeline of terrorism that links Kabul to Srinagar, underscoring the inseparability of Afghanistan's instability from Kashmir's terrorism.

Diplomatic Relations with Pakistan and India

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 profoundly altered the diplomatic landscape of South Asia, particularly in the triangular relationship between the United States, Pakistan, and India. While Pakistan was thrust into the role of Washington's frontline ally in the "War on Terror," India emerged as a strategic partner in reconstruction and regional stability. Yet these recalibrations were fraught with contradictions. Pakistan's duplicity in supporting terrorist networks while cooperating with the U.S. undermined trust, while India's growing role in Afghanistan triggered anxieties in Islamabad. The result was a complex web of cooperation, mistrust, and rivalry that continues to shape South Asia's security architecture.

U.S.- Pakistan Relations: Cooperation and Duplicity

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan elevated Pakistan's strategic importance. Geographically, Pakistan provided the logistical backbone for U.S. military operations, including supply routes through Karachi and airbases for drone strikes. Rais Ahmad Khan underscores that "Pakistan's strategic importance intensified post-9/11 due to

its geographical proximity to Afghanistan and its crucial role in aiding U.S. military operations" (Khan 1987, 66).[24]

Yet this cooperation was marred by duplicity. While Pakistan publicly aligned with Washington, its intelligence services covertly supported Taliban factions and terrorist groups. Alexander Evans notes that "American military operations in Pakistan's sovereign territory, often conducted against Pakistan's wishes, intensified friction between the two nations" (Evans 2012, 34)[25]. The ISI's support for groups such as the Haqqani Network and Lashkar-e-Taiba reflected Islamabad's desire to maintain influence in Afghanistan and sustain proxy warfare in Kashmir.

Drone strikes became a particularly contentious issue. Liaqat Ali Chandio and Amir Ahmed Khuhro observe that "the complex and covert nature of U.S.- Pakistan relations are well illustrated from the issue of drones over Pakistan territory. The government co-operated with the U.S. military over the drone strikes. The unmanned aircraft for bombing and missile attacks were started in Pakistan in 2004 during the Bush administration. The U.S. drone program led to problems with the Pakistani government and aggravated anti-U.S. sentiment in the country" (Chandio and Khuhro 2019, 388).[26]

This duality, cooperation with Washington while enabling terrorism created enduring mistrust. The U.S. questioned Pakistan's effectiveness in controlling its borders, while Pakistan resented American violations of sovereignty. Zhang Guihong highlights that "Pakistan took centre stage in the U.S. agenda, abruptly halting the steady progression of U.S.- India relations" (Guihong 2008, 154)[27]. Thus, Pakistan's role as both ally and spoiler became a defining feature of post-2001 diplomacy.

U.S.- India Relations: Strategic Partnership and Constraints

Zahoor Ahmad Wani notes that the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan has had a multi-fold effect for India, given its expanded presence through embassy reopening in Kabul, reestablishment of four consulates and several reconstruction projects in the war-torn nation (Wani 2022, 622).[28] This engagement has reflected India's desire to counter Pakistan's influence and assert itself as a regional power. India invested in infrastructure projects, including the construction of the Afghanistan's Parliament building and the Zaranj-Delaram highway, which connected Afghanistan to Iran. These

initiatives underscored India's commitment to Afghanistan's democratic reconstruction and its broader strategic interests in Central Asia.

At the same time, U.S.- India relations deepened. Evans observes that "the altered regional dynamics post-invasion led the United States to adopt a more comprehensive and strategic approach toward India, recognizing its significance in the South Asian context" (Evans 2012, 34)[29]. Defence cooperation expanded, with joint military exercises and intelligence sharing. Economic ties also grew, as Washington sought to cultivate India as a counterbalance to China.

Yet these gains were constrained by U.S. reliance on Pakistan. Washington's need for Islamabad's logistical support often led it to overlook Pakistan's sponsorship of terror, leaving India vulnerable to cross-border terrorism. This contradiction frustrated New Delhi, which viewed U.S. policy as inconsistent and short-sighted. As Connah argues, "India's strategic partnership with the U.S. was undermined by Washington's unwillingness to confront Pakistan's duplicity, creating a paradox where India was both a partner and a victim of U.S. policy in South Asia" (Connah 2020, 72).[30]

The Kashmir Dimension

The triangular relationship between the U.S., Pakistan, and India was most acutely felt in Kashmir. Pakistan's support for Afghan-trained terrorists intensified insurgency, while U.S. reluctance to confront Islamabad left India exposed. Hooman Peimani notes that "the infrastructure of jihad created in Afghanistan during the 1980s was transplanted into Kashmir, where Pakistan sought to replicate the Afghan model of resistance against India" (Peimani 2001, 47).[31]

For India, this created a strategic dilemma. On one hand, U.S. support for Pakistan undermined India's security in Kashmir. On the other hand, India's growing partnership with Washington offered opportunities for defence cooperation and diplomatic leverage. Balancing these contradictions became a central challenge for Indian policymakers.

The Delhi Police's counterterrorism reports emphasize that "Afghan-origin weapons and tactics were repeatedly identified in Kashmir operations, underscoring the transnational nature of the insurgency" (Delhi Police 2024, 7)[32]. This evidence

highlights the direct link between Afghanistan's instability and Kashmir's insurgency, mediated through Pakistan's intelligence apparatus.

Diplomatic Tensions and Strategic Ripples

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan created enduring tensions in South Asia. For Pakistan, cooperation with Washington was a means of securing aid and legitimacy, but it also fuelled domestic instability and anti-American sentiment. For India, the invasion offered opportunities for engagement in Afghanistan but also exposed the limits of U.S. support.

The report by ORF underscores that "the U.S. refusal to confront Pakistan's duplicity allowed militant networks to thrive, with Kashmir becoming a primary beneficiary of Afghan instability" (ORF 2023, 12)[33]. This refusal reflected Washington's prioritization of short-term military objectives over long-term regional stability.

As a result, the triangular relationship between the U.S., Pakistan, and India remained characterized by mistrust and contradiction. Pakistan leveraged its role as a frontline ally to sustain proxy warfare in Kashmir, while India struggled to balance its partnership with Washington against the realities of U.S.- Pakistan cooperation.

Hence**,** the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan reshaped diplomatic relations with Pakistan and India, creating a complex web of cooperation, mistrust, and rivalry. Pakistan's duplicity in supporting terrorism while cooperating with Washington undermined trust, while India's growing role in Afghanistan triggered anxieties in Islamabad. The Kashmir conflict became the focal point of these contradictions, as Afghanistan's instability bled into insurgency and U.S. policy failed to confront Pakistan's role. For India, the challenge lies in navigating a diplomatic landscape where its partnership with Washington is constrained by America's reliance on Islamabad, underscoring the enduring strategic ripples of the Afghan war.

U.S. Miscalculations and the Rise of Chinese Influence in South Asia

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was intended to dismantle terrorist networks and stabilize South Asia. Instead, a series of policy oversights created strategic vacuums that China was quick to exploit. For India, these oversights had profound consequences. Not only did they intensify terrorism in Kashmir, but they also facilitated

Beijing's rise as a dominant actor in South Asia, encircling India through economic, diplomatic, and military initiatives. The convergence of Afghan instability, U.S. inconsistency, and Chinese assertiveness has created a dual-front dilemma for India, forcing New Delhi to confront both cross-border terrorism and strategic encirclement.

The first major oversight was Washington's overreliance on military solutions. By framing the Afghan war primarily as a counter-terrorism operation, the U.S. neglected the political and developmental dimensions of state-building. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, established in 2004, lacked legitimacy and struggled to assert authority beyond Kabul. As Evans notes, "the altered regional dynamics post-invasion led the United States to adopt a more comprehensive and strategic approach toward India, but this was undermined by its failure to stabilize Afghanistan itself" (Evans 2012, 34).[34]

The second oversight was the diversion of resources to Iraq in 2003. The invasion of Iraq siphoned attention and funding away from Afghanistan, allowing the Taliban to regroup. This neglect prolonged instability in Afghanistan, which spilled over into Kashmir through terrorist pipelines. Hooman Peimani observes that "the Afghan war created a reservoir of experienced fighters who, once displaced, sought new theatres of jihad, with Kashmir becoming a primary beneficiary" (Peimani 2001, 45).[35]

The third oversight taken by the US was relying on Pakistan for support in logistics. The US's capacity to combat terrorism in Kashmir was hampered by its reliance on Islamabad. Washington had given Pakistan more intelligence power by prioritizing short-term goals over regional stability. Consequently, this had made it easier for Afghan instability to spread into Kashmir.

Exploitation of US Vacuums by China in Afghanistan

With its "strings of pearl" strategy, which encircles India, China strategically capitalized on the vacuum the US created in South Asia to increase its influence through military assistance, diplomatic efforts, and economic investments. One of the most important examples to mention in this regard is the Afghan War, which gave China the opportunity to portray itself as a trustworthy ally in contrast to Washington's inconsistency.

In order to take advantage of the gaps left by the US, China established the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2015. In order to gain access to the Arabian Sea and forge a partnership with Pakistan, China made investments in a number of infrastructure projects that connected Gwadar Port to Xinjiang. China also invested in ports, highways, and energy projects as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, which further filled the gaps caused by US negligence during the Afghan War and made China a more desirable economic partner for South Asian nations. India's hegemony in the region was also seriously threatened by this.

By acting as a mediator between the Taliban and the Afghan government in Afghanistan, China further enhanced its position as a military and security ally. In contrast to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, this had made China a stabilizing force. India's role as a regional stabiliser was put in jeopardy because China's military intervention increased China's influence in Afghanistan and bolstered Pakistan's ability to wage proxy wars in Kashmir.

India’s Dual-Front Dilemma

The convergence of U.S. oversights and Chinese assertiveness has created a dual-front dilemma for India. India faced cross-border terrorism in Kashmir which was fuelled by terrorists trained by Afghanistan and sponsored by Pakistan. Along with this, it faced China’s strategic encirclement that had further developed through economic investments, military partnerships and diplomatic channels.

Kashmir: An Immediate Front

Kashmir became the battleground for Afghanistan’s fighters as Afghanistan’s instability intensified terrorism in Kashmir that Pakistan’s intelligence facilitated and established the local terror networks. Delhi Police had highlighted in its counter-terrorism reports that weapons and tactics originating from Afghanistan were frequently identified in Kashmir operations, justifying the transnational nature of this insurgency. (Delhi Police 2024, 7)[36]

This highlights the dual-front dilemma faced by India presented through persistence in Kashmir’s militancy which is inseparable from Afghanistan’s instability posing as security challenges for India.

China: The Strategic Front

A report by ORF notes that “the U.S. refusal to confront Pakistan’s duplicity allowed militant networks to thrive, while China’s economic initiatives filled the gaps left by Washington’s neglect” (ORF 2023, 12).[37]

This creates a long-term challenge as Kashmir’s terror posed as an immediate threat and China’s encirclement around South Asia threatened India’s regional influence, thereby forcing India to take on both immediate and strategic challenges upfront.

Strategic Responses by India

India strategically responded to these challenges through diplomatic engagement like deepening its partnership with USA to counter China’s rise through initiatives like US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). India also responded to Chinese economic investments in Afghanistan and Central Asia by intensively investing in the region with projects such as Chabahar Port in Iran, that emerged as an alternative regional connector avoiding Pakistan’s territory. On the military front, India has strengthened itself along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and intensified counter-terrorism operations in Kashmir to cut off terrorist routes that had originated from Afghanistan.

So, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, that was intended towards counterterrorism led to a series of miscalculated decisions that reshaped South Asia’s strategic landscape. By depending too heavily on military resolutions, re-directing resources to Iraq and relying on Pakistan, Washington failed to help stabilize Afghanistan and ended up empowering ideas of jihad. China took advantage of these vacuums to magnify its influence, putting India in a dual-front quandary.

The issue at hand for India is to find a solution to counter immediate threats and strategic ones. Terrorism in Kashmir is the tactical front and China’s encircling strategy serves as the strategic front. Together, they highlight the long shadow of the Afghan war and how it played a role in reshaping the security environment for India due to U.S. interventions.

Conclusion: Afghanistan's Instability and India's Security Challenges

The ineffectiveness of external interventions is repeatedly highlighted through Afghanistan's history of being the "graveyard of empires". The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, while highlighted as a counterterrorism operation, ultimately destabilized the region and created enduring strategic ripples. These ripples were most visible in Kashmir as terrorists and transnational jihadist networks trained by Afghanistan had intensified terrorism in Kashmir.

India was left exposed to cross-border terrorism due to U.S.'s reliance on Pakistan which had subdued its ability to confront the duplicity of Pakistan in transforming a localised insurgency of Afghanistan into a global jihadist struggle. Pakistan's intelligence had made it easier for Afghan fighters to join and integrate with Kashmiri terrorist groups, allowing Kabul's turmoil to spread to Srinagar and posing as a major security risk to India.

By directing resources to Iraq, depending too much on military-led solutions and ignoring regional diplomacy, the U.S. has made policy errors all at once. This left gaps that China could readily take advantage of to increase its power in South Asia by investing in diplomatic efforts, military alliances and economic projects; this has put India in a difficult situation on two fronts. India had to address China's encirclement policy as well as the immediate threats in Kashmir altogether.

Suggestions for India

To address the aforementioned issues, India must use the multi-faceted approach that integrates economic endeavours, military preparations, diplomacy and regional ties. Therefore, India can implement the following suggestions to address the upcoming issues:

- India can quickly cut off communication routes between Afghan and Kashmiri terrorists by deploying cutting edge AI powered surveillance systems and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) to petrol adjacent regions. Increased technological investments and the creation of domestic monitoring systems with dependable partners like Germany and Russia, who are leaders in this area, can make this possible.

- By supporting its Indo-Pacific strategic geopolitical location and presence, India can use multi-lateral platforms like QUAD to counter China’s rise and garner support against the U.S.’s support for Pakistan. This will encourage the U.S. to take action in India’s favour, which will help us defend our counter-terrorism efforts against the Afghanistan-Pakistan nexus. These forums may even present chances to strengthen India’s strategic alliance with the U.S. and counter-balance Beijing’s influence.
- Through a better co-development strategic investment, as a bilateral partnership deal or diplomatic relationship in good faith, India can improve its sales pitch for protecting developing nations from the debt-trap problem caused by China’s strategic investments in their development projects, which frequently come as a deal that is more favourable for China in the long run. By using its diplomatic channels effectively, India can persuade these states to prioritise the long-term advantages above a short-term eye-catching solution that could lead to debt-trap down the road.
- India should keep funding Afghanistan’s rehabilitation initiatives such as infrastructure construction, governance assistance and sports diplomacy, to prove itself as a trustworthy partner. In addition to interacting with diplomats, India can use its soft power diplomacy to bolster its credibility in Afghanistan by interacting with Afghanistan’s civil society while upholding its “Panchsheel principles”.

India can create an all-encompassing Integrated National Security response that guarantees India's resilience in the face of long-lasting strategic repercussions by recognizing the connections between Afghanistan's instability, the gaps left by US oversights, and China's strategic diplomacy.

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