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## India's Latest Ingress into Afghanistan - Effects on Pakistan

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After the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, India had been making major strides in the war torn country and its influence over successive regimes of Kabul remained intact. Augmenting its hegemonic and imperialistic ambitions, New Delhi attempted to infiltrate and influence all sectors of the Afghan society and make it a launching pad for the encirclement of its arch-rival Pakistan. Making inroads into Afghanistan with this objective, it invested more than 3 billion US



dollars since the US invasion of the country in several mega infrastructure development projects and became Afghanistan's largest regional donor and fifth-largest donor globally. New Delhi currently has 1.5 billion dollar trade with Afghanistan, has built over 200 public and private schools, sponsors over 1,000 scholarships and before Taliban's government hosted over 16,000 Afghan students.<sup>1</sup> Adopting a smart strategy, India has always projected its involvement in Afghanistan as aid-oriented, which is focused on the amelioration of Afghan people.<sup>2</sup> However, this relation came to a standstill when the Taliban took over.

Due to a history of severe animosity and strained relations, Indian embassy in Kabul was shut down when the Taliban took over. However, after several meetings, it reopened on 15<sup>th</sup> of August this year. India's resurgence under the Taliban was not unexpected but its magnitude is yet to be assessed. The new scenario is once again fraught with serious risks of India getting involved in propagating anti-Pakistan narratives using various means of propaganda to exploit the Afghan youth's nationalist sentiments.<sup>3</sup> As of now, New Delhi is warming up to the group and has also become a generous supplier of humanitarian aid to the Taliban-led Afghanistan which includes consignments of 20,000 tons of wheat, medicine, half a million doses of COVID-19 vaccine and winter clothing for the Afghans. Keeping in view its nefarious designs and the use of the Afghan soil to create instability in Pakistan, this development has raised some eyebrows in Islamabad for its possible ill effects on the country.

The total sum allocated for Afghanistan in India's annual budget is 24.183 million USD for the year 2022-2023 which is almost half of the year 2021-2022 which amounted to 47.6 million USD.<sup>4</sup> This cut can be attributed to strained relations between Kabul and New Delhi after the political transition of Afghanistan in August last year. Despite having a history of tumultuous relations with the Taliban, the Afghan society generally thinks favourably of India. This became evident in a recent survey (July 2022) which was conducted by a European news outlet which found out that nearly 70 per cent Afghans consider India as a "best friend".<sup>5</sup>

India's hegemonic ambitions in the region and the trajectory of its foreign policy towards its neighbours are deeply rooted in the Kautilian philosophy which regards that "Every neighbouring state is an enemy and the enemy's enemy is a friend." Following this philosophy and taking advantage of the history of border disputes, New Delhi has been making ingress in Afghanistan through soft power projection. Under the disguise of assistance, it has been using Afghan soil to destabilize Pakistan by sponsoring terrorism and facilitating sub-nationalist insurgencies. India has allegedly trained the ISK-P and TTP elements in Afghanistan to use them as a proxy against Pakistan. It is reported that several individuals of these terrorist organizations are still under training in India. As the diplomatic relations between Taliban-ruled Kabul and New Delhi have been re-established and Taliban government is vying for Indian economic assistance and military support, there are fears that India will reconsolidate its links with the terrorist outfits and use them to create unrest in Pakistan like it was doing during the previous regimes.

As a manifestation of soft ingress policy, India is currently spending a large sum engaging Afghan youth particularly students to influence the narrative building process through scholarships, cultural exchanges and winning hearts and minds (WHAM) projects. According to UNHCR, as of now, India hosts more than 15000 Afghan refugees and 14000 Afghan students are studying at 73 different Indian universities.<sup>6</sup> These students and refugees will have a significant impact on their return and can ultimately influence the foreign policy preferences of their homeland.

Mainstream and social media campaigns show that New Delhi is working hard to highlight Indian investment and mega infrastructural development projects to present itself as a friend of Afghans and shape an anti-Pakistan narrative.<sup>7</sup> Indian movies and Bollywood entertainers have become very popular in Afghanistan. It has been observed that the Afghan children now sit before the television not to watch local television but instead watch Indian serials dubbed in local languages.<sup>8</sup> In sports, Board of Control for Cricket in India has not only allowed Afghan cricketers to play in the IPL but has also provided the Afghan team with sponsors and local venues for cricket matches against rivals. As a result, the Indian cricket team is celebrated by the Afghans.

India's resurgence in Afghanistan will be based on a number of factors, however, its economic might may compel the Taliban to openly pursue ties with her. It is worth mentioning that more than 60 percent of the Afghan population is under the age of 25,<sup>9</sup> and most of

them view India as a trusted friend. The young foot soldiers of the Taliban also belong to the same group. Therefore, the group's leadership will feel pressurized not only by its young recruits but also by the Afghan society to allow India to take the leading role in

*India has been trying to make inroads in Afghanistan through soft power projection and all its endeavours including economic assistance and military support are directed against Pakistan.*

Afghanistan.

Pakistan has also launched the annual Allama Iqbal Scholarship program for 1500 Afghan students and is establishing various educational institutions in different provinces of Afghanistan. According to Pak-Afghan Graduate Association (PAGA), around 35000 Afghan students got education in various colleges and universities in Pakistan during the last 30 years. However, as compared to India, only 7000 Afghan students, half the number hosted by India, are currently enrolled in various universities of Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> Islamabad has a weak strategy in Afghanistan of winning hearts and minds. A large number of Afghans pass through Pak-Afghan border daily and their maltreatment and that of trade convoys by our security officials has also created a negative perception about Pakistan. Also, the congested and insufficient windows at Pakistani visa centers in Kabul has resulted in reduction of visas and added to the grievances of Afghan visa seekers.<sup>11</sup>

Every country has the right to pursue a foreign policy that serves its interests best. Since, Afghanistan is developing its relations with India, Pakistan needs to ensure that India's resurgence in Afghanistan does not affect its security and economic interests. In this regard, following is recommended:

- Pakistan should broaden diplomatic engagements with Afghanistan to ensure that Pakistan's views are expressed at every meeting and on all available Afghan platforms.<sup>12</sup>
- Pakistan's visa office in Kabul needs to be renovated and made more spacious to accommodate maximum visa seekers to avoid congestion.
- Pakistan's security officials at border-crossings need to be trained and instructed to treat Afghan nationals particularly women, children and elderly in more respectful

manner and in line with Afghan culture and tradition.

- Pakistan should improve the quality of care and health facilities by making special medical centres for Afghan Patients at Pak-Afghan border crossings.
- Pakistan should make its presence in mainstream and social media of Afghanistan to ensure positive image building of Pakistan and should be able to highlight the negative aspects of Indian policies towards Afghan society. For this purpose, it should provide media studies scholarships and conduct training programs for media personnel.
- Pakistan needs to increase the general educational scholarships to Afghan students, provide free books and stationary items to students and maximize training facilities to Afghan academics.
- Pakistan should provide pharmaceutical facilities at affordable prices in Afghan markets to counter the ingress of Indian pharma companies in Afghanistan.
- Pakistan should augment transit trade-facilitation arrangements with Afghanistan to ease the flow of trade between and through the two countries to spur economic development and interdependence.
- Pakistan should enhance free trade agreements with Afghanistan as well as improve the nontariff measures, mainly at the

custom checkpoints on both sides of the border.

- Duty tax should be reduced or waived off on selected items especially fresh seasonal fruits.
- More space should be provided to ease the clearing and screening process of containers carrying cargo.
- Pakistan should open additional formal border crossings with Afghanistan to facilitate people's movement. We should digitize cross-border movement of individuals to avoid any delays and impediments at the border crossings.
- Pakistan should prioritize investments in Afghanistan to capitalize on Afghanistan's untapped opportunities and potential and help ensure the capital inflow and transfer of knowledge and technology across the border particularly invest more in mining, telecommunication and carpet-making sectors.

India's intentions and interests in Afghanistan are not only anti-Pakistan but also linked to its ambition to be seen as a great power and as a policeman of the region. An analysis of Pakistan's engagement in Afghanistan reveals that Islamabad is merely responding to the Indian ingress into Afghanistan to protect its territorial integrity and sovereignty and not following an independent Afghan centric approach which is the need of the hour.

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