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## Future Contours of Afghanistan's Security Landscape and its Implications for India



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### Introduction

The recent yet significant development in India's extended neighbourhood has missed the focus in the ensuing global melee against COVID-19 pandemic. A peace deal was signed between US and Taliban which laid down a timeline of 14 months for the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> Taliban claimed it to be a 'victory of sorts' since it envisages a key role for itself in shaping the future of Afghanistan. Taliban's return to the centre stage is a cause of concern for the region, since it refreshes the memory of the ruthlessness and chaos that prevailed in Afghanistan during its rule in the 1990s, as also earned the country the epithet of 'epicentre of terrorism' during its reign.

Afghanistan is a country of multi-ethnic groups, traditionally ruled by tribal warlords. It is a country which have always proved difficult to govern by one central authority and where the world powers played the 'Great Game' for attaining strategic influence. In the nineteenth century, Britain attempted to gain control over Afghanistan which resulted in a disastrous outcome. In the twentieth

### Key Points

- The US-Taliban peace deal is fraught with challenges, since the current Afghan government was left out during the negotiations.
- The deal is a result of US' domestic political compulsions, and any future US involvement depends on the outcome of its Presidential elections.
- US' withdrawal is likely to cede space to extremist Islamic organisations, and Taliban envisages a key role for itself in post-US Afghanistan.
- Political power-sharing, the role of Islam, women rights, human rights protection, and future of democracy in Afghanistan, are contentious issues in intra-Afghan talks.
- Pakistan, Iran, and China have high stakes and wishes to remain stakeholders in Afghanistan.
- India needs to remain a stakeholder in Afghanistan and any regional round table or dialogue on Afghanistan must include India.

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## Future Contours of Afghanistan's Security Landscape ...

century, USSR intervened militarily following a 1978 coup to support pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan, however the intervention resulted in a humiliating withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989. In the twenty-first century, US commenced a war in Afghanistan to rid it of terrorists in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks as part of *Op Enduring Freedom*. As history repeats itself, US forces are all set to withdraw from Afghanistan by 2021.

As a follow-up to the deal, comprehensive intra-Afghan talks were supposed to begin within 10 days; however, the same was delayed on account of lack of consensus within the Afghan government due to disputed elections, differences of opinion over prisoners' release, and the onset of COVID-19. These talks are critical, since a strategy is to be devised about the modalities of political power-sharing, the role of Islam, women rights, human rights protection, and future of democracy in Afghanistan.

The emerging situation in Afghanistan is a matter of deep concern for India, especially from the geo-strategic and security perspective. A critical analysis of envisaged future developments in Afghanistan with its implications for India is given in succeeding paragraphs.

### Current Realities

As the events unfolded in Afghanistan, the security situation appeared grim and uncertain in the foreseeable future. Notwithstanding the peace deal between the US and Taliban signed on February 29, 2020 at Doha, the Afghan government expressed their reservations in releasing 5,000 Taliban prisoners, a pre-condition to begin intra-Afghan talks.<sup>2</sup> Violent incidents in the country, including the targeting of minorities, have continued unabated, and disputed elections of September 2019 resulted in a political crisis with the emergence of two power structures led by Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. The two have signed a power-sharing agreement on May 17, 2020 with Ghani retaining Presidentship and Abdullah nominated as Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, which is responsible for talks with the Taliban.<sup>3</sup> The policy level cooperation between these two leaders in the future remains a matter of speculation.

The impending withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan by 2021 is likely to cede space to extremist Islamic organisations, viz. Taliban, Al-Qaeda and Daesh-Khorasan (Islamic State). The return of Taliban is set to benefit Pakistan the most, which has played a central

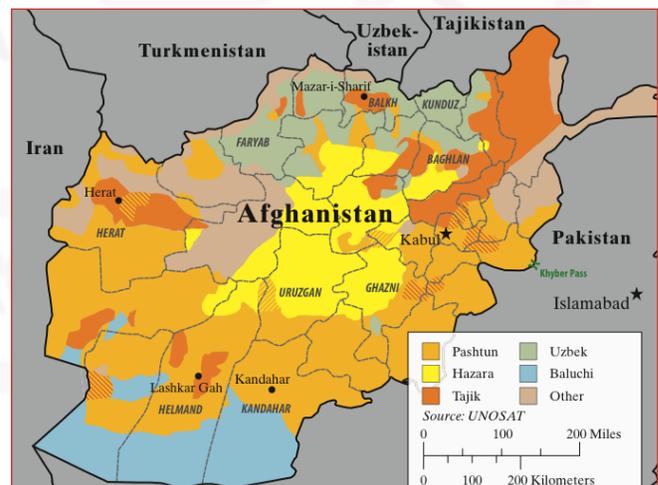
role in materialising the US-Taliban talks. Though Pakistan's cooperation for the conclusion of the deal was crucial, there is a necessity to maintain pressure on it to crack down on terror activities emanating from its soil. Already there are reports indicating that Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) has moved few of their training camps to the eastern borders of Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> The Haqqani network, JeM, LeT along with the Taliban, provides leverage to Pakistan to calibrate terror activities in Afghanistan and Kashmir. India has been maintaining that, any peace process should not lead to "ungoverned spaces" where terrorists or their proxies can relocate.<sup>5</sup>

Development in Afghanistan has also been hampered due to corruption and ineffective governance. There has been stagnation in revenue collection and a rift persists over handling of aid for development projects. As things stand, peace and stability remain elusive and attempts by the Taliban to return to power, with international recognition, in a country with fragmented power structure continues. Future of intra-Afghan talks remains uncertain and the outbreak of COVID-19 places additional burden on the country which is considered 'ill-prepared' to handle a public health emergency of such a large scale.

### Tribal Dynamics

Fourteen recognised ethnic groups live in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> External powers in the past have exploited the tribal differences for their gain. Shia Iran backed Hazara militias

Map 1: Afghanistan Tribal Layout



Source: Available at [www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com), accessed on March 24, 2020

against the Soviets in the 1980s, whereas Pakistan and Saudi Arabia helped the predominantly Pashtun Taliban.<sup>7</sup> There are also cross-border affiliations, viz. Pashtuns with fellow Pashtuns in Pakistan; Uzbeks, Tajiks and Turks with their ethnic communities across the northern borders and Baluchis with their kinsmen in Pakistan and Iran. The Afghans place their tribal loyalties above their country. The ethno-politics acts as a centrifugal force for the tribes, thus making it difficult for any central power to govern the country (Map 1).

### Influence of Taliban

Taliban, an ultra-orthodox Islamic fundamentalist group, ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, before being toppled by the US invasion, and since then it has regrouped inside Pakistani territory and continued insurgent activities. A firm believer of radical Wahhabi ideology, they governed the country with Sharia laws. It has approximately 60,000 fighters, predominantly Pashtuns.<sup>8</sup> The group is currently headed by Haibatullah Akhundzada with two deputies – Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob (son of Mohammad Omar, erstwhile head of the Taliban) and Sirajuddin Haqqani (head of the Haqqani Network). The Taliban has nine commissions and three administrative organs through which it runs a shadow government. The Military Commission appoints shadow Governors and battlefield Commanders for each of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.<sup>9</sup> According to the Foundation for Defence of Democracies Long War Journal, a US based publication, Taliban presently controls 75 districts, whereas the government

controls 133 districts. Balance 189 districts remain contested (Map 2).<sup>10</sup>

According to the 2020 UN Report, the Taliban has strong quid pro quo ties with the Al-Qaeda and provides protection to them in exchange for resources and training.<sup>11</sup> The Al-Qaeda has approximately 600 fighters in Afghanistan, mostly based out of Eastern provinces.<sup>12</sup> Haqqani Network is also considered a component of the Taliban and shares symbiotic relations with Al-Qaeda, and maintains close relations with Pakistan Inter Services Intelligence (ISI).<sup>13</sup>

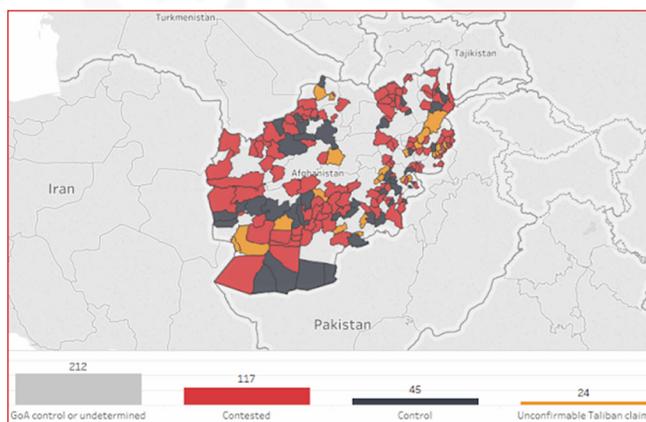
IS-Khorasan has its presence in the Eastern Province of Nangarhar bordering Pakistan. According to a US intelligence report, it has approximately 5,000 fighters in Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> Most of its leaders and fighters are estranged members of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and they do not recognise the international borders. Analysts have claimed that, some of the disgruntled Taliban fighters, displeased with the peace deal, may switch over to Daesh.<sup>15</sup>

### Internal Challenges and Concerns

Given the faction-ridden violent past of Afghanistan, the future remains unpredictable. Vanda Felbab-Brown, a senior fellow in Centre for 21st Century Security and Intelligence in the Foreign Policy program, Brookings Institution has predicted two plausible scenarios in Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> In an optimistic scenario, the Afghan government and Taliban will manage to negotiate a deal within the 14 months' period allowed for US' withdrawal. The other scenario envisages a coup, either by military or any other politicians, leading to a civil war. Yet another scenario could be of internal conflict wherein Taliban may delay the culmination of political talks till US' withdrawal and then escalate violence to consolidate its hold over the contested areas, to make the governance by current regime untenable.

In all scenarios, the Taliban emerges as a major player and post US' withdrawal, it surely will have a significant role in governance since it is militarily strong, controls substantial territory, and has powerful leadership and tacit support of Pakistan. Over the years, Russia, China, Iran, and US have all made peace with the Taliban, despite their differences of the past. The present National Unity Government in Afghanistan is deeply divided within, and even if it survives the current political crises, it is unlikely to match

**Map 2: Taliban Control in Afghanistan**



Source: FDD Long War Journal, available at <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>, accessed on May 31, 2020

up to the Taliban without US' support. Given the prevailing conditions, the scenario of internal conflict appears likely, since the much-desired stability, as envisaged in the peace deal, remains unachievable.

It is difficult to predict the level of control the Taliban will wield, but with a fragile government at the centre, they are likely to be key players in the internal functioning of Afghanistan. The return of Taliban may again take the country back to the era of sharia laws that was enforced during its previous rule in the 1990s. Overall, the Afghan society is likely to get radicalised more, with massive curbs on women rights and the democratic rights coming under severe strain.

According to the US-Taliban deal, the 'nuts and bolts' for any future arrangements in the country have to be worked out during the Intra-Afghan talks. However, the talks are already fraught with numerous challenges. First, the key stakeholder in these talks is the Afghan government; however, the political schism has strengthened the position of the Taliban. Degree of freedom allowed to Abdullah led High Council for National Reconciliation in talks with Taliban, is not yet known. Second, prisoner exchange is a contentious issue, as the Afghan government, rather than releasing all of them *ab initio*, may want to retain prisoners including few leaders for leveraging at a later stage, which might prove to be a deal breaker. Third, continued violent actions by either side may give a reason for the other side to walk out of the talks.

The economy will face a major impact due to the deteriorating security situation. According to the World Bank, Afghanistan's biggest economic challenge is finding sustainable sources of growth. The Afghan economy is estimated to have grown by 2.9 percent in 2019, driven mainly by agricultural growth; yet the trade deficit remains extremely large at 31 percent of the GDP, financed mostly by grant inflows.<sup>17</sup> Volatile security conditions, political instability, a large number of internally displaced people (more than 4 lakh in 2019) and return of refugees (approximately 5 lakh returned from Iran in 2019) will put a strain on the economy.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the current international security and civilian grant support pledges are set to expire by the end of 2020, which will have deleterious effects on the economy and the current outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic is likely to further exacerbate the economic conditions. Rising poverty and lack of economic opportunities leading to unemployment, are likely triggers for insurgencies in the near future.

The Afghan government draws its strength from the capability of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) to effectively handle operations and provide security. Thus, the overall competence of ANDSF to stand on its own without the support from coalition forces, will dictate the direction in which intra-Afghan talks progress. Afghan Security Forces have an assigned strength of 2,53,850 personnel with roughly 18,000 Afghan Local Police (ALP) personnel.<sup>19</sup> US had pledged 47.7 billion dollars and disbursed approximately 47.4 billion dollars from 2005 to 2018 to build, train, equip and sustain these forces.<sup>20</sup> Thus, sustaining this force financially and maintaining its cohesion will be a major challenge.

Notwithstanding the counter terror assurances given by Taliban, the existence of multiple non-state actors, treacherous topography and existing demographic faultlines make Afghanistan a preferred choice for an operational base by terrorist organisations. Hence, containment of these organisations is a major concern not only for the Afghan government but for other 'peace loving' nations.

### External Factors

Afghanistan has been a playfield for external players for many years. Therefore, key interests of its immediate neighbours in the post US withdrawal environment requires critical analysis. Pakistan, China and Iran, all have high stakes in Afghanistan and may wish to remain an influential stakeholder post US withdrawal.

Pakistan wants a pliant regime in Afghanistan to safeguard its multiple interests. First, it considers control over Afghanistan essential to maintain a strategic depth against India. Hence, it wants Afghanistan to curtail its ties with India. Second, it has an outstanding border dispute with Afghanistan along the Durand Line which it desires to settle favourably. Third, large number of Afghan refugees reside in various parts of Pakistan due to ethnic linkages, whom it may want to repatriate. Fourth, it requires bases along the Af-Pak border for the terror groups capable of providing mercenaries for its proxy war in Kashmir.

China, in the last two decades, has maintained a 'studied distance' from the US led Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) and avoided any military involvement in Afghanistan. However, being the biggest foreign investor in

Afghanistan and having invested in copper extraction, oil-gas sector and road-rail infrastructure, China's interests in Afghanistan are deeply economic and strategic in nature.<sup>21</sup> China also views Afghanistan from the perspective of countering separatism, extremism, and terrorism in the Xinjiang region. However, the Afghans should view with due skepticism, any larger role played by China in its internal affairs.

Iran, in addition to its ethnic connections, also has its trade interests in Afghanistan, since links to Central Asia passes through the Afghan territory. Iran would like to prevent the emergence of an anti-Shia stronghold in Afghanistan and check the rise of terror groups which threatens the Shias. Hence, it may favour a heterogeneous Afghan government comprising the current regime and Taliban to maintain balance and control.<sup>22</sup>

*“Corruption, government malfeasance, record high opium production, and criminalisation of economy continue to be the greatest threat to the sustainability of what has been achieved in Afghanistan.”*

– **Alice G Wells**, Acting Assistant Secretary for South & Central Asia, US Department of State

## Prognosis

The Afghans have a history of dependence on foreign aid, which has not allowed their domestic economy to thrive. Over the years, number of countries have made investments to create a stable and secure environment in Afghanistan. However, foreign aid has often been used to buy the loyalty of ethnic groups and increase influence in provinces, rather than supporting development. High levels of corruption, political instability, ineffective governance and utter disregard for rule of law, casts a shadow on the future of Afghanistan.

US announced a 14-month timeline for troop withdrawal due to domestic political compulsions, and also that, any future involvement of the US would largely depend on the outcome of the US elections in November 2020 and also as to how the new government perceives its strategic interests in Afghanistan. The outlook of the new administration in power will thus dictate the future US policies in the region. According to the Bilateral Security Accord (BSA), signed between US and Afghanistan on 30 September 2014, US' engagement is up to 2024.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, US is likely to continue playing a long-term role in the Region.

Sensing urgency on the part of the US to withdraw its forces, the Taliban have used the peace deal to negotiate the withdrawal of all foreign troops, with the ultimate aim of gaining control over Afghanistan. The present domestic preoccupation of US in its fight with COVID-19 pandemic allows the Taliban to play hard in the peace process and this may result in no tangible progress being made in intra-Afghan talks. The only interest of the Taliban in the peace talks is to seek the release of its leaders and fighters, who are currently languishing in prisons. Despite signing of a power-sharing agreement between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, the bitterness in their relations is well known. Though differences have persisted since 2014, it is more critical now due to its negative impact on the process of intra-Afghan talks.

In the foreseeable future, the violence level is expected to rise and Afghan security forces are likely to remain the prime target of attacks by Taliban, though collateral damage to lives and properties of civilians cannot be ruled out. A rival of Taliban-Al Qaeda combine, IS-Khorasan also has a considerable strength in Afghanistan and may resort to violence to claim the space vacated after US' withdrawal. It has been targeting minorities and Shia-Hazaras in the past.

Most nations are presently facing economic distress due to COVID-19 virus and may find it difficult to offer any economic support/aid, and thus the Afghan economy, in its current state, appears to be in severe crisis. US Secretary of State also threatened to reduce aid due to Afghan political differences. Further, the loss of economic opportunities and unemployment may result in chaos and disorder, which in turn will strengthen the terror groups.

Given China's close ties with Pakistan and its economic and geopolitical interests, it is slated to play a larger but tacit role in the immediate future of Afghanistan. Having courted Taliban even prior to 'Operation Enduring Freedom' and having signed a 'Memorandum of Understanding on Economic and Technical Cooperation' with Taliban just a few days before 9/11, it is easier for China to engage with the Taliban.<sup>24</sup> Any voids created due to disengagement by the US in Afghanistan may be filled up by China, though any military involvement of People's Liberation Army (PLA) can be ruled out.

Pakistan is likely to remain involved in the internal affairs of Afghanistan and may meddle in the intra-Afghan talks. Upgradation of terror support infrastructure by Taliban-

ISI duo in Af-Pak region is likely, which may prove to be detrimental to the regional stability and security. Due to strict international financial controls, terror funding may become difficult and to sustain their activities, the terrorist organisations may generate revenue through cultivation of poppy, and drug trade may thrive. To secure its trade interests as also to prevent any refugee spillover, Iran may continue to maintain leverage with its ethnic connections in the Hazara and Tajik communities.

### Implications for India

India has shared historical ties with Afghanistan and maintained cordial relations with all Afghan governments, barring the Taliban regime (1996-2001), during which even the Indian Embassy had closed down. The ties have been rebuilt since then and India has made a tremendous contribution in reconstruction efforts, which has often been acknowledged by the Afghan government and its people.

According to the available estimates, India has invested more than 3 billion US dollars in various schemes and projects in Afghanistan, which includes 290 million US dollars for construction of Salma Dam (India-Afghanistan Friendship Dam) in Herat Province, 135 million US dollars for the construction of Delaram-Zaranj Highway and 90 million US dollars for the Afghan Parliament Building.<sup>25</sup> Other high impact projects include rebuilding Habibia High School and reconstructing Child Hospital & Institute in Kabul, building a cricket stadium in Kandahar, the construction of power station and transmission lines, upgrading television and telephone networks, and resuscitation of water reservoirs.<sup>26</sup> The Hajigak Iron Ore Deposit tender was won by an Indian Consortium, and infrastructure development related to the project is complete. There are many other smaller and less visible projects too and the future of such projects need safeguarding.

Other than economic investments, India has played an important role in developing, training and equipping the Afghan National Army (ANA) and thus it is essential that in any emerging post-deal arrangements, ANA maintains the bond developed with the Indian security establishment.

India's relations with the Taliban have remained strained since inception and the images of IC 814 hijack in 1999 are still fresh. In the run-up to the US-Taliban talks,

India always insisted on Afghan-owned, Afghan-led and Afghan-controlled peace process, even though Ashraf Ghani government was sidelined in the talks. Resultantly, there has been no rapprochement between India and Taliban due to which, the investments made by India in Afghanistan and a foothold established by India in the geo-strategically important country with great difficulty, is at risk.

The suspicion and antagonism towards India has been common to both China and Pakistan. Consequently, marginalising India's role in Afghanistan may emerge as another area of cooperation between China and Pakistan. Together, they may attempt to elbow India out of the Region.

Pakistan also remains fixated with its policy of waging a proxy war in J&K and to support the effort, the ISI facilitates infiltration of terrorists across the Line of Control or the International Border and plans terror actions in the Union Territory, as also incites people's agitation against the government using social media. The activation of terror camps of Kashmir-centric groups in Af-Pak border areas and any increase in the influence of IS in Afghanistan will have perilous implications for the Indian security calculus. Hence, the change of regime in Afghanistan is certainly bound to have a serious fallout in J&K. Return of Taliban is likely to increase the availability of mercenaries for a proxy war in J&K and according to recent reports, a resident of Budgam District of J&K was arrested in March 2020 by Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) in Kandahar Province along with Aslam Farooqui, Chief of ISKP.<sup>27</sup> In another operation, Afghan Forces had arrested a JeM terrorist of Pakistan origin.<sup>28</sup> Since, attacks on the Indian soil in future may originate in Afghanistan, it is imperative that links with friendly intelligence agencies operating there are strengthened.

Afghanistan is a landlocked country with high level of dependency on Pakistan for trade. Connectivity is essential to boost economic activities, hence early completion of the Chabahar Project and integrating it with the Delaram-Zaranj highway, as an alternative to Pakistan, is vital. It will also enhance the stakes for the ruling dispensation in Afghanistan and its Western neighbour Iran to ensure the security of the axis. Importance of soft power diplomacy needs no elaboration – music, food, language, Bollywood and cricket are some common areas of interests between the two countries.

Afghanistan also has been home to Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist minorities since ancient times. According to Narender Singh Khalsa, member of Loya Jirga (Lower house), there are about 1000 Sikhs consisting of 225 families.<sup>29</sup> Another estimate puts the figures at 245 Hindu-Sikh families with an approximate population of 1,300.<sup>30</sup> These religious minorities has been facing persecution and over the years, large numbers have migrated to other countries. In the recent past, they have been targeted by terror groups. Thus, India needs to show solidarity with these ethnic groups and ensure their security.

There is a need for India to consolidate gains made over the last two decades, and therefore diplomatic support needs to be provided to the democratically elected government during the intra-Afghan talks. India needs to remain a stakeholder in Afghanistan and any UN sponsored regional round table or dialogue on Afghanistan must include India, and it must engage actively with both US and Russia. Though Taliban remains untrustworthy, it is imperative that India also open its channels of communication with them and adopts a more accommodative rather than antagonistic approach towards them to cater for all emerging scenarios.

To ensure security for Indian investments, it is important to involve larger numbers of local Afghan contractors, thus enlarging the community of stakeholders. Opening up of the Indian Defence market for supplying weapons and military equipment also needs serious consideration by the policy makers.

## Conclusion

In Afghanistan, stability is perceived differently by different stakeholders. For the US, safe withdrawal of forces with no direct terror threats to its interests, may be construed as desired stability, whereas for China eliminating Uyghur terror threat and protecting Chinese businesses/projects may be seen as stability. In the case of Pakistan, a strong Taliban regime controlling Afghanistan may bring stability, whereas, for India, a strong democratic government which does not allow terror groups to operate from its soil, will be in order. However, with suspicions running deep amongst ethnic groups and political class, the conflict-ridden country is unlikely to witness stability in the near future.

Afghanistan's development hinges on infrastructure development, which in turn is related to a secure

environment. The synergy of effort is hence a sine qua non for stabilisation of Afghanistan. The focus of multinational effort needs to be on countering terror, capacity building and development of Afghan institutions.

As India looks at being a reliable regional power in South Asia, it needs to be closely involved in the future of Afghanistan and cannot afford to leave its fate to be decided by China-Pak-Taliban trio. Towards this end, improved ties with the US needs to be exploited which is pushing for a greater role for India in the Indo-Pacific region, even beyond South Asia. There is a strategic community which professes that India needs to abstain from any direct involvement in Afghanistan, claiming it to be outside the sphere of influence since we do not share any border with them. It is worth appreciating that India's aspirations need to be matched by credible and tangible actions in our extended neighbourhood.

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