

A Cautious Balance

Explaining India's Approach towards Afghanistan's Peace Process

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Introduction

'It is not for Pakistan to decide as to what role another country [India] has in regional or global affairs. Pakistan also cannot decide on behalf of an independent and sovereign country Afghanistan and dictate them as to how to conduct their foreign policy', said Raveesh Kumar, the Official Spokesperson of India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on January 18, 2019, in response to Pakistan's statement that 'India has no role in Afghanistan'.¹ Kumar went on to blame Pakistan for supporting 'cross-border terrorism' against its neighbours and sought Islamabad to 'join international efforts to bring inclusive peace to Afghanistan'.² Reflective of the tense triangular geopolitical dynamic between Kabul, Islamabad, and New Delhi, the statement highlighted India's struggle to ensure its political relevance in the Afghan peace process. Despite having invested over US\$2 billion in Afghanistan's reconstruction efforts since 2001, India's official position of supporting an 'Afghan [government]-led, Afghan [government]-owned, and Afghan [government]-controlled'³ reconciliation process came under severe strain when the United States' decided to hold direct talks with the Pakistan-supported Afghan Taliban since

¹ Government of India (GoI), 'Official Spokesperson's response to media query', 18/01/2019: Link [here](#).

² Ibid

³ GoI, 'Text of Strategic Partnership Agreement', *Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)*, 04/10/2011: Link [here](#).

November 2018.⁴ Held in Doha, the US-Afghan Taliban talks undermine the Afghan government that made multiple offers to the Afghan Taliban since 2014 to hold peace talks ‘without any preconditions’, only to be rebuffed by the latter.⁵ In contrast, the process strengthened the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan’s position vis-à-vis Kabul, and lent weight to Islamabad’s threat of reducing India’s presence in Afghanistan.

Why does New Delhi continue to refuse diplomatic engagement with the Afghan Taliban and supports a government in Kabul that is hamstrung by internal divisions, endemic corruption, and may not survive without financial, political, and military support from the US? India’s approach seems perplexing given its intent to maintain long-term presence in Afghanistan and to cultivate friendly ties with Kabul. The fact that the US and other actors such as China, Russia, and Iran are engaging with the Afghan Taliban imparts urgency to this question.⁶ What makes it important, however, are the interconnections between the Afghan conflict and South Asian geopolitics. India’s tormented relationship with Pakistan and increasing power potential will ensure that whatever position it takes on these issues will have an impact on Afghanistan’s future. Nonetheless, what makes this question interesting is the fact that India’s relations with the Kabul government itself underwent a shift since 2014. In early 2018, when Afghan president Ashraf Ghani reached out to the Afghan Taliban offering talks without any preconditions, India welcomed the move at the UN

⁴ ‘Taliban holds talks with US envoy in Qatar’, Al Jazeera, 19/11/2018; Link [here](#). Give some readings on Pakistan’s support for the Afghan Taliban (female authors as well).

⁵ Government of Afghanistan (GoA), ‘The Kabul Process for Peace & Security Cooperation in Afghanistan Declaration’, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 28/02/2018: Link [here](#).

⁶ ‘Russia, U.S., China aim to cajole Taliban into inter-Afghan talks’, *Reuters*, 24/04/2019, Link [here](#). For a longer history of China’s engagement with the Taliban see Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia’s New Geopolitics* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2015); Andrew Higgins and Mujib Mashal, “In Moscow, Afghan Peace Talks Without the Afghan Government”, *New York Times*, 04/02/2019, link [here](#).

with a cautionary note that ‘the Afghan Government’s willingness for peace is despite the fact that armed groups have identified themselves and demonstrated to all of us that they are the irreconcilables ... it should also be clear to the armed opposition that there would be no tolerance for those who continue violence’.⁷ This statement marked a subtle but certain departure from India’s previous reaction to a similar outreach by Kabul in 2015. At that point in time, Indian officials viewed Ghani’s desire for talks as a ‘tilt’ towards Pakistan, antithetical to India’s strategic interests. In response, New Delhi cancelled high-level bilateral and multilateral engagements with Kabul.⁸

India’s role in Afghanistan has traditionally attracted limited analytical attention.⁹ Often considered to be a peripheral player, Indian presence in Afghanistan is often understood in binary terms either as a positive regional power invested in the developmental sector, or as a negative regional competitor of Pakistan. Such a

⁷ Government of India (GoI), ‘The irreconcilable guns in Afghanistan need to be silenced: Statement by Ambassador Syed Akbaruddin, Permanent Representative to the UN’, *Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)*, 08/03/2018: [Link here](#).

⁸ Suhasini Haidar, ‘India rebuffs Afghanistan on Strategic Meet’, *The Hindu*, 29/08/2015: [Link here](#).

⁹ For existing survey of India’s Afghanistan policy and larger approach vis-à-vis Central Asia, see Tanvi Pate, “Soft Power, Strategic Narratives, and State Identity: Re-assessing India-Afghanistan Relations post-2011” *India Review*, 17 (3), 320-351, 2018; Sanya Saroha, Ashok Behuria, and Yaqoob Ul Hassan, “US-Taliban Talks for Afghan Peace: Complexities Galore”, *Strategic Analysis*, 43 (2), 126-137, 2019; C Christine Fair, “Under the Shrinking US Security Umbrella: India’s End Game in Afghanistan?” *International Affairs*, 87 (3), May 2011, 571-588; Sandra Destradi, “India: A Reluctant Partner for Afghanistan”, *The Washington Quarterly*, 37 (2), 2014, 103-117; Shanthie Mariet D’Souza, “India’s Evolving Policy Contours towards Post-2014 Afghanistan”, *Journal of South Asian Development*, 82 (5), September 2013, 185-207; Meena Singh Roy, “India’s interests in Central Asia”, *Strategic Analysis*, 12, 2001, 2273-2289; Harsh Pant, “India in Afghanistan: A Test Case for a rising power”, *Contemporary South Asia*, 18 (2), 2010, 133-153; Elisabeth Leake, *The Defiant Border: The Afghan-Pakistan Borderlands in the Era of Decolonization, 1936-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Avinash Paliwal, *My Enemy’s Enemy – India in Afghanistan from the Soviet Invasion to the US Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017)

narrative overlooks the complexity of India's relationship with Afghanistan and its enduring role in moulding the contours of the Afghan conflict and its importance in crafting a future resolution. Unsurprisingly, as the US seeks a negotiated settlement with the Afghan Taliban, there is limited clarity about the direction of India's role therein, and much concern about its increasing isolation in Afghanistan.¹⁰ To fill this gap in literature and to offer an answer to the question raised above, this article focuses on India's contrasting response to Ghani's outreach to the Afghan Taliban in 2015 and 2018/19.¹¹ To be sure, the article does not aim to validate, dispute, or advance theoretical debates on India's foreign policymaking.¹² Neither does it intend to offer a historical overview, or detailed future scenarios, of India's relationship with Afghanistan. The objective is to unpack the source of India's contrasting responses on peace talks between 2015 and 2018, and in doing so, explain the reasons for India's continuous distancing from the Afghan Taliban despite the Trump's administrations direct talks with the group.

The article argues that India's core desire is to ensure a strategic balance between Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹³ Given the power differential between Kabul and Islamabad, this means that India wants to ensure that Pakistan does not manipulate the terms of reconciliation between the Afghan Taliban and Kabul.¹⁴ This is because one

¹⁰ Indrani Bagchi, 'India elbowed out of the Afghanistan peace talks', *Times of India*, 15/07/2019; link [here](#).

¹¹ For analysis on how India dealt with the rise of the Taliban in the mid-1990s see, Avinash Paliwal, 'India's Taliban Dilemma – To Contain or to Engage?', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 40 (1-2), 36-67, 2017

¹² For a primer on that see, Harsh Pant ed. *New Directions in India's Foreign Policy: Theory and Praxis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)

¹³ Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 13-17.

¹⁴ The idea of balance here is not insinuating a wider construct that has to do with actual balance of power between two countries. It implies Afghan strategies to cope with Pakistani pressure in the face of overwhelming power imbalance. Of note here is the aspect that India is not averse to Kabul reconciling with the Afghan Taliban and

of the demands Pakistan consistently makes from Kabul in return for cooperation is a reduction in Indian diplomatic, intelligence, and developmental presence in Afghanistan.¹⁵ India's objective is to ensure that no future dispensation in Kabul undermines Indian interests in the country. The aim to maintain such a strategic balance between Afghanistan and Pakistan is informed by a combination of two more structural drivers. These include changes in other regional and global power's approach towards Afghanistan, the evolving landscape of Afghanistan's mainstream politics, and the balance of power between the Afghan Taliban and Kabul. In 2015, lack of clarity about the US's Afghanistan policy, continuing Afghan Taliban offensives, and Ghani's temporary side-lining of India, raised concerns in New Delhi about Kabul's impending 'strategic tilt' towards Islamabad at the cost of Indian interests. In contrast, Kabul's 2018 overture was backed by a commitment by the Trump to continue US troop presence on the basis of 'conditions on the ground – not arbitrary timetables'.¹⁶ The peace overture itself was made directly to the Afghan Taliban and not to Pakistan. Unlike in 2015, Ghani took India into confidence in 2018 before calling for dialogue 'without preconditions', and earned Indian support despite the erosion of Kabul's control over large territorial pockets across the country.¹⁷

India's desire to limit Pakistan's scope for manipulating the reconciliation process between the Afghan Taliban and the government is central in keeping its

vice versa i.e. the Afghan Taliban is not the problem per se. Pakistani influence on the Afghan Taliban and the latter's inability to liberate itself from such influence is the problem. Enabling Kabul to devise ways of handling and potentially countering Pakistani pressures on the issue of reconciling with the Afghan Taliban (despite the overwhelming power imbalance between the two countries) is at the heart of India's Afghanistan policy.

¹⁵ 'A Conversation with Shahid Khaqan Abbasi', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 20/09/2017: Link [here](#).

¹⁶ United States Government (USG), 'Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia', *The White House*, 21/08/2017, link [here](#).

¹⁷ Author's interview with A, serving Indian intelligence official, New Delhi, 2017

policy focussed upon Kabul. This is despite Trump's decision to open direct talks with the Afghan Taliban in 2019. There is a sense in New Delhi that no arrangement that favours one entity over the other (i.e. the Afghan Taliban or the Kabul government) is likely to succeed.¹⁸ In this context, New Delhi views the Afghan Taliban as a group that has failed to liberate itself from its dependence on Pakistan, and is thus of limited strategic value to India. If anything, opening official channels with the Afghan Taliban is likely to increase the group's international profile and strengthen its hand against Kabul. This was apparent in India's refusal to accept an interim government in Kabul as discussed during the US-Afghan Taliban six-day talks in Doha in February 2019.¹⁹ This article unpacks these empirics in three sections. First, it outlines the spectrum of India's Afghanistan policy debate and the drivers of policy change. Here the article borrows Avinash Paliwal's analytical work wherein he demonstrates how some Indian officials (partisans) advocate an aggressive anti-Pakistan operational stance, whereas others (conciliators) argue for an accommodative approach towards Pakistan-supported groups in Afghanistan.²⁰ Second, it details Ghani's outreach to Pakistan in 2014-15, India's disapproval of the same, and explains the source of India's opposition. Third, it explains why India approved Ghani's outreach in 2018 after having opposed it in 2015. Based on this analysis the conclusion articulates the reason for India's unceasing support for Kabul.

¹⁸ Harsh V. Pant and Avinash Paliwal, "India's Afghan Dilemma Is Tougher Than Ever", *Foreign Policy*, 19/02/2019, [Link here](#); Amar Sinha, India's Ambassador to Afghanistan (2013-2016), 'Naïve To Think Taliban Will Pull The Plug On Other Terror Groups', *Strategic News International*, 10/05/2019, [Link here](#).

¹⁹ Devirupa Mitra, "India to US: Not in Favour of 'Interim' Government in Afghanistan", *The Wire*, 03/02/2019, [Link here](#).

²⁰ Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 10-19

Before we move to the next section it is important to highlight the research methodology of this article. Such a disclosure is important given how contemporary and sensitive the issue under analysis is. The complexity and uncertainty of the Afghan conflict and limited information on the ongoing US talks with the Afghan Taliban puts a limit on offering a definitive analysis on India's engagement with these processes. To ameliorate some such concerns, this article utilises the partisans versus conciliators theoretical lens that Paliwal offers as a heuristic to explain India's behaviour in Afghanistan since 1979.²¹ The following section on the spectrum of India's strategy debate and policy drivers fleshes out this framework in context of the central question raised in the article. In terms of sources and data gathering, the article relies heavily on publicly available official statements (particularly India's statements at the United Nations Security Council – UNSC), existing secondary literature, media reports, and a selection of primary interviews with officials who were directly responsible for shaping India's Afghanistan policy in recent years. Whereas some interviews were conducted during between 2013 and 2016, others were conducted for between 2017 and 2019. To be clear, interview data is problematic, and does not match the gold standard of archival material. But the contemporary nature of this article makes semi-structured interviews critical, if not definitive. To ensure that the information provided in these conversations is correct, I corroborated it with available primary and secondary sources, as well as from other interviewees who were privy to such information. All interviewees were shortlisted based on prior information about their position within the Government of India. Most of these interviews, especially those conducted over the last couple of years, were held under pledges of anonymity.

²¹ Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 10-19. This theoretical lens itself is rooted in the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF). For more on ACF see, Paul A Sabatier and Christopher M Wieble eds. *Theories of Policy Process* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2014)

Where the interviewee was agreeable to reveal identity, their full name and designation as well as location and date of the interview is disclosed.

Spectrum of Strategy Debate and Drivers of India's Afghanistan Policy

The security situation in Afghanistan, and Pakistan's role therein makes Afghanistan strategically important for India. Given Afghanistan and India's strained ties with Pakistan, bonhomie between Kabul and New Delhi is often understood as 'proxy warfare'.²² This dominant narrative implies that India and Pakistan compete for influence over different Afghan factions to limit each other's room for strategic manoeuvre in the war-torn country. Operationally, this means that India seeks a government in Kabul that will not allow Pakistan's secret service, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), to run training camps for India-centric militants, as it did throughout the 1990s. An India-friendly government in Kabul may use diplomatic and asymmetric warfare tools to exert pressure on Islamabad, just like it did during the presidency of Hamid Karzai by supporting Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants and Baloch separatist leaders.²³ In contrast, Pakistan has historically sought strategic depth in Afghanistan in order to use Afghan territory during a military crisis with India. Today, ensuring a cooperative, if not a compliant, regime in Kabul is viewed

²² William Dalrymple, 'The Deadly Triangle: Afghanistan, Pakistan and India', *The Brookings Institution*, 25/06/2013; Rudra Chaudhuri, 'The Proxy Calculus: Kabul, not Kashmir, Holds the Key to Indo-Pakistani Relationship', *The RUSI Journal*, 22/12/2010, 52-59; Nicholas Howenstein and Sumit Ganguly, 'India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan', *Journal of International Affairs*, University of Columbia, 25/03/2010, Link [here](#); Fair, "Under the Shrinking US Security Umbrella: India's End Game in Afghanistan?", 571-588; D'Souza, "India's Evolving Policy Contours towards Post-2014 Afghanistan", 185-207

²³ Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 239-246

critical by Islamabad to obviate strategic encirclement by India.²⁴ In the light of this strategic competition, there is consensus among India's policymaking circles that a 'independent, genuinely sovereign, territorially united, and economically strong Afghanistan' is in India's interest.²⁵ It is assumed that a strong and stable Afghanistan will not succumb to Pakistani manipulation of Afghan domestic politics, and is likely to counter Pakistan given the historically strained bilateral ties between Kabul and Islamabad.

The debate emerges on what can, and should, India do to achieve this objective of a strong and stable Afghanistan. The partisan line of argument is that 'India should focus on whoever comes to power in Kabul without fear or favour'.²⁶ India should thus build goodwill among the people of Afghanistan, and engage with every Afghan political unit, including the Afghan Taliban and its various factions. This view pervades the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and sections of India's external intelligence agency the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW).²⁷ Officials who advocate this line appreciate the difficulty of opening and sustaining a meaningful channel with Afghan insurgent groups dependent on Pakistan – but they advocate such an approach nonetheless. An economically proactive (in terms of aid

²⁴ Khalid H Nadiri, 'Old Habits, New Consequences: Pakistan's Posture Towards Afghanistan Since 2001', *International Security*, 39 (2), 2014; C Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) 103-135; Ayesha Siddiqi, "Pakistan's Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Separating Friends from Enemies", *The Washington Quarterly*, 34 (1), 149-162, 2011; Aparna Pande, *Explaining Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Escaping India* (London: Routledge, 2011) 59-87; Tricia Bacon, "Slipping the Leash? Pakistan's Relationship with the Afghan Taliban", *Survival*, 60 (5), 159-180, 2018

²⁵ Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 11-12

²⁶ *Ibid*, 7-26

²⁷ Based on a series of interviews conducted by the author in India with serving and retired diplomats and intelligence officers between 2014 and 2019.

and capacity building) and politically open approach, it is argued, will allow India to have close relations with whoever comes to power in Kabul. Advocates of this argument prefer to avoid the repeat of the 1996 to 2001 phase when India cut all contact with the Taliban and had no embassy in Kabul, despite the latter wanting to keep a channel open.

The conciliatory view calls India to develop strong political, economic, and military ties with *only* those Afghan groups that are at odds with and operate independently of Pakistan. This is a dominant view within the armed forces and domestic intelligence agencies such as the Intelligence Bureau. Such reasoning also resonates among members of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the powerful National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval.²⁸ These policymakers assert that India should actively contain Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan by supporting India's anti-Pakistan Afghan 'friends'. This can be done by offering such groups political, military, and financial support, and by generating international diplomatic support at the UN for their cause. For instance, India's support for the erstwhile United Front, popularly known as the Northern Alliance, during the 1990s was shaped along such partisan lines. If India's material support for such anti-Pakistan Afghan factions falls short of buttressing the former's domestic power base, then, India must undertake overt or covert military operations to undermine their opponents. The best way to make sense of these strategy debates is to view it as a spectrum along which foreign policy decisions are discussed.²⁹ It is equally important to note that this debate is far from being a binary, is heavily context-dependent, and that identifying

²⁸ Doval was part of the Indian negotiations team that went to Kandahar in 1999 to secure the release of the hijacked Air India flight IC814. See Praveen Donthi, 'Undercover – Ajit Doval in Theory and Practice', *The Caravan*, 01/09/2017. Link [here](#).

²⁹ Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 10-13

institutions that (broadly) embody the argument enhanced along either line is an exercise that risks analytical reductionism. For instance, it is possible that a certain policymaker adopts a partisan anti-Pakistan stand at one point in time but navigate to a conciliatory stance in other circumstances.

Which of these ideas translate into policy output depends on the central *driver* of India's Afghanistan policy i.e. New Delhi's desire to strike a strategic balance between Afghanistan and Pakistan. This driver is more important than, if not unrelated to, India's own bilateral relations with Pakistan. If Indian policymakers perceive that Pakistan is succeeding in, or is likely to succeed in, pressuring Afghanistan on the issue of reconciliation with the Afghan Taliban, then the likelihood of a partisan anti-Pakistan and anti-Afghan Taliban policy course increases. On the other hand, India is likely to adopt a conciliatory approach if its policymakers are confident of Afghanistan's intent and capability to negotiate with the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan without compromising on the gains made since 2001 or agreeing to reduced Indian presence in the country. As the following sections demonstrate, India continues to maintain a Kabul-centric partisan policy course despite the resumption of direct talks between the US and the Afghan Taliban. This central driver of India's Afghanistan policy is supplemented by two additional factors; (a) the evolving policies of regional and great powers involved in Afghanistan, and (b) Afghan domestic politics.³⁰

If Iranian and Russian support was important for India to sustain financial links with its favoured factions in the 1990s, the role of the US and NATO became critical to build India's political and developmental presence across Afghanistan after

³⁰ Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 13-14. All these factors are conditioned by India's changing economic capacities and geographical disconnect with Afghanistan. *Ibid*

2001. Equally, within Afghanistan, different political factions have valued India varyingly at different points in time, despite the widespread goodwill that India has historically enjoyed in Afghan society. Ghani, for example, side-lined India in 2015 to address Pakistani concerns.³¹ Both these factors i.e. postures of regional powers and Afghan domestic politics, influence Indian's policy debates on Afghanistan. After all, the question of how to tackle Pakistan's support for the Afghan Taliban animates debates in Kabul, Moscow, Tehran, and Washington DC, as much as it does in New Delhi. In such situations, advocates of both the partisan anti-Pakistan strategy and the conciliatory strategy find allies and detractors internationally that strengthen or weaken their policy views within India.

Another dimension that this article highlights is the impact of structural uncertainty on India's Afghanistan policy. For most part from 2014 to 2017, it was unclear what direction the US will take in Afghanistan i.e. will it withdraw all troops, extend its timeline of withdrawal and limit the troop numbers, or continue to fight indefinitely and may even increase troop presence? Mismatch between the official end of the US-led ISAF operations in December 2014, and continuing US combat operations against a resurgent Afghan Taliban for most part of 2015 and 2016, imparted uncertainty to the situation. Fissures within the National Unity Government (NUG) in Kabul coupled with lack of regional consensus on Afghanistan made matters worse. Such uncertainty strengthened India's anti-Pakistan partisanship in rhetoric, while keeping the door open for a conciliatory approach with pro-Pakistan Afghan factions in practice. The US's decision to open direct communications with the Afghan Taliban in late-2018 affords clarity of intent from the US, but continues to promise uncertainty and prolonged conflict on the ground.

³¹ Praveen Swami, 'Upset with Delay, Kabul shelves request for arms aid from Delhi', *Indian Express*, 30/10/2014

In such situations, no single policy view enjoys decisive influence over policy outcomes. Instead, what occurs is a policy compromise where the government adopts an official *de jure* posture along one or the other line, but *de facto* practices the opposite in order to keep its options open. Such was the case from 2005 to 2011, when India officially maintained that there is ‘no good and bad Taliban’, but opened secret channels with certain Afghan Taliban factions to gauge their views on relations with India – and what they think of India’s presence in Afghanistan.³² Difference between policy rhetoric and practice has reflected the polarized debate within India’s policymaking circles on the Afghan question, and the rough-and-tumble of a war-torn country’s daily politics at moments of particular flux. During moments of transition, Indian prime ministers, unable to make clear strategic choices, give room for both partisanship and conciliation to flourish until the situation on the ground sufficiently clarifies itself.³³ Therefore, essentially, throughout the 2014-2018 period, India officially supported Kabul. But given the myriad problems afflicting the Afghan government, and the US’ decision to open direct talks with the Afghan Taliban, the question of opening a direct channel with the Afghan Taliban remains much debated in New Delhi.

Outreach 1.0

Why did India react negatively to Ghani’s outreach to Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban in 2015? This question is important not just to make sense of India’s acceptance of a similar outreach in 2018, but also because India officially supports an

³² Paliwal, *My Enemy’s Enemy*, 213-245

³³ For insights on how Indian prime minister made some clear foreign policy choices on a select issue such as the India-US nuclear deal, the 2009 Sri Lankan civil war, see Shivshankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India’s Foreign Policy* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2016)

Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and Afghan-controlled reconciliation process since 2011. The following paragraphs introduce Ghani's outreach to the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan in 2015, outline India's reaction thereof, and then examine the reasons for India's reaction.

Ghani's Outreach

Soon after taking office in September 2014, the new Afghan president Ashraf Ghani spent political capital in reaching out to Pakistan. He was responding to Afghanistan's security woes in the wake of the forthcoming drawdown of US combat troops and increasing attacks by the Afghan Taliban.³⁴ His approach was simple i.e. in return for persuading the Afghan Taliban to renounce violence and enter negotiations with his government, Kabul will deliver on Pakistan's demands to reduce Indian influence in the country, and crackdown on TTP figures operating from Afghan soil. US officials believed that only Pakistan could ensure a peaceful 'exit' of US troops and deliver on reconciliation.³⁵ Despite vehement opposition against such an outreach from within and outside the Afghan government, Ghani went ahead.

He articulated a 'five-circle foreign policy' and in a clear signal to Pakistan put India in the 'fourth' circle – to New Delhi's disappointment.³⁶ His first

³⁴ AFP 'Afghan president Ashraf Ghani arrives in Islamabad to build Pakistan ties', *The Guardian*, 14/11/2014: [Link here](#).

³⁵ 'Joint Statement by President Barack Obama and President Ashraf Ghani', *The American Presidency Project*, 24/03/2015, [Link here](#).

³⁶ "The five circles of Ghani's foreign policy objectives are: (i) the neighboring countries, (ii) Islamic countries, (iii) the West, (iv) Asia and (v) international organizations. Initially, President Ghani's "neighboring countries" definition did not include countries that did not share a boundary with Afghanistan, but that soon changed as it raised some eyebrows in India, and possibly Russia, resulting in a U-turn by Ghani to modify the "neighbors"¹ into "neighborhood"² to include countries with significant clout and importance for Afghanistan, such as India."

international trips were to Pakistan, China, and Saudi Arabia, a further sign of the limited importance he attached to India. Furthermore, within a month of taking office, in October 2014, he shelved a long-pending proposal of arms aid from India.³⁷ In early 2015, in one of the most controversial moves in this process, Afghanistan's intelligence agency, the National Directorate for Security (NDS), signed a Memorandum-of-Understanding (MoU) with the ISI without taking its chief Rahmatullah Nabil into confidence.³⁸ It was expected that such a MoU would reduce tensions between the two intelligence agencies and help pave the way for peace talks. Soon after, Ghani met with Pakistan's military and civilian leadership and agreed to allow ISI officers to interrogate imprisoned TTP cadres in order to glean operational intelligence in support of Operation *Zarb-e-Azb*, Pakistan's counter-insurgency operation in Waziristan.³⁹

What made Ghani's outreach audacious was the fact that throughout this period the number of Afghan Taliban attacks increased and resulted in a 28 percent hike in casualty figures of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANSDF).⁴⁰ Plus, Ghani had little domestic support for the outreach. Afghan public

Malaiz Daud, 'Sources of Tension in Afghanistan and Pakistan: A Regional Perspective', *CIDOB Policy Research Project*, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 2016, [Link here](#). Suhasini Haidar, 'In Step With Ghani's Afghanistan', *The Hindu*, 24/04/2015, [Link here](#); Vivek Katju, 'Ghani and India: Circles of Separation', *Gateway House India*, 29/04/2015, [Link here](#).

³⁷ Swami, 'Upset with delay, Kabul shelve request for arms aid from Delhi', *Indian Express*.

³⁸ Mirwais Adeel, 'Afghan NDS chief opposed signing agreement with Pakistan's ISI', *Khaama Press*, 18/05/2018, [Link here](#); Jon Boone and S E Rasmussen, 'Afghan backlash over security deal with Pakistan', *The Guardian*, 19/05/2015, [Link here](#). For more see Christophe Jaffrelot ed. Christophe Jaffrelot (Ed.), *Pakistan at the Crossroads: Domestic Dynamics and External Pressures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016)

³⁹ Interview with 'A'

⁴⁰ Tom Vanden Brook, 'Afghan casualties surged in 2015 because of increased Taliban attacks', *USA Today*, 04/01/2016: [Link here](#).

opinion, especially in urban centers and small towns that witnessed heavy violence, remained staunchly against Pakistan, whose soil the Afghan Taliban operates from. Moreover, having lived and worked in the US for most of his adult life, Ghani did not have local political ‘constituencies’ like other Afghan politicians. He became president with the US supporting him over Abdullah Abdullah, a strong candidate representing the Tajik lobby, and orchestrating a power and title-sharing arrangement through the NUG.⁴¹ The biggest push for his outreach was coming from the White House, which was keen on ending the war in 2014.

By August 2015, the outreach was over. The strains created by domestic opposition, Ghani’s novelty in Afghan politics, and Pakistan’s continuing support for an ever-aggressive Afghan Taliban were too exorbitant. The final blow came in form of a news item in July-end that Mullah Omar had been dead since 2013.⁴² The news came in the middle of Pakistan’s facilitation of peace talks between Kabul, the US, and the Afghan Taliban, and fed into Afghan concerns about Pakistan’s continuing duplicity in the process. The struggle for succession within the Afghan Taliban and the ensuing violence led to a breakdown of the outreach.⁴³ On August 07, 2015, Kabul experienced a series of uncommonly powerful blasts that killed and injured many.⁴⁴ The following morning, Ghani withdrew the peace offer and nearly threatened Pakistan with a counter attack:

⁴¹ ‘John Kerry makes surprise visit to Kabul to ease tension over Afghan unity pact’, *The Guardian*, 09/04/2016, Link [here](#).

⁴² ‘Mullah Omar: Taliban leader ‘died in Pakistan in 2013’’, *BBC News*, 29/07/2015: Link [here](#).

⁴³ Antonio Giustozzi and Silab Mangal, ‘An Interview with Mullah Rasool on Reconciliation between the Taliban and the Afghan government’, *RUSI Commentary*, 16/03/2016: Link [here](#).

⁴⁴ Ahmed Shakib and Rod Nordland, ‘Waves of Suicide Attacks Shake Kabul on its Deadliest Day of 2015’, *New York Times*, 07/08/2015: Link [here](#).

In the middle of the night, at 1:30 a.m., doomsday descended upon our people. It wasn't an earthquake, it wasn't a storm, it was human hand ... I ask the people and government of Pakistan: If a massacre such as the one that occurred in Shah Shaheed had happened in Islamabad and the perpetrators had sanctuaries in Afghanistan, had offices and training centres in our major cities, how would you react?⁴⁵

Ghani was angered by Pakistan's non-cooperation despite having delivered by targeting TTP and IS-K (Islamic State-Khorasan Province) elements.⁴⁶ For its part, Pakistan most likely knew of Mullah Omar's death, but failed to disclose this information to Kabul. This issue diminished whatever little trust Ghani had put in Pakistan to help facilitate peace talks with the Afghan Taliban, and proved crucial to Ghani's change in strategy on Pakistan.

India's Reaction

Initially, New Delhi adopted a wait-and-watch approach and supported the gambit. It was keen on not being viewed as an obstructionist power impeding the NUG's initiatives. In January 2015, Indian diplomats were confident that Ghani would not compromise on the red-lines of reconciliation i.e. Afghan Taliban would need to renounce violence and accept the Afghan constitution in order for any meaningful talks to begin.⁴⁷ Even in April 2015, PM Narendra Modi stated that India would walk 'shoulder to shoulder' with Afghanistan despite increasing concerns

⁴⁵ Mujib Mashal, 'After Kabul Attack, Afghan Leader Points Finger at Pakistan for Failing to Stop Taliban', *New York Times*, 10/08/2015: Link [here](#).

⁴⁶ Ismail Khan, 'ISIS Leaders Reportedly Killed in Drone Strikes in Afghanistan', *New York Times*, 09/07/2015

⁴⁷ Author interview with B, serving MEA official, New Delhi, 2015

about Ghani's unfolding 'strategic tilt' towards Pakistan.⁴⁸ Indian policymakers rationalized Ghani's overtures to Pakistan, including a 'temporary' shelving of arms aid from India, as expedient tactical ploys to achieve a breakthrough in peace talks.⁴⁹

Despite growing concerns with Ghani's direction, the event that really set alarm bells ringing in New Delhi was the May 2015 MoU signed between the Afghan and Pakistani intelligence agencies. It was unusual for two secret agencies at war with each other to sign a public memorandum-of-understanding. The document went against the geopolitical realities of the region and threatened to undermine the strategic balance between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Slowly but surely, India's position began to evolve along partisan lines. In June 2015, New Delhi subtly changed its statement on Afghanistan at the UN, asserting that it will only support a 'truly' Afghan-led and Afghan-owned reconciliation process.⁵⁰

The implication of the statement was clear. New Delhi was losing confidence in Ghani's ability to steer the talks even if it did not think that the balance had decisively tilted in Pakistan's favour. A senior Indian diplomat privy to high-level deliberations on Ghani's outreach warned: 'If this [outreach] becomes a long-term feature, then it will be a problem for India'.⁵¹ A consensus emerged in New Delhi to communicate India's own redlines to Ghani. Important among these was protecting its economic and strategic interests and not allowing the use of Afghan territory for India-centric militants. The other crucial issue was the protection of India's consular

⁴⁸ Smriti Kak Ramachandran, 'India will walk shoulder to shoulder with people of Afghanistan, says Modi', *The Hindu*, 28/04/2015: Link [here](#).

⁴⁹ B interview

⁵⁰ GoI, 'Statement by Asoke Mukherjee in UNSC debate on UNAMA', *MEA*, 17/09/2015: Link [here](#); GoI, 'Statement by Asoke Mukherjee in UNSC debate on UNAMA', *MEA*, 22/06/2015: Link [here](#).

⁵¹ Author interview with C, now retired senior Indian diplomat, December 2014.

and diplomatic presence across the country. In addition to re-opening its embassy in Kabul in 2001, India opened consulates in Kandahar, Jalalabad, Herat, and Mazar-e-Sharif. Such consular presence allowed India to monitor Pakistan's activities in Afghanistan, and assess whether these would have any direct or indirect impact on India's national security.⁵² A central part of India's regional security infrastructure, these consulates became a thorn in its relationship with Pakistan as it blamed New Delhi supporting anti-Pakistan Baloch and Pashtun militants from these consulates.⁵³

On May 22, 2015, NSA Ajit Doval voiced India's apprehensions: 'What Pakistan wanted [from the MoU] was to get an assurance and put pressure on Afghanistan, so that they will not allow their territory to be used for any security related work by India. That is the crux of it. This is based on a faulty assumption that India probably uses Afghan soil or Afghan nationals for its security purposes'.⁵⁴ In August 2015, New Delhi rebuffed Kabul's request to host a high-level strategic partnership committee (SPC) meeting to review and revive the 2011 Strategic Partnership Agreement.⁵⁵ In further disapproval of Ghani's moves, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj refused to attend the Sixth Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA) scheduled for September 2015. These

⁵² History played its part in the construction of India's red-lines regarding the Afghan reconciliation. For most part of the 1990s, the ISI used militant training camps in south and east Afghanistan to train Kashmiri separatists in order to foment insurgency in India-administered Kashmir. India's response of supporting the Northern Alliance succeeded in limiting the Taliban's success in Afghanistan. However, it failed to halt the Kashmir-centric militant training camps and led to national humiliation during the IC-814 hijacking crisis in 1999. India had lost connect with the Pashtun hinterlands of Afghanistan. Consular presence across Afghanistan is viewed as critical for India's national security, and the NDS-ISI MoU was perceived as a threat. Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 136-145

⁵³ M Ilyas Khan, 'What lies behind Pakistani charges of Indian 'terrorism'', *BBC News*, 06/05/2015, Link [here](#).

⁵⁴ 'Govt to Review Controversial NDS-ISI MoU', *TOLO News*, 24/05/2015: Link [here](#).

⁵⁵ Haidar, 'India rebuffs Afghanistan on Strategic Meet', *The Hindu*

developments firmly demonstrated the increasing salience of partisanship over a largely tolerant approach till then.

Explaining India's Reaction to the Peace Talks in 2015

There were three key reasons why India reacted the way it did. One, it perceived that Ghani's outreach risked undermining the central driver of India's Afghanistan Policy i.e. ensuring a balance between Kabul and Islamabad. Despite regular briefings by Afghan officials about their benign intent behind the outreach, New Delhi lost confidence in Ghani's capability to steer the reconciliation process. Two, complementing this central concern was the other driver India's Afghanistan policy i.e. evolving approach of regional and great powers towards Afghanistan. The impending withdrawal of the US-led NATO troops in the wake of Afghan Taliban offensives ran the risk of the latter overwhelming the fledgling Afghan state, and, in turn, jeopardizing India's presence across the country. Finally, the third driver of India's Afghanistan policy i.e. domestic political situation in Kabul, itself remained uncertain. Few Afghans supported Ghani's outreach to Pakistan. Under pressure from the US, he had taken a radical step without prior groundwork within Afghan society. These inter-locking factors ensured that conciliatory advocacy in India vis-à-vis the Afghan Taliban remained marginal. The following paragraphs unpack these three inter-locking factors.

To assess whether Kabul is tilting towards Islamabad, Indian policymakers focus, first and foremost, on the temperament of the Afghan president. If this individual is willing to make compromises during negotiations with Pakistan (and Afghan Taliban) that are either operationally excessive (permitting Pakistani security officials access to Afghan prisons for interrogating targets) or go beyond what section

of the Afghan society (especially those who benefitted from the support afforded by the West) would accept, it raises concerns in New Delhi. Such indicators are interpreted as Kabul succumbing to Pakistani pressure and the beginning of a process that may lead to a reduced Indian footprint in Afghanistan.⁵⁶ Though Ghani's shelving of Indian arms aid, and visits to China, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan were *necessary* for India to react negatively, what gave *sufficiency* to the move was the NDS-ISI MoU, a core feature of which was reduced Indian presence in Afghanistan. To be clear, the outreach was not a singular crisis moment pushing India to initiate policy shift in a short temporal window (e.g. like in 1992 when the Mujahideen came to power by ousting former president Mohammad Najibullah).⁵⁷ It certainly did not create an either-or choice. But, had Pakistan reacted constructively to Ghani's overture and delivered on reconciliation in return for reduced Indian presence in Afghanistan, it would have intensified the debate between partisans and conciliators.

Supplementing India's reading of Ghani's intent behind the outreach were changes in policy approach of key powers involved in Afghanistan. For starters, the withdrawal of the US-led NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in December 2014 exacerbated structural dilemmas.⁵⁸ Few knew what the US would do if the Afghan Taliban made inroads soon after the departure of ISAF troops. The fact that the ANSF remains incapable of defending the country without external support added urgency. As the Afghan Taliban intensified attacks, Kabul and New Delhi dreaded a repeat of 1992 when President Najibullah was ousted from power and brutally murdered in 1996 by the Taliban. Even Ghani's signing of the US-

⁵⁶ 'A Conversation With Shahid Khaqan Abbasi', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 20/09/2017: Link [here](#). Nadiri, 'Old Habits, New Consequences', 132-168

⁵⁷ Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 79-87

⁵⁸ S E Rasmussen, 'NATO ends combat operations in Afghanistan', *The Guardian*, 28/12/2014: Link [here](#).

Afghanistan Bilateral Security Agreement in October 2014 failed to address Indian and domestic Afghan concerns.⁵⁹

Parallel to this structural uncertainty emerging from US' incoherent policy, were China's efforts to mediate between the Afghan Taliban and Kabul (via Pakistan). Beijing viewed the Afghan situation as an opportunity to play a role in stabilizing the region and use the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (where the US vouches for Afghan actions, and China for Pakistan) as a platform to build its reputation as a responsible global power. The first official tour Ghani undertook in end-October 2014 was to Beijing, and peace talks were high on the agenda.⁶⁰ Kabul wanted China to use its influence in Pakistan to take the peace process forward. Before the end of the year, Chinese officials initiated contact with certain Afghan Taliban figures in Pakistan and elsewhere. In the light of the horrendous attack by the TTP on the Army Public School in Peshawar on December 16, 2014, there was hope in Kabul that Islamabad might change tack.⁶¹

India had intelligence about the outreach. However, in March 2015, Afghanistan's CEO Abdullah Abdullah formally informed India that China held 'one, two, or three' rounds of talks with the Afghan Taliban, and asked the latter 'to have

⁵⁹ Despite knowing that Afghanistan will require foreign military assistance for many years to come, Karzai refused to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement with the US that sought legal immunity for all US troops that were to be based in the country after 2014. Worried about his 'legacy', Karzai was keen on avoiding Najibullah's fate who was viewed as a Soviet puppet. With a militarily resurgent Afghan Taliban, the last thing Karzai wanted was to be seen as an American 'puppet' who paved the way for US soldiers to kill Afghans without legal consequences (at the least). In a shrewd move, Indian PM Manmohan Singh supported Karzai's decision, even though he saw the need for an US-Afghan BSA. 'Karzai Digs Heels in over BSA with US, says India Understands', *Business Standard*, 14/12/2013: Link [here](#).

⁶⁰ Ayaz Gul, 'Afghanistan's Ghani Visits China in First Official Trip', *VOA*, 28/10/2014: Link [here](#).

⁶¹ 'Pakistan School Attack: PM Sharif vows to end 'terrorism'', *BBC News*, 17/12/2014: Link [here](#).

talks directly with the Afghan government'.⁶² On May 19-20 2015, senior Afghan official Mohammad Masoom Stanikzai held a secret meeting with Afghan Taliban representatives in Urumqi, under the supervision of China and Pakistan.⁶³ Though no breakthrough occurred in or after the meeting, China's increasing role in Afghan politics cautioned India.⁶⁴ New Delhi's relations with Beijing had turned sour by early 2015, and the two countries' previous backchannel on Afghanistan had become redundant.⁶⁵ Both Beijing and New Delhi had an interest in stabilizing Afghanistan, but difference lay in how to reach that end-point. Allowing Pakistan to influence Afghan affairs was not a problem for China the way it was for India (an aspect Afghan officials realized after Beijing's 2015 attempts to facilitate peace talks). Pakistan's strategic importance for China convinced Indian officials that Beijing was likely to support Pakistan over Afghanistan during crunch negotiations when an 'either-or' choice was to be made i.e. China was unlikely to press Pakistan into giving up its support for the Haqqanis, or coaxing the Afghan Taliban to talk to the Afghan government, if Islamabad did not see value in it.⁶⁶

⁶² 'China held rounds of Taliban talks - Afghanistan's Abdullah', *Reuters*, 13/03/2015: Link [here](#). Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2015) 117-144

⁶³ Margherita Stancati, 'Afghan Peace Envoy Met Taliban in Secret China Talks', *Wall Street Journal*, 24/05/2015: Link [here](#).

⁶⁴ C interview

⁶⁵ Author's interview with Shivshankar Menon, former National Security Advisor of India (2010-14), London, 24/11/2014; There was considerable tension between China and India even during Xi Jinping's September 2014 visit, when PLA troops entered Indian territory when their premier was in New Delhi. 'Chinese troops begin withdrawing from Indian Territory hours after Xi-Modi meet', *Times of India*, 19/04/2014: Link [here](#).

⁶⁶ During the April 2018 informal summit in Wuhan between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese Premier Xi Jinping, the two sides decided to cooperate and collaborate in Afghanistan. Nothing much came out of it. On Wuhan Summit see GoI, 'India-China Informa; Summit at Wuhan', *Ministry of External Affairs*,

In addition, domestic Afghan politics increased India's skepticism about the outreach. Ghani's actions were criticized domestically. Former president Karzai, who had developed close links with India during his tenure, warned that the outreach risked sliding Afghanistan 'under [the] thumb' of Pakistan.⁶⁷ Many Afghans viewed it as Ghani's attempt to cater to the US's unreasonable demands. The opposition viewed him as an American presidential appointee without a mass base and running a government of Western-educated technocrats.⁶⁸ This scenario veered from the Karzai years where one individual took most decisions. As India's former National Security Advisor M K Narayanan put it, Karzai was a 'maximum leader' close to India.⁶⁹ In contrast, Ghani was presiding over a structurally weak, operationally inadequate, and politically divided apparatus. To make matters worse, his reputation of being short-tempered and inability to build domestic consensus isolated Ghani further within the government. In this context, his outreach to Pakistan in general, and the NDS-ISI MoU in particular, enraged Afghanistan's intelligence community.⁷⁰ Allegedly coerced into signing the MoU, NDS officers blamed NSA Hanif Atmar for being the architect of the deal. The Afghan parliament demanded a text of the same and threatened to invalidate it. Fierce domestic opposition heightened India's apprehensions about the deal and convinced New Delhi to criticise the move.

28/04/2018, Link [here](#). On the decision to work together in Afghanistan see D R Chaudhury, "Wuhan Effect: India, China to jointly train Afghan diplomats", *The Economic Times*, 16/07/2018, Link [here](#).

⁶⁷ Jon Boone, 'Hamid Karzai: Afghanistan in danger of sliding 'under thumb' of Pakistan', *The Guardian*, 09/03/2015: Link [here](#).

⁶⁸ Borhan Osman and Anand Gopal, "Taliban Views on a Future State", *Center on International Cooperation*, NYU-CIC, July 2016, Link [here](#).

⁶⁹ Author interview with M K Narayanan, former NSA of India (2005-2010), Chennai, 11/01/2016

⁷⁰ Boone and Rasmussen, 'Afghan backlash over security deal with Pakistan', *The Guardian*

Outreach 2.0

The failure of outreach 1.0 helped stabilise India-Afghanistan relations, and led to increased communication between New Delhi and Kabul. Three years later, in February 2018, Ghani made another peace offer without preconditions.⁷¹ It was made directly to the Afghan Taliban, and not via Pakistan. Critically, the offer came within weeks of the Afghan Taliban's open letter seeking direct dialogue with the US.⁷² It was meant to demonstrate that the insurgents could only seek peace with Kabul, not directly with the US. For long, the Afghan Taliban has been refusing to negotiate with the Kabul government, terming it 'illegitimate'.⁷³ The Afghan Taliban rejected the offer, and instead, launched a series of offensives across Afghanistan. The only moment when both sides declared unilateral ceasefires was during Eid in June 2018.⁷⁴ The ceasefire demonstrated that far from being a move towards mutually acceptable peace process, it was part of the competition between Kabul and the insurgents.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, India supported the outreach. If Akbaruddin's March 2018 UN statement demonstrated India's conciliatory stand vis-à-vis Ghani's outreach, his September 2018 statement reinforced it: 'The challenges posed by the deteriorating situation [in Afghanistan] does not mean we [the UNSC] ought to stoically accept the death tolls as commonplace. Rather, it should mean that it is time for us to strengthen

⁷¹ GoA, 'The Kabul Process for Peace & Security Cooperation in Afghanistan Declaration', *MFA*, 28/02/2018: [Link here](#).

⁷² Harriet Alexander, 'Taliban publishes open letter to Americans', *Telegraph*, 14/02/2018: [Link here](#).

⁷³ Ayaz Gul, 'Afghan Taliban Pen Open Letter to Americans, Call for Dialogue', *VOA*, 15/02/2018: [Link here](#).

⁷⁴ A M Makoi, 'Taliban leaders declare Eid ceasefire with Afghan forces', *The Guardian*, 09/06/2018, [Link here](#).

⁷⁵ The Afghan Government offered a longer ceasefire than the Afghan Taliban, who observed it only for three days during Eid. The propaganda around Afghan Taliban fighters meeting with Afghan security officials ensured that the narrative around ceasefire benefitted the Afghan Taliban more than the Kabul government. "Afghan Taliban agree three-day ceasefire – their first", *BBC News*, 09/06/2018, [Link here](#).

our collective support for the Government and people of Afghanistan and the brave Afghan National Defence and Security Forces to counter the inhumanity of those who have banded together to ruthlessly brutalise the lives of the ordinary people of Afghanistan'.⁷⁶

Explaining India's Reaction to the Peace Talks in 2018

Making sense of India's reaction in 2018 requires focus on how changes in regional and great power politics, and Afghanistan's domestic security and political situation, impacts India's options in the light of its desire to strike a balance between Afghanistan and Pakistan. As mentioned previously, New Delhi pays attention to the temperament and actions of the Afghan president vis-à-vis Pakistan. Breakdown of the 2015 Afghan outreach to Pakistan, and the Shah Shaheed bombing, made Ghani a virulent critic of Pakistan. By October 2015, he elevated India to the first circle of his 'five-circle' foreign policy, and in November, indicating a clear shift in position, directed NSA Hanif Atmar to visit New Delhi and finalize the 'gift' of four Mi-25 attack helicopters that had been shelved.⁷⁷ Though of limited military-strategic value, the helicopters sent a powerful signal to the region on India's position on Afghanistan. Between 2015 and 2018, Ghani grew more critical of Pakistan, even though he remained politically weak, was unable not quell the insurgency, nor run a stable government.

In 2019, at the time of writing, he continues to face a serious standoff with the powerful governor of Balkh, Atta Mohammad Noor, and his vice president Abdul

⁷⁶ Government of India (GoI), 'Time to cripple Taliban's illicit drug trade, *Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)*, 18/09/2018: [Link here](#).

⁷⁷ Suhasini Haidar, 'Hanif Atmar, Afghan NSA, to travel to India to meet Ajit Doval', *The Hindu*, 04/11/2015: [Link here](#).

Rashid Dostum.⁷⁸ Such political instability, and Ghani's weak popularity is coupled with the Afghan Taliban's offensives, especially in Ghazni and Faryab in August 2018. The Afghan Taliban threatens nearly 70 percent of Afghanistan's territory and exerts influence on nearly 50 percent population.⁷⁹ Though these offensives fail to win the insurgents control over provincial capitals, they inflict heavy casualties on civilians and the Afghan armed forces.⁸⁰ Such power asymmetry between the Afghan Taliban and Kabul makes India's Kabul-centric policy puzzling. Arguably, these facts and the structural uncertainties associated with the Trump administration should lead India to reconsider its partisan approach and open a channel to the Afghan Taliban, just like it did in the late-2010s, and similar to what Russia and Iran have done.⁸¹ But it continues to support Kabul nonetheless.

In addition to the change in Ghani's position vis-à-vis Pakistan, what then explains India's policy shift in 2018 – before the US decided to open direct talks with the Afghan Taliban later that year – is its perception of the US' policy at that point in time. Trump's decision to support continuous presence of US combat troops in Afghanistan offered a temporary but welcome reprieve to Indian policymakers. Heavy drone and airstrikes accompanied Trump's August 2017 speech on South Asia and Afghanistan (261 airstrikes between June and November 2017) and joint US-Afghan combat operations across Afghanistan (2,175 ground operations, even though US

⁷⁸ Mujib Mashal, 'The President, the Strongman, and the Next U.S. Headache in Afghanistan' *New York Times*, 15/01/2018, [Link here](#).

⁷⁹ Bill Rogio and Alexandra Gutowski, 'Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan', FDD's Long War Journal; [Link here](#).

⁸⁰ Mujib Mashal, 'Why the Taliban attack in Ghazni matters', *New York Times*, 13/08/2018, [link here](#).

⁸¹ Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 230-236; 'Iran and Russia Team up with Taliban to Undermine U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan', *Middle East Institute*, [Link here](#).

troops did not enter Pakistan's territory).⁸² Most regional powers viewed Afghan Taliban's open letter to the US in February 2018 as a reaction to such military pressure.⁸³ To be clear, appreciative of the role that US troops were playing, president Barack Obama announced in October 2015 that he would maintain the posture of 9,800 troops throughout 2016 and leave future decision-making in hands of the next president.⁸⁴ The difference between Obama and Trump was that the latter was pursuing the same COIN strategy without a fixed timeline until late 2018. Despite its transitory nature, the fact that Trump signalled that the US was willing to continue fighting until their demands on reconciliation are met resonated well in India's power corridors. India had been making this argument for years, and found an American president who finally operationalized it.

In fact, ever since Trump came to power and announced a strategic review of the Afghanistan policy, India activated behind-the-scenes lobbying to shape the US' policy approach. In this, it found a willing partner in the former US NSA General H. R. McMaster. Firm in his belief of not withdrawing troops from Afghanistan prematurely, McMaster deftly steered the strategic review and generated sufficient support within Trump's embattled administration to continue fighting the war.⁸⁵ India asserted that talking to the Afghan Taliban would not solve the problem till such talks were being micro-managed by the ISI. Despite differences over how they should deal

⁸² Shashank Bengali, 'U.S. airstrikes rise sharply in Afghanistan - and so do civilian deaths', *LA Times*, 04/12/2017: Link [here](#); Anthony Cappacio, 'U.S. Touts Special-Operations Raid in Rare Detail', *Bloomberg*, 21/12/2017: Link [here](#).

⁸³ Harriet Alexander, 'Taliban publishes open letter to Americans', *Telegraph*, 14/02/2018: Link [here](#).

⁸⁴ USG, 'Statement by the President on Afghanistan', *The White House*, 15/10/2015: Link [here](#).

⁸⁵ Idrees Ali, 'Trump has made Afghanistan decision after 'rigorous' review: Mattis', *Reuters*, 20/08/2017; for more see Patrick Radden Keefe, 'McMaster and Commander: Can a national-security advisor retain his integrity if the President has none?', *The New Yorker*, 30/04/2018

with Pakistan in the long term, there was convergence between the US and India on Afghanistan until mid-2018.

Trump's August 2017 speech exacerbated India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan. Within weeks, Pakistan's then PM Shahid Khaqan Abbasi countered that he saw 'zero' political or military role for India in Afghanistan, and that increased Indian involvement will further complicate the situation.⁸⁶ A week after Abbasi's statement, India's defence minister Nirmala Sitharaman ruled out any Indian 'boots on the ground' but restated India's commitment to Afghanistan in all other sectors.⁸⁷ Throughout 2018, Indian officials within the MEA and the R&AW were confident that Ghani's outreach that year put Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban under pressure. It promised to create confusion (if not dissension) among the Afghan Taliban's rank and file on how to respond, thus increasing cleavages within the movement.⁸⁸ Even the August 2018 offensives in Ghazni and Faryab did not shake India's confidence in Ghani's ability to steer the reconciliation process without crossing India's 'red-lines'.

Conclusion

The interconnection between the Afghan conflict and India-Pakistan bilateral relations makes New Delhi an important stakeholder in Afghanistan's peace process. As this article shows, India desires a strategic balance between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The fluid nature of Afghan domestic politics with its constantly shifting

⁸⁶ 'A Conversation With Shahid Khaqan Abbasi', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 20/09/2017: Link [here](#).

⁸⁷ In January 2018 Pakistan articulated the 'Bajwa Doctrine' that underlined Islamabad's desire for domestic security and peaceful relations with its neighbours.⁸⁷ Named after Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Bajwa, the ostensible doctrine came as a response to the US-Afghanistan-India alignment. 'No Indian Troops in Afghanistan, says Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman', *Indian Express*, 17/09/2017: Link [here](#).

⁸⁸ Antonio Giustozzi, 'Do the Taliban Have any Appetite for Reconciliation with Kabul?', *Centre for Research and Policy Analysis*, 19/03/2018: Link [here](#).

alliances, however, shapes India's tactical and operational decision-making in real-time. On the ground this means striving for a process wherein Kabul does not play a weak hand vis-à-vis the Afghan Taliban and Islamabad, in light of its military setbacks at the hands of the former, and power asymmetry vis-à-vis the latter. Since 2001, New Delhi has offered over US\$2 billion aid package to Kabul, trained many Afghan police, military, and intelligence officers, steadfastly (though limitedly) supported both Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, and earned the image of a trusted though reluctant actor in Afghanistan.⁸⁹ What is less appreciated within this context is India's capability to either advertently or inadvertently complicate Afghanistan's reconciliation process. Historically, India's support to the Northern Alliance (or the United Front) against the Taliban and Pakistan during the 1990s was the height of its partisan politics in Afghanistan. Officially it adopted a *de jure* policy line of bringing all warring factions to the negotiations table, but *de facto* it supported the staunchly anti-Taliban and anti-Pakistan Northern Alliance.⁹⁰ If in 2015, for instance, Pakistan would have responded positively to Ghani's overtures in return for reduced Indian presence in Afghanistan, it is likely that New Delhi would have supported Ghani's domestic opponents to undermine such an outreach.⁹¹ This is because even though an unstable Afghanistan is not in India's interest, New Delhi fears that stability on Pakistan's term is more harmful to Indian interests.

It is for this reason that India continues to support the Kabul government in 2019 despite the US's decision to open direct talks with the Afghan Taliban. In addition to India's mistrust of Pakistan, policymakers in New Delhi believe that any peace process that fails to respect the multiple social and political realities of post-

⁸⁹ Destradi, 'India: A Reluctant Partner for Afghanistan' 103-117

⁹⁰ Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 115-125

⁹¹ Haidar, 'India rebuffs Afghanistan on Strategic Meet', *The Hindu*

2001 Afghanistan is likely to fail.⁹² Diplomatic recognition and engagement with the Afghan Taliban, then, is viewed as an incorrect approach for India (even though there is increased acceptance to maintain intelligence links with the Afghan Taliban unlike the total disconnect of the 1990s).⁹³ This is because India's diplomatic outreach to the Afghan Taliban will weaken Kabul's position vis-à-vis the former. It will risk dislocating Afghanistan's political canvass from a constitutional Islamic Republic to an Islamic Emirate as envisioned by the Afghan Taliban. India's limited capacities and capabilities to ensure a strategic balance between Afghanistan and Pakistan on an on-going basis means that it adopts a multilateral strategy and seeks regional and global powers to support Kabul economically, politically, and militarily. This is visible in India's continuing call for an inclusive peace process at the UNSC in June 2019 where it officially welcomed the 'opportunities created by recent international efforts [in Afghanistan]'.⁹⁴ New Delhi also gifted of two Mi-24 helicopter gunships to Kabul in May 2019, and continues to emphasize on connectivity with Afghanistan and Central Asia via Iran where it is developing the Chabahar port.⁹⁵

From a partisan-conciliators lens, as laid out at the beginning of this article, this means that India's Afghanistan policy today is somewhere in between i.e. New Delhi accepts and supports the reality of Kabul's outreach to the Afghan Taliban (a conciliatory trait), but wants to make sure that Kabul retains some leverage over this

⁹² Amar Sinha, India's Ambassador to Afghanistan (2013-2016), 'Naïve To Think Taliban Will Pull The Plug On Other Terror Groups', *Strategic News International*, 10/05/2019, Link [here](#)

⁹³ Interview with a senior Indian official 'M', New Delhi, May 2019.

⁹⁴ Government of India, 'Indian Statement in Open Debate on Situation in Afghanistan, *Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)*, 19/06/2019, Link [here](#).

⁹⁵ Elizabeth Roche, 'India hands over two Mi-24 helicopters to Afghanistan', *LiveMint*, 17/05/2019, Link [here](#). On India's development of the Chabahar port and the viability of the Zaranj-Delaram Highway to connect India, Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia see C Christine Fair, "The All-New Great Game", *FirstPost*, 01/02/2019, Link [here](#).

process and thus refuses to open official channels of communication with the Afghan Taliban (a partisan trait). This aspect is demonstrated best in India's recent decision to abrogate Article 370 of the Constitution of India that afforded special status to the now erstwhile contested state of Jammu and Kashmir on August 05, 2019. Furthermore, it divided the state into two Union Territories (that are directly administered by the central government from New Delhi) of 'Jammu and Kashmir' and 'Ladakh'. Such integration of Kashmir with the Indian Union nullified any future possibility of negotiations on the issue between India and Pakistan, and American arbitration on the same as suggested, twice, by the US president Donald Trump.⁹⁶ Despite being part of the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) ideological fabric and in its election manifestos since 2014, the timing of abrogating Article 370 was determined by events in and around Afghanistan and increasing bonhomie between the Trump administration that depends on Pakistan army's support for a deal with the Afghan Taliban.⁹⁷ Interestingly, India's aggressive move in Kashmir has been accompanied by conciliatory calls for establishing direct communication with the Afghan Taliban by retired but influential officials.⁹⁸ India's serving army chief made a similar statement in January 2019 indicating an increasing appetite within the government to engage with the Afghan Taliban.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ 'Donald Trump offers to mediate Kashmir conflict', *DW*, 22/07/2019; Link [here](#).

⁹⁷ For an excellent analysis on this issue based on primary interviews on the ground see Christine Fair, 'India's Move in Kashmir: Unpacking the Domestic and International Motivations and Implications', *Lawfare*, 12/08/2019, link [here](#). For more on Article 370 see Laya Maheshwari, 'How the Indian Government Changed the Legal Status of Jammu and Kashmir', *Lawfare*, 12/08/2019, link [here](#).

⁹⁸ Amitabh P Revi and Prateek Suri, 'Taliban Have Capacity To Buck Pakistan's Deep State, India Has to Engage with Them', *SNI Wire*, 11/08/2019, link [here](#).

⁹⁹ Ajai Shukla, 'Army Chief Bipin Rawat open to talks with Afghan Taliban, sans Conditions', *Business Standard*, 09/01/2019, link [here](#).

The difference in India's reaction to Kabul's outreach efforts in 2015 and 2018/19 has its source in these above-mentioned structural and ideational factors. In 2015, Indian policymakers, regardless of their institutional background, bureaucratic and political positioning, and operational outlook on dealing with pro-Pakistan Afghan factions such as the Afghan Taliban, reached a consensus that Ghani's outreach – if successful – would harm India's strategic interests in the region. Ghani's acquiescence to Pakistani demands, including a reduction in Indian footprint in Afghanistan, coupled with lack of reciprocity from Islamabad, threatened the strategic balance India sought between its two neighbours. In 2018, however, despite Ghani's domestic political challenges, India viewed the outreach to the Afghan Taliban as one that sought to secure Kabul and New Delhi's interests. It was also supported by Trump's decision to continue financial and military support to Kabul in 2017 as part of his new South Asia policy.¹⁰⁰ The US's outreach to the Afghan Taliban ever since has raised the spectre that Indian interests may become compromised if Trump allows Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban to set the terms of reconciliation.¹⁰¹ Though India continues to support Kabul, how it will react to a full withdrawal of US troops with an empowered Afghan Taliban in control of parts or whole of Afghanistan depends on how isolated India becomes, and whether it perceives the strategic balance shifting firmly in Pakistan's favour or not. Ultimately, the precariousness of India's position to support Kabul in 2019 demonstrates its dependence on external powers to realise a balance between Kabul and Islamabad, and its inability to unilaterally shape its regional security environment. This is visible in how the chaos within the Trump

¹⁰⁰ USG, 'Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia', [Link here](#).

¹⁰¹ 'U.S. envoy for Afghan peace meets Taliban officials in Qatar', *Reuters*, 13/10/2018, [Link here](#).

administration since the exit of McMaster, who shaped Trump's South Asia strategy in 2017, complicated India's position in Afghanistan.¹⁰²

From a regional geopolitical perspective, Russia, China, and Iran's decision to engage with the Afghan Taliban and promote the peace process only heightens the risk of India's isolation in Afghanistan. In an attempt to ensure its continued relevance in the Afghan peace process, New Delhi sent senior retired diplomats to Moscow in March 2018 for an official conference on Afghanistan that included representatives from the Afghan Taliban.¹⁰³ Despite signalling India's intention to maintain informal lines of communication with the Afghan Taliban, the move did not lead to a shift in official policy. This is because Indian policymakers do not view China and Russia's involvement in the peace process as being a dealmaker or deal-breaker in the immediate term.¹⁰⁴ Nonetheless what may undermine further, if not unhinge entirely, India's government-centric Afghanistan policy are the on-going US-Iran tensions.¹⁰⁵ The lack of movement on Chabahar port,¹⁰⁶ and India's recent

¹⁰² Evan Osnos, 'Trump vs. the "Deep State"', *The New Yorker*, 21/05/2018. Link [here](#). Throughout 2017 and 2018, before opening direct channels with the Afghan Taliban, Trump sought increased Indian involvement in Afghanistan's security sector. In private, he asked India to send combat troops as a supplement to the US forces, only to be met with stoic refusals. No Indian government is likely to take that step given the negative effect it will have on India's economy, military capacities, as well as public opinion as Indian soldiers are likely to die, and equally likely to kill Afghan civilians. Interview with 'A'.

¹⁰³ The MEA termed the visit as being 'non-official', distancing it from India's official policy of supporting the Kabul government. GoI, 'Official Spokesperson's response to queries regarding India's participation in a meeting on Afghanistan hosted by Russia', *MEA*, 08/11/2018, Link [here](#).

¹⁰⁴ Interview with 'M'

¹⁰⁵ 'Iran tensions: 1,500 US troops head to Middle East as Trump seals \$7billion Saudi arms sales', *The Guardian*, 25/05/2019, Link [here](#). On India's reaction to the US-Iran tensions see, Seema Sirohi, 'India's Options as US announces end of Iran waiver', *Observer Research Foundation*, 24/04/2019, Link [here](#). For a detailed analysis of India-Iran relations see Sumitha N Kutty, 'Dealing with Differences: The Iran Factor in India-U.S. Relations',

decision to cut its oil supplies from Iran under US pressure, will negatively affect India's ability to foster connectivity with Afghanistan while bypassing Pakistan.¹⁰⁷ Disconnect with Iran will also preclude the option of India's sustained support to anti-Afghan Taliban and anti-Pakistan groups even if its presence in Afghanistan is threatened in the future. The lack of geographical contiguity with Afghanistan requires India to have a land-based link via Iran. Such a link was required even in the 1990s, when India's support for the Northern Alliance was made possible by alignment with Russia and Iran.¹⁰⁸ Managing this process of the US seeking withdrawal from Afghanistan while threatening the use of force against Iran will be one of the key foreign policy challenges for the Narendra Modi 2.0 government.¹⁰⁹

Asia Policy, 14 (1), 2019; Sumitha N Kutty, "Iran's Continuing Interests in Afghanistan", *The Washington Quarterly*, 37 (2), 139-156, 2014

¹⁰⁶ India received a waiver from the US to develop the strategic Chahbahar port in Iran that connects India to Afghanistan via Central Asia. 'India get US waiver for development of strategic Chahbahar port in Iran', *Indian Express*, 08/11/2018; Link [here](#).

¹⁰⁷ 'US deadline ends, India stops purchasing Iranian oil', *The Economic Times*, 24/05/2019, Link [here](#).

¹⁰⁸ Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 130-135

¹⁰⁹ For an overview of the foreign policy challenges that the new government in India faces, see Ashley Tellis, "Troubles Aplenty: Foreign Policy Challenges For the Next Indian Government", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 20/05/2019, Link [here](#).