**Afghan-India Honeymoon is Over**

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India invested heavily in Afghanistan, allocating more than $3 billion for aid and reconstruction initiatives. These efforts encompassed the development of critical infrastructure, including roads, bridges, dams, power stations, schools, hospitals, and the Afghan Parliament building. India also extended humanitarian aid, providing food, clothing, medicine, and shelter, along with scholarships for Afghan students and training for Afghan security forces. This support included weapons, equipment, and military vehicles for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

The primary, albeit undeclared, objective of India’s engagement with Afghanistan was to counter Pakistan’s influence in the region. While publicly stating aims like leveraging Afghanistan’s strategic location as a gateway to Central Asia and fostering goodwill with the Afghan government and people, both India and Afghanistan acknowledged the complexities of their alliance. They recognized that India’s involvement was primarily driven by self-interest, and questions lingered about the long-term sustainability of these efforts given the ever-evolving political and security dynamics in Afghanistan.

Ehsanullah Ehsan, a central leader and former spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban, revealed in a 2021 foreign media interview an alleged collaboration between Afghan security forces, specifically the NDS (National Directorate of Security), and India’s intelligence agency, RAW (Research and Analysis Wing), in supporting cross-border terrorist activities targeting Pakistan. According to Ehsan, he was involved in such activities from sanctuaries on the Afghan side of the border.

Ehsan disclosed that the TTP (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan), which had sought refuge in Afghanistan since June 2014, established connections with the Afghan intelligence agency, NDS. Through this link, they established contact with operatives of India’s RAW. Ehsan claimed that NDS and RAW facilitated the harbouring of anti-Pakistan militants and assisted in establishing “special committees” in Afghanistan to maintain contact with the NDS.

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The statements made by Ehsanullah Ehsan in his interview had brought to the forefront allegations of clandestine collaboration and assistance provided to elements opposed to Pakistan by Afghan and Indian intelligence agencies and raised concerns about the nature of regional dynamics and the potential implications for security and stability in the region.

The abrupt withdrawal of the previous Afghan government and U.S. forces in 2021, leaving behind military and civilian hardware worth billions of dollars, not only dashed the United States’ aspirations for Afghanistan but also eroded India’s influence within the Afghan government. The rapid rise of the new Taliban regime, which has established itself as the de facto governing authority, albeit awaiting international recognition, may have signalled a reluctance to serve as a tool of Indian policy against Pakistan in the region.

Furthermore, it underscores the age-old axiom that India primarily acts in its self-interest and may change its loyalty when its interests demand it. India, after a careful assessment of the costs and benefits associated with maintaining friendly relations with the Taliban, as well as the desire to appease the United States has chosen the latter path. The benefits it stands to gain from its association with the United States appear to outweigh any potential loss in its status as the largest regional donor to Afghanistan over the past two decades.

The withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan had sharply diminished its role and influence within Afghanistan. Currently, India has not publicly disclosed any immediate plans to reopen its embassy in Kabul which it shut down immediately after the withdrawal of US forces in 2021. Recently, Afghanistan, citing a lack of cooperation from the host government, has opted to close its embassy in New Delhi. These diplomatic moves underscore a notable shift in India’s stance and priorities, signalling a reduced interest in maintaining its previous level of engagement with the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan.

This recalibration in India’s approach is influenced by several key factors. Foremost among them is the explicit declaration by the predominantly Pashtun Taliban that Islam will be the guiding framework for Afghanistan’s political structures. India has closely aligned itself with the United States and is wary of the Taliban due to perceived close ties between the group and Pakistan. India views the Taliban as an extension of Pakistan’s influence in the region, reinforcing its decision to reassess its engagement with the new Afghan government.

India’s decision not to extend patronage to the Taliban-led government, coupled with the Taliban interim government’s move to close down its embassy, has cast a shadow of uncertainty over the future of thousands of Afghan students, professionals, patients, and businessmen residing in India.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of October 2023, approximately 18,500 Afghans are living in India. Among this population, more than 10,000 Afghan students find themselves grappling with the challenge of renewing their visas. Around 5,000 professionals are facing obstacles in renewing their work permits, while over 2,000 patients are encountering difficulties in accessing essential medical care. Additionally, Afghan military personnel are struggling to receive their salaries and cover their expenses, and asylum seekers are confronting hurdles in obtaining refugee status. This complex situation highlights the multifaceted humanitarian and administrative challenges faced by Afghan residents in India amid the evolving political landscape in Afghanistan.

Maintaining all-weather-friendly relations by Pakistan with the Interim Afghan Government has also not been the bed of roses Although Pakistan played a pivotal role in facilitating the signing of the Doha agreement, which ultimately led to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, the collapse of Mr. Ashraf Ghani’s government, the alteration of India’s relationship with Afghanistan, and the installation of the Taliban interim government in Kabul.

Subsequently, Pakistan took a series of steps to support the Taliban Interim government in consolidating its authority in Afghanistan following the U.S. evacuation in 2021. Pakistan extended substantial economic assistance to the Taliban government, including essential supplies like food, fuel, and medicine. This support played a crucial role in addressing the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and helped the Taliban maintain basic services for the Afghan population. Pakistan also actively advocated for the Taliban on the international stage, encouraging other countries to recognize the Taliban government and offer assistance. These diplomatic efforts improved the Taliban’s standing within the international community.

Ironically, while Pakistan succeeded in minimizing Indian influence in Afghanistan through its support for the Taliban, its expectations from the Taliban in terms of addressing cross-border terrorism have not been fully met. Pakistan had hoped that the Taliban would take concrete measures to prevent cross-border terrorism, but this has led to disappointment.

According to a United Nations report, there are more than 5,000 hardcore TTP (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan) terrorists based in Afghanistan. These individuals have been granted the freedom to launch attacks inside Pakistan with impunity. This situation has given rise to a sudden increase in the number of militant groups operating from Afghanistan, some of which enjoy support, or at the very least, tolerance from the new government in Kabul.

Regrettably, terrorism originating from Afghan soil and involving Afghan nationals who are residing illegally in Pakistan is not limited to aiding and abetting terrorists. These individuals are also engaged in smuggling essential commodities such as wheat, flour, sugar, oil, and foreign currency. This illegal activity has had a detrimental impact on Pakistan’s law and order situation and has strained its financial and economic stability.

In response to these challenges and to protect its interests, Pakistan has implemented a series of measures. These actions include tightening border controls, and cracking down on smugglers, as well as individuals involved in hawala and Hundi transactions. Additionally, Pakistan has taken steps to address the issue of Afghan nationals who were residing illegally within its borders, utilizing its public services, while simultaneously adopting an anti-state stance.

Furthermore, Pakistan has observed a continued flow of support to Baluch ethnic separatist groups, which seek either greater autonomy or outright independence for their homeland. This ongoing support of separatist movements presents an additional security concern for Pakistan.

Pakistan’s approach toward Afghanistan remains pragmatic, aiming to engage with the Afghan Taliban in a constructive and mutually beneficial manner. Pakistan seeks to avoid confrontation and is committed to persuading the Interim Afghan Government to exercise its influence over the TTP (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan) to prevent them from launching terrorist attacks on Afghan soil.

Pakistan recognizes the potential counterproductive consequences of engaging in direct conflict with the Interim Afghan Government. Such a scenario could divert the energy of various jihadist groups in Afghanistan toward Pakistan, making it crucial for Pakistan to exercise strategic patience. A key element of this approach is Pakistan’s insistence on not entering into direct negotiations with the TTP but instead continuing to pressure the Interim Afghan Government to disarm and treat them as terrorists and criminals.

This pragmatic stance reflects Pakistan’s efforts to navigate the complex regional dynamics and security challenges posed by developments in Afghanistan while pursuing a diplomatic and strategic approach.

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