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«TALIBAN FACTOR» IN INDIA-CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS

This article examines role of Taliban in India's relationship with the Central Asian Republics (CARs) in three phases – from early 1990s to 2001, from 2001 to 2021 and from 2021 onwards. In the first phase in 1990s, both India and the CARs faced serious security threats from advent of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Their perception of Taliban being a 'mutual threat' was one of the reasons why India and some Central Asian countries like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan supported Northern Alliance in late 1990s against the Taliban in Afghanistan. The US-NATO presence in Afghanistan since 2001 led to changes in India and CARs response to Afghanistan. Both sides cooperated with the US for the improving the security situation in Afghanistan. In the post-American Afghanistan since 2021, India and the CARs have deepened their security and intelligence cooperation and both sides are maintaining regular political and security consultations. The India-CARs cooperation over Afghanistan has the potential to be a template that other countries could also follow in their ties with the Taliban. Sufism has a special role and potential in shaping India-CARs response to the Taliban and terrorism in the contemporary context.

Key words: India, Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Taliban.

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Үндістан мен Орталық Азия қарым-қатынастарындағы «Талибан факторы»

Бұл мақалада Үндістанның Орталық Азия республикаларымен (ОАР) қарым – қатынасындағы «Талибан» қозғалысының рөлі үш кезеңде – 1990 жылдардың басынан 2001 жылға дейін, 2001 жылдан 2021 жылға дейін және 2021 жылдан бастап қарастырылады. Бірінші кезеңде 1990 жылдары Үндістан да, патша да Ауғанстанға Талибанның келуімен байланысты қауіпсіздікке үлкен қауіп төндірді. Олардың Талибанды «өзара қауіп» ретінде қабылдауы Үндістанның және Тәжікстан мен Өзбекстан сияқты Орталық Азияның кейбір елдерінің 1990 жылдардың аяғында Ауғанстандағы талибандарға қарсы Солтүстік Альянсты қолдауының бір себебі болды. 2001 жылдан бастап АҚШ пен НАТО-ның Ауғанстанда болуы Үндістанның өзгеруіне және оның Ауғанстанға реакциясына әкелді. Екі тарап Ауғанстандағы қауіпсіздік жағдайын жақсарту мақсатында АҚШ-пен ынтымақтастықта болды. Америка өз әскерлерін Ауғанстаннан алып кеткеннен кейін, Үндістан мен ОАР 2021 жылдан бастап қауіпсіздік пен барлау саласындағы ынтымақтастықты тереңдетіп келеді және екі тарап саяси және қауіпсіздік мәселелері бойынша тұрақты консультациялар өткізеді. Үндістан мен ОАР-ның Ауғанстандағы ынтымақтастығы басқа елдер де «Талибан» қозғалысымен байланыста болатын үлгі болуы мүмкін. Қазіргі контексте Үндістанның Талибан мен терроризмге қарсы әрекетін қалыптастыруда сопылық ерекше рөл мен әлеуетке ие.

Түйін сөздер: Үндістан, Орталық Азия, Қазақстан, Өзбекстан, Тәжікстан, Қырғызстан, Түрікменстан, Талибан.

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«Фактор Талибана» в отношениях Индии и Центральной Азии

В этой статье рассматривается роль движения «Талибан» в отношениях Индии с Центрально-азиатскими республиками (ЦАР) в три этапа – с начала 1990-х по 2001 год, с 2001 по 2021 год и с 2021 года и далее. На первом этапе в 1990-х годах и Индия, и ЦАР столкнулись с серьезными угрозами безопасности, связанными с приходом талибов в Афганистан. Их восприятие Талибана как «взаимной угрозы» было одной из причин, по которой Индия и некоторые страны

Центральной Азии, такие как Таджикистан и Узбекистан, поддержали Северный альянс в конце 1990-х годов против талибов в Афганистане. Присутствие США и НАТО в Афганистане с 2001 года привело к изменениям в Индии и ее реакции на Афганистан. Обе стороны сотрудничали с США в целях улучшения ситуации в области безопасности в Афганистане. После выведения военных сил США из Афганистана с 2021 года Индия и Центральноазиатские республики углубили сотрудничество в области безопасности и разведки, и обе стороны проводят регулярные консультации по политическим вопросам и вопросам безопасности. Сотрудничество Индии и ЦАР по Афганистану потенциально может стать образцом, которому другие страны также могли бы следовать в своих связях с движением «Талибан». Суфизм играет особую роль и обладает потенциалом в формировании реакции Индии на «Талибан» и терроризм в современном контексте.

Ключевые слова: Индия, Центральная Азия, Казахстан, Узбекистан, Таджикистан, Кыргызстан, Туркменистан, Талибан.

Introduction

Advent of the Taliban in Afghanistan has been a multifaceted challenge for the regional countries in South and Central Asia. Religion and radicalization have been intertwined with each other in Afghanistan, especially after 1979. Developments in Afghanistan have an impact on both, India and the CARs, from security, economic to cultural and social spheres. When the CARs gained independence in 1991-92, they inherited the Afghanistan problem from the former Soviet Union. India was also trying to adjust its Afghanistan policy in a post-Soviet phase at that time. India's Ministry of External Affairs in its 1996-97 Annual Report had written that New Delhi's bilateral relations with the CARs were shaped by common concerns and challenges faced by the region. The report further added that the Taliban's northern advance and seizing of Kabul was a security threat for the CARs (Annual Report, 1996-97). Taliban's ascent to power was seen as 'Pakistan's larger game plan to extend her influence in Central Asia' (Annual Report, 1995-1996). Some of these concerns have been expressed this time also when the Taliban came to power again in Afghanistan in August 2021. The history seems to be repeating itself; however, the regional response to the Taliban is different this time. India and CARs have been engaging the Taliban without recognizing its government in Afghanistan. It is, therefore, important to analyze the change in India-CARs response to Taliban this time. Due to lack of any serious internal challenge this time and no substantial external pressure, the Taliban is likely to rule for a longer period in Afghanistan. Hence, the Taliban would be an important factor in India-CARs ties in near to mid-term and there is need for an academic understanding to bring out its contours.

Materials and Methods

This article uses open source material, both primary and secondary with descriptive methodology to find answer to the research question: how is the Taliban a factor in India-CARs relationship. The article is based on the hypothesis that since the Taliban is a security and ideological threat to both India and the CARs, their response in dealing with the Taliban should include a strong ideological and strategic basis. There is lack of academic writing to highlight the Taliban factor in India-CARs relations. This article is one such attempt to cover this theme mainly from an Indian perspective.

Results and Discussion

Taliban's Ideology

Taliban came to power for the first time in Afghanistan in September 1996 and established Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which sent shockwaves around the region and the world alike. One of the first moves made by the Taliban was to institute a strict implementation of *Quranic* interpretation and jurisprudence. While in practice, it turned into merciless policies for women, political opponents and religious minorities devoid of any respect for human rights (www.dni.gov). Taliban resorted to strict religious ideology mixing *Deobandi* traditionalism, *Wahhabi* puritanism with a conservative *Pashtun* social code known as *Pashtunwali* to create a brutal and repressive regime (www.britannica.com). *Deobandi* Islam has roots in British colonial India. The regional countries were very concerned regarding Taliban's intolerance and barbarism leading to anti-Taliban sentiment. One of the well known Pakistani voices on Taliban, journalist Ahmed Rashid had argued that Taliban created a new radical model for Islamic revolution and as an ever expanding en-

terprise; it sought new markets like Central Asia (Ahmed, 1999).

India, CARs Response to the Taliban in First Phase (Early 1990s to 2001)

In the first phase from early 1990s to 2001, the Taliban proved to be a security threat for both India and the CARs. Taliban aided and actively supported terrorist groups which targeted India and Central Asian countries. Afghanistan under the Taliban rule also became sanctuary for such terrorists groups. Due to presence of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan, the terrorism emanating out of Afghanistan had global ambitions that threatened India and the CARs equally. According to Shivshankar Menon, India's former Foreign Secretary & National Security Advisor, Pakistan was paying the Taliban to take Kashmiri militants under its protection while it also encouraged Osama bin Laden to join hands with the Taliban, since he was also sponsoring bases for Kashmiri terrorists in Khost province of Afghanistan. Taliban leader Mullah Omar had openly supported jihad in Kashmir in 1998. It was clear to the Taliban that as long as they provide safe havens for Pakistani and Kashmiri militants, Pakistan would not refuse them anything (Shivshankar, 2021). Well known American investigative journalist, Steve Coll has argued that Pakistan's intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) facilitated training for Kashmiri radicals in Afghanistan, apart from providing funds and arms supplies (Coll, 2004).

Similarly, Taliban became a destabilizing factor for the CARs as well. Three Central Asian countries can be termed as frontline states – Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as they share a porous border with Afghanistan and are directly impacted by its security scenario. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan do not share border with Afghanistan. However, terrorism became a serious security concern for all the CARs in 1990s. In 1999 and 2000, the connections between Taliban and terrorist organizations in Central Asia became public when Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) used its bases in Tajikistan and some Taliban controlled areas in North Afghanistan to launch raids in south Kyrgyzstan. In February 1999, IMU had also attempted but failed to assassinate President Karimov through six car bombings to establish a Taliban-like regime in Uzbekistan. IMU terrorists were seen as important allies by the Taliban and bin Laden. IMU also fought against the Northern Alliance to support the Taliban. IMU, the Taliban and bin Laden also wanted to overthrow the secular regimes in CARs and replace them with Is-

lamic Caliphate (Coll, 2004). On the contrary, India desired to see that the secular orientation of the CARs remained intact (Joshi, 2007). This is because rise of Islamic Caliphate in the CARs would have threatened India's Jammu and Kashmir due to its geographic proximity with the region. That is why; security planners in India saw the CARs as a strategic buffer which should have been protected against any fundamentalist threat.

The Northern Alliance headed by Ahmad Shah Massoud was strongly contesting the Taliban in northern Afghanistan. They had also promised that all militant camps would be closed if they come to power [Withington, 2002]. These were enough reasons for countries like India, Russia, Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to support the Northern Alliance against the Taliban. This was also the wider regional consensus that since the Taliban is a mutual security threat, there should be regional cooperation to tackle this issue. It can be said that response to the Taliban from India and the CARs was aligned with the regional and international approach which was to isolate and contain them. Hence, India and the CARs did not recognize the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

Second Phase (2001-2021)

The second phase starts when the US-NATO troops intervened in Afghanistan following the 9/11 terror attacks on the US. America's war on terrorism received support from both, India and the CARs as it overthrew Taliban from power, something they wanted but were not able to achieve. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan even allowed the US to maintain its military bases on their territory to support its counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan. Due to improved security situation in Afghanistan after 2001, India strengthened its links with Afghanistan and provided almost \$3 billion in development assistance. In 2012, India also announced its 'Connect Central Asia Policy' which sought to work on finding connectivity to the CARs. The shortest land route from India to the CARs passes through Pakistan. However, given its perennial strategic rivalry with India, Pakistan has never allowed India transit right to access the CARs. Hence, India started to work with Iran via Chabahar port to access Afghanistan and the CARs. Afghanistan now became a land bridge that would reconnect India and the CARs, constituting a single geopolitical space (Joshi, 2017). Under the Taliban rule, India was not engaging Afghanistan and hence, such economic initiatives were not possible. Better security situation in

Afghanistan also led India to sign agreements related to Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline which was also supported by the US as an alternate to Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline. At the same time, there was gradual increase in India's bilateral security cooperation with the CARs which focused on Afghanistan. India established Joint Working Groups (JWGs) on Counter Terrorism with Uzbekistan in 2003, Kazakhstan in 2004 and Tajikistan in 2012 (Joshi, 2017). Security developments in Afghanistan are central to discussions of these groups. Bilateral military exercises have been started between India and some of the CARs in this phase that include Exercise Prabal Dostyk now renamed Kazind with Kazakhstan since 2016, Exercise Khanjar with Kyrgyzstan since 2011 and Exercise Dustilk with Uzbekistan in 2019. Military training institutes in India have been training military officers from the CARs except Turkmenistan. India has also upgraded its relations to the level of strategic partnership with Kazakhstan (2009), Uzbekistan (2011), Tajikistan (2012) and Kyrgyzstan (2019). As the Taliban was gaining back territory in Afghanistan after 2015, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan had established contacts with the Taliban even before they came to power in 2021. India refrained from officially engaging the Taliban in this phase due to uncertainty and complexity of the Afghan war. Two years before the US-NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, first India-Central Asia Dialogue at the level of Foreign Ministers was held in 2019 in Samarkand where Afghanistan had also participated.

Third Phase (After Taliban Takeover in August 2021)

India-Central Asia engagement changed after the Taliban took over Afghanistan again in August 2021. India had closed its embassy in Kabul after Taliban's return; however, the CARs did not do so. In June 2022, India reopened its Kabul embassy with downgraded presence. New Delhi has been maintaining official contacts with the Taliban government. Both India and the CARs are engaging the Taliban government without recognizing it. On its part, the Taliban this time has been very diplomatic while engaging the regional countries. Unlike the last time, the Taliban government has not made any hostile statements against India and the CARs this time. They have been also conveying that they have the desire and capability to rein in other terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan. In Central Asia, there is a belief this time that attempts to isolate the

Taliban regime could turn it rogue and engagement may be better than isolation. This observation is based on author's interactions with Central Asian experts at an international conference organized by India-Central Asia Foundation in April 2023 in New Delhi. On the other hand, India believes that continued isolation of Afghanistan would create problems for Afghan people and a working relationship with the Taliban should be maintained in order to coordinate assistance for Afghan people. By contesting Pakistan's attempts to control its policies, the Taliban is showing its autonomous character, which is also one of the primary reasons why India began to engage the Taliban government in this phase. Both India and the CARs want Afghanistan to be peaceful so that economic interdependence and connectivity projects could pass through Afghan territory connecting South and Central Asia. Since the Taliban looks firmly entrenched in Afghanistan this time, India and the CARs may be betting on engagement with the Taliban to gauge its intentions and explore possibilities of regional cooperation.

However, there is more to this than meets the eye. A UN report in June 2023 had highlighted that the Taliban continues to have a strong relationship with al Qaeda which is allowing al Qaeda to regroup. The report also says that foreign terrorist organizations continue to operate in Afghanistan. To put it straight, the Taliban is showing the will to control the foreign terror outfits from attacking regional countries; however, they may not have the capability to do so. This necessitates further security cooperation between India and the CARs. Two important things have happened in this regard after the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan. *One*, India has started to hold biennial Annual Summit with the CARs beginning in January 2022. The two sides also agreed to establish a Joint Working Group on Afghanistan during this summit. *Second*, India also started to hold meeting with the CARs at the level of National Security Advisors and the first such meeting took place in December 2022. It must be mentioned that India and the CARs deal with the Afghanistan issue at the bilateral level in their ties while the recent initiatives by India make it 'India-Central Asia' issue, since the threat is regional in nature. India and CARs (except Turkmenistan) are members in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which also has mechanisms to address the current situation in Afghanistan. However, SCO cannot play an active role in Afghanistan's future due to differences among members over their respective Afghanistan policies. The Delhi Declara-

tion issued after first India-Central Asia Summit in 2022 highlighted that ‘Afghan territory not be used for sheltering, training, planning or financing terrorist acts and called for concerted action against all terrorist groups, including those sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)’. India-CARs relations with the Taliban would depend on two critical elements in future: Taliban’s ability to address their security concerns, internal challenges to Taliban’s rule and Taliban’s willingness to accommodate political opponents to form an inclusive government.

There is, however, need to highlight the fact that the Taliban is not only a security but also an ideological threat to the regional countries. They may have dropped their plans to expand beyond Afghanistan but their conservative ideology needs to be countered. The Taliban claims to be inspired by *Deobandi* Islam that has roots in India. *Deobandi* Islamic scholars in India claim that Taliban’s view of Islam is an extreme version that has nothing to do with them. This message needs to be amplified to ideologically discredit the Taliban. One area in which India and the CARs can directly cooperate is propagation of Sufism as a counter to religious radicalization. The Central Asian countries have a secular outlook; have historical *Sufi* influence and nomadic psyche which do not favor any fundamental tendency. *Sufism* supports humane view towards other beliefs while eschewing any conservative and fundamentalist view. *Sufism* was very popular during the *Mughal* era in India. In contemporary context, *Sufism* has a calming impact in the context of terrorism and violence being spread in Central and South Asia. The CARs have been promoting *Sufism* through Islamic education to counter social radicalization. India and Central Asia have a lot in common to promote *Sufi* tourism, cultural exchange and educational cooperation in order to deal with the threat of terrorism (Khan, 2015). Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had highlighted Sufi heritage of the CARs to counter terrorism during his address at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in 2021.

Conclusion

The Taliban has been an important factor in India’s relationship with the CARs. Taliban rose to power in Afghanistan around the same time when

the CARs gained independence in 1991-92. From early 1990s to 2001, Afghanistan faced political violence. When Taliban came to power in 1996, they allied with bin Laden which made Afghanistan vanguard of global terrorism. The Taliban directly threatened India and the CAR’s by sheltering, financing and training those terrorist groups which were a direct security threat to them. The Taliban supported jihad in Kashmir while they dreamt to topple the governments in CARs and replace them with Islamic Caliphate. The impact was equally felt in Kashmir and Batken, Kyrgyzstan. The Taliban’s conservative view of Islam was in contradiction to secular orientation of India and the CARs. Given Taliban’s outright hostility for India and the CAR’s, the two sides had supported the Northern Alliance in order to contain the Taliban in Afghanistan. In the second phase from 2001 to 2021, India and the CARs consolidated their bilateral relations and plans to connect the two regions via Afghanistan were announced under India’s Connect Central Asia Policy. The two sides had also supported America’s war on terrorism as it was directed against the Taliban and other terror outfits in Afghanistan. India further strengthened its military diplomacy with the CARs through military training, military exercises and capacity building programs. In this phase, there was a potential that Afghanistan could become a land bridge between India and the CARs, however, Taliban resurgence and return to power in August 2021 put questions marks over such plans. This also started the third phase in which India and the CARs have been engaging the Taliban without recognizing it. The Taliban has been totally neglected by the Western world that is focused on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The West may be trying to isolate the Taliban, however, the regional sentiment is to engage them and help the common Afghan people. India and the CARs have further strengthened their political and security links to deal with the Taliban. However, the two sides also need to counter terrorism from an ideological point of view in which *Sufism* has a lot of contribution to make. To a great extent, Taliban’s willingness to address security concerns of India and the CARs would determine the trajectory of their relations with Afghanistan in future.

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