# **India’s role as a spoiler in Afghanistan post-U.S.-Taliban Deal 2020**

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Afghanistan, a close-knitted neighbor of Pakistan, holds a significant position in the South Asia region for several reasons, such as geostrategic importance, enriched culture, ethnicity, conquerors, and empires. The state, also termed as the graveyard of empires, has been underwaters for terrorism, militancy, social and economic breakdown, international isolation, and disrupt government for decades. Not far in history, whether it was the Soviet-Afghan War of 1979 or the War on Terror of 2001, Afghanistan and the regional countries endured the spread of sectarianism, terrorism, religious extremism, social radicalism, and militancy up till now. The United States leading a military campaign in Afghanistan as its major foreign policy concern has remained at the frontline since 2001 to propagate its motive of ending terrorism and peace restoration. Yet, failed to do so after several multi- and bi-lateral talks with the Taliban and active military presence in Afghanistan for over two decades. After over a year of negotiations between the U.S. and Taliban, both parties have now come to a settlement, the U.S.-Taliban peace deal 2020, signed on February 29, 2020. The deal is a product of four interlinked parts to address four issues in Afghanistan; cease-fire, withdrawal of foreign forces, intra-Afghan negotiations, and counter-terrorism assurances, conclusively towards economic cooperation and protection of security.

The first part necessitates the establishment of guaranteed enforcement mechanisms for the prevention of the use of Afghan soil by any terrorist group or individual detrimental to the security of the U.S. and its allies. This may include the recruitment, fundraising, training, planning, and conducting terrorist attacks by international terrorist groups or individuals (i.e., al-Qa’ida, ISIS-K and alike), misuse of authenticated travel documents, providing hostage or supporting similar activities bearing threat of terrorism in nature or terrorist individuals. Meanwhile, the U.S. will continue to provide military and financial support to Afghan government institutions and military forces to deter and end internal and external threats and facilitate the arrangements to ensure sustainable peace. The second part addresses the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan within a timeline subjected to the fulfillment of commitments under the agreement. The initial reduction of U.S. military forces will be from 12000 to 8600 within the first 135 days with effect from the declaration of the U.S.-Taliban peace deal. ­­­Initially, a time period of 14 months for the withdrawal of all the military forces of the U.S. and its allies since the commencement of the deal, is now extended to September 11, 2021. Meanwhile, U.S. will provide support in facilitating a political settlement to reach a permanent ceasefire.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The completion of the aforementioned parts will lead to the last parts of intra-Afghan negotiations between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban to reach a political settlement, nature of government body, and other diplomatic arrangements. It will be followed by the removal of UNSC sanctions on the Taliban, recognition, and endorsement of the deal arrangements by UNSC upon U.S.'s request, ultimately leading to a final and comprehensive ceasefire.[[2]](#footnote-2) This marks the end of America’s longest war, the War on Terror, in its history. The country has witnessed countless battles, violence, the bloodshed of innocent and violent, destruction of homes; religious sanctuaries; institutions; terrorism, social disruption, profusion of ammunition and arms, counter attacks, military bases, proxy wars, civil wars, peace talks and peace conferences and multiple players. An absolute Afghan-led and Afghan-owned sustainable political agreement in all of its armed conflicts since 1975[[3]](#footnote-3) has hardly been noticed in its recent history, rather the involvement of foreign powers in negotiations has always been welcomed. It has not only impaired the country’s geo-political grounding but also portrayed its alarming and threatening situation.

Of all the regional and international players in the war in Afghanistan, India's role maintained a significant concern for Pakistan. India's tenacious involvement in Afghanistan without having a shared border, historical relations, ethnicity, or any other significant relation where it can devote itself, has always remained contentious, for all the right reasons. The bloodshed and hostilities borne by the Muslim community of India, killings of innocent across the line of control, India's strong allyship with the U.S. and the Afghan government, IIOJK issue, and numerous maneuvers, hints clearly at its creation of strategic space in the host country for regional enemies. In the course of expeditious development in Afghanistan, India has invested more than USD 3 billion on around 400 projects channeling in infrastructural, social, and economic development. It announced 100 new projects worth USD80 million, just eights months prior to the U.S.-Taliban peace deal. Amidst the pandemic, India sent 75,000 tonnes of wheat as a relief package to Afghanistan. Endowing heavy fundings and development investment is to create a diplomatic and strategic position for India’s encirclement strategy against Pakistan. Besides investment in the development sector, India has established 66 training camps for training, harboring, and launching terrorist attacks and proxy wars in Pakistan.[[4]](#footnote-4) The aspersion of India is widely known since history, in the form of false accusations, assassinations, abduction, etc. to sabotage the image of Pakistan on international forum and perpetuate terrorism. The allyship of the U.S. is a harboring factor in India’s motive to conduct covert operations against Pakistan.

History is full of examples of India’s malign tactics regarded as spoilage, be it in the Afghan peace process, Kashmir issue, or other regional issues. The kidnapping of Ravindra Mahatre in 1984 accusing Pakistan to be involved in kidnapping RAW official- plot made by RAW; kidnapping of Romanian diplomat in India in 1991- a plot constructed and conducted by RAW to harm Sikhs’ freedom struggle; Doval Doctrine – famous for fostering insurgency in Balochistan; involvement of Amar Sinha, former Indian ambassador in Afghanistan, with Daesh group particularly in managing the funding and supply of anti-Pakistan terrorist groups; Lahore blast on 23rd June 2021, just before FATF meeting – plot by RAW; Dassu blast occurring before JCC CPEC meeting; and recent false news of alleged kidnapping of Afghan ambassador’s daughter in Islamabad are only some of the examples to highlight the longstanding agenda of India to disparage the image of Pakistan on international diaspora[[5]](#footnote-5). The EU DisinfoLab[[6]](#footnote-6),[[7]](#footnote-7) has also revealed and confirmed a network of 500 fake media outlets and numerous fake NGOs promoting anti-Pakistan and pro-India narratives for almost 15 years in 116 countries.

With the support from the U.S., India has remained actively involved in spreading terrorism and architecting its hegemonical designs in South Asia, playing the ultimate role of spoiler in regional and international peace. India, the Afghanistan government, and Pentagon recently accused Pakistan to provide safe havens to the terrorists along the Pak-Afghan border which are repudiated categorically and repeatedly by Prime Minister Pakistan, Foreign Minister Pakistan, the Foreign Office spokesman, and other officials at multiple times[[8]](#footnote-8)To protect self-interest, secure the now-unstable strategic space in Afghanistan, and strengthen its propaganda against Pakistan to weaken its role in the Afghan peace process, India is actively playing the presidency card in UNSC sessions.

Despite the vital role of Pakistan in the Afghan peace process, the former was kept at a distance and disregarded at the UNSC meetings of the Afghan government and India, as well as denied the participation of the Pakistan Ambassador and its permanent representative at the UN.[[9]](#footnote-9) In a recent press briefing, Pentagon Press Secretary stated, ‘"We all have a shared sense of the importance of closing down those [terrorist] safe havens along Pak-Afghan border and not allowing them to be used by the Taliban or other terrorist networks to sow discord'.[[10]](#footnote-10) The growing attacks and security tensions in Afghanistan and putting the brunt of the former’s deteriorating security situation on Pakistan is debauching the comprehensive and all-supported effort to bring peace in Afghanistan after the longest war on terror and the U.S.’s geopolitical luxury of withdrawing after failure to restore peace. The air of blame game and false accusations from India, Afghanistan, and the U.S. in recent news and reports are to weaken the image of Pakistan at the international diaspora and to save the self-interest of regional enemies after fleeting of their supporters. The recent announcement of the U.S. government to send 5,000 troops to drawdown American and foreign personnel, and embassy from Kabul in observance of the growing violence in Afghanistan,[[11]](#footnote-11) is another eyebrow-raising concern for Pakistan.

**Way Forward**

It is high time to conduct diplomacy in cognizance of the malign activities of regional spoilers. Pakistan, a safe haven not for terrorists but Afghan refugees for decades, has remained a direct recipient of terrorist attacks, hybrid warfare, travel security risk, social unrest, and violence. Considering the unfolding scenario since the U.S.-Taliban deal 2020, the recent events hint at the traditional maligning tactics of regional enemies as well as signals towards the clandestine agenda of concerned parties and allies.

India, taking the presidency of the UNSC for the first time, can use the presidency card to pressurize Pakistan by bringing over the Kulbhushan Jadhav issue. Twisting the facts, it can censure Pakistan for not cooperating on ICJ's judgment about Kulbhushan Jadhav in 2019 by not allowing council access and legal representation by the Indian government.[[12]](#footnote-12) The international standing of a state is contingent upon a wide array of geo-economic and political indicators, ideologies, and geo-strategic partnerships instead of shaping narrow and enemy-targeted state narrative, ideology, and foreign policy. India, to secure the shaky position and strategic space created in Afghanistan, is in constant tries of establishing engagements with the Taliban. In its motive of isolating Pakistan through different fall flat operations, India has become prey to its own motives. The latter’s weak association with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan where Pakistan’s and China's association is comparatively stronger might empower it to use its own created base against Pakistan and increase its influence in Central Asia. Another option for India is also to influence Northern Alliance, however, the latter's position weakened after the assassination of Ahmed Shah Massoud. Ahmed Shah Massoud’s son, Ahmed Massoud’s willingness for negotiations and to form an inclusive government with the Taliban, also opens up doors for India to secure space in Afghanistan. Following rapid advance, the Taliban's sudden takeover of Kabul elucidates the U.S.'s defeat as well as the critical situation for India and other investors in Afghanistan. It is highly probable that India, after losing strategic space in Afghanistan, will look for a station to cultivate its plots and operations against Pakistan.

Being an important neighbor and an integral player in the Afghanistan peace process, Pakistan needs to exercise cautious diplomacy and foreign policy in cognizance of spoiling agendas of enemies. Amid the time of disinformation and perception as tools of hybrid warfare unlike the conventional tools i.e., normal politics and diplomacy, the threats to state sovereignty need to be recognized. The EU DisinfoLab report provides a great help in shaping diplomacy countering not only India but also domestic challengers by highlighting strong symbiosis between India’s government and its news media, and covert network of disinformation propagandas. It is important to promote a policy narrative that prioritizes state sovereignty and security while welcoming geo-economic and strategic partnerships for regional development. Simultaneously, leading an inclusive and unified foreign policy without political conflicts at the display is imperative to strengthen the narrative.

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