

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

'Troubling Times for India: 'Diminishing' Democracy, the Kashmir Conflict & the Afghanistan Effect?'
Global Strategy Forum, 19 October 2021

Rahul Roy-Chaudhury
Senior Fellow for South Asia
The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), London

- I'd like to focus my remarks on the Taliban-Haqqani control of Afghanistan and its impact on India, especially on the Kashmir conflict with Pakistan.

AFGHANISTAN

- **The Taliban-Haqqani control represents a huge loss of power, influence and presence for India in Afghanistan; and as I will say in my conclusion, has made India more insecure in relation to the Kashmir conflict.**
- The Taliban's facilitation of a hijacked Indian Airlines flight in Kandahar over 20 years ago remains deeply etched in India's public memory. The Haqqani network, the most-feared terror group affiliated to the Taliban, carried out the deadliest attack against the Indian embassy in Kabul in 2008; and the Indian security establishment considers it to be closely linked to Pakistan's intelligence agency as well as anti-India jihadi groups present in Afghanistan, including the LeT and the JeM. Importantly, India had not previously engaged with the Taliban or the Haqqanis – covertly or diplomatically - in any significant way.
- There also appears to be considerable confusion over the intentions and practices of the new Afghan regime towards India. This takes place amidst differences emerging between the Taliban and the Haqqani network, Pakistan's determined and long-standing effort to end India's presence in Afghanistan and concerns over the presence of anti-India terror groups in Afghanistan, alongside the Kashmir conflict. **Let's unpack these four issues, one-by-one.**
- **Taliban-Haqqani views towards India:** Although the Taliban leadership has made conciliatory statements - including a desire for friendly cultural and economic relations with India, and hoped it would continue its development work in Afghanistan, the powerful Haqqani group has taken a tougher approach. The young Haqqani leader, Anas Haqqani, has publicly stated that India's role for the past 20 years has been negative. It remains to be seen whether the powerful Haqqani network's views towards India will prevail or not.
- **Pakistan's perspective:** India-Pakistan tensions had been a key driver for their competition for influence and fierce rivalry in Afghanistan. In Pakistan,

therefore, there is now a sense of triumphalism that it has significantly increased its power and influence over Afghanistan and the consequent closure of India's diplomatic missions. This is the result of strong and long-standing Pakistani intelligence ties with the Taliban and the Haqqani network through funding, arming, training and the provision of sanctuary in Pakistan.

- **Anti-India terror groups:** According to UN, Pakistani terror groups LeT and JeM had approximately 800 and 200 armed fighters, respectively, co-located with Taliban forces. Although Taliban leaders have publicly said that Afghanistan will not be used to host LeT or JeM or other anti-India groups, their actions, so far, undermine their public statements. Reportedly, a number of LeT and JeM escaped when the prison in Kabul was over-run; and with **Sirajuddin Haqqani as the Acting Interior Minister, LeT and JeM personnel have reportedly been** deployed for the security of Kabul.
- **On Kashmir:** In a partially revealing interview to the BBC Urdu service, Suhail Shaheen, official spokesperson at the Taliban's Qatar office, said that the "Taliban had a right to raise their voices for Muslims in Kashmir". For the Indian security establishment, this appears to indicate that the Taliban is also coming under increasing pressure from Pakistan intelligence to take a strong stand against India in Kashmir.
- **So, where does all this leave us in terms of Afghanistan's impact on Kashmir?**

IMPACT ON KASHMIR

- **In effect, India has two major security concerns in relation to Afghanistan, as mentioned by prime minister Modi recently: terrorism and radicalisation.**
- **In terms of Terrorism, the Indian security establishment's fears are:**
- **Firstly**, that, once the situation within Afghanistan stabilises, Afghan-based LeT and the JeM could host training camps and intensify efforts to plan and implement terror attacks in Kashmir – thereby decreasing 'footprints' to Pakistan under scrutiny by the Financial Action Task Force. They could be logistically supported by the Haqqani network with the Taliban complicit in not seeking to intervene. When the Taliban were last in power in the late 1990s, some 400 Afghans had reportedly been fighting in Kashmir with at least 22 being killed by Indian security forces. However, the Indian security establishment, at the moment, appear confident to counter such efforts on the basis of the large security presence currently in Kashmir. But, this confidence may be misplaced, with the current resurgence in targeted terror attacks taking place in Kashmir.

- **Secondly**, that the sense of triumphalism within Pakistan's intelligence agency in terms of their newly-established 'strategic depth' against India could lead to heightened support of anti-Indian terror groups.
- However, my sense is that there is greater concern in India's security establishment over the rise and spread of Islamic radicalisation from Afghanistan. In effect, the Taliban-Haqqani regime could encourage Islamic radicalisation in a way that the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria was unable to do. This could take the form, for example, of terrorism inspired on ideological grounds, through increased radicalisation of Kashmiri youth, exacerbated by local tensions in Kashmir.
- **To conclude, the Taliban-Haqqani regime in Afghanistan has made India more insecure in relation to Kashmir. Although the Taliban-Haqqani themselves are unlikely to carry out terror attacks in India, they could be complicit in providing a 'safe haven' to anti-India terror groups as well as encouraging radicalisation in India. This could also be exacerbated by Pakistani intelligence and its newly acquired 'strategic depth' against India.**
- Thank You.