

## **India's outreach to the Taliban** **(GS Paper 2, International Relation)**

### **Why in news?**

- Recently, a delegation from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) was in Kabul, meeting with Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, among others.
- At around the same time, India's National Security Advisor was in Tajikistan, declaring that India would remain an important stakeholder in Afghanistan and calling for assistance to bolster Kabul's ability to counter terrorism.



### **Engagement with Taliban leaders:**

- The announcement by the MEA of to Kabul to oversee delivery operations and discuss India's humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan with the Taliban leaders, shouldn't come as a surprise.
- There were also reports that a team of Indian officials had visited Kabul in February to explore the possibility of reopening the Indian embassy, albeit in a very scaled-down way and for a very limited purpose.
- Although contacts between India and the Taliban commenced long before the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the first publicly acknowledged meeting between Indian officials and the Taliban took place at the request of the latter in Doha, after the Taliban captured Kabul.
- Earlier, Taliban have held out assurances of security if India opened her mission and have sought closer cultural, economic, and even security ties with India.

### **Humanitarian assistance:**

- The decision of the Indian government to send 50,000 tonnes of wheat, medicines, and vaccines to Afghanistan as humanitarian assistance provided the first big opening.
- Late in 2021, suggestions were made to the government to send a delegation to oversee the aid distribution and use the opportunity to connect with the Taliban leadership in Kabul.
- The proposed visit would give officials an idea of the ground situation, which would be useful in deciding the next course of action.
- Given that many other countries were sending delegations to Kabul, there was no reason why India should stay away from an area in which it has vital security and strategic interests.

### **Taliban 2.0:**

- Whilst India wasn't in any mood to break away from the international consensus and recognise the Emirate, it was not entirely averse to the possibility of engagement.

- Even so, India remained in a wait-and-watch mode, partly to see if the Taliban 2.0 was an updated version of the original Taliban, partly to observe how the dynamics between the Taliban and Pakistan played out, and partly to see how the rest of the world was reacting and responding to the developments inside Afghanistan, including Taliban's policies on terrorism, women, minorities, and political opponents.
- There was probably also a political and ideological resistance on part of the government in Delhi.
- After all, the incongruity of taking a hard stance against Islamist terror groups operating against India and at the same time doing business with the Taliban was quite glaring.

#### **How Pakistan's influence and control over the Taliban has reduced?**

- After the Taliban takeover in August 2021, there was discussion about how India had suffered a serious strategic setback and would have no role or say in Afghanistan for a long time to come. However, even back then, it was quite clear that it was only a matter of time before India would be back in the game.
- The world in the 2020s was very different from what it was in the 1990s when Pakistan was pretty much calling all the shots in Afghanistan. While Pakistan remains a pivotal player even today, its influence and control over the Taliban are just not what it was a quarter-century ago.
- Back in the 1990s, Pakistan wasn't as broke as it is today. This meant that apart from security assistance Pakistan was also able to help the Taliban financially and economically. Diplomatically, Pakistan was a lot more relevant in international affairs in the 1990s than it is today.
- In other words, Pakistan's ability to influence the Taliban is circumscribed by its own economic, diplomatic, and security challenges.

#### **How Taliban 2.0 is organizationally changed?**

- The Taliban have also changed not ideologically but organisationally. There are tribal, regional, political, and even policy-based (between the pragmatists and hard-liners) divisions in the Taliban that were not so visible back in the 1990s. For now, the tussle between the different factions has not shown any signs of escalating into an internecine conflict.
- However, it does create some space for India, especially because some of these factions are not exactly enamoured of Pakistan which treated many Taliban leaders very shabbily, bullying them, incarcerating them, and blackmailing them to make them compliant.
- Developing relations with India gives them certain leverage over Pakistan. The way this dynamic play is that the more overbearing Pakistan becomes, the more Afghans will gravitate toward India.

#### **Global stance towards Afghanistan:**

- The options available to India are no different than those available to any other country. The Americans have summed these up in three words: Engage, isolate, or oppose.
- The US officials say that they are focused on the first two options and the third option is, for now, off the table. India has so far focused only on the isolate option. However, beyond a point, this option will yield diminishing returns, especially because many other countries are now starting to 'engage' the Taliban.
- Contradictory though it may appear, most countries are adopting a policy of both engaging and isolating the Taliban. They are engaging by holding a dialogue, providing humanitarian, and even some economic assistance, reopening their missions and pushing the Taliban to live up to some of their commitments on human rights, women, and minority rights, and giving safe passage to Afghans who want to leave.
- At the same time, they are isolating the Taliban by holding back on formal diplomatic recognition, providing aid, and assistance to the regime, and giving access to the international financial system.

#### **What should be India's policy towards Afghanistan?**

- The Indian policy should incorporate all three options, with some differences. While there is a case for India to engage with the Taliban, India must simultaneously reach out to its old friends, most of who are in exile.
- As a country that is rooting for stability in Afghanistan and is pushing for an inclusive government, India can use its contacts with the exiles to push for reconciliation.

#### **Indian Embassy & consulates:**

- As part of its engagement, India can reopen not just its embassy, but also its four consulates. This will be a litmus test of sorts to see how much the Taliban are independent of Pakistani influence. Engagement will also mean giving some economic, development, and humanitarian assistance.
- Even as India engages the Taliban, it must simultaneously isolate the Taliban, and not break ranks with the rest of the international community.

#### **Supporting anti-Taliban forces:**

- The last prong of India's approach has to be to oppose the Taliban, not just diplomatically and politically, but also by covertly supporting anti-Taliban forces. After all, the Taliban are doing the same by fraternising with organisations like Jaish-e-Mohammed and al-Qaeda.
- If anything, this can be India's carrot-and-stick approach with the Taliban. If they remain recalcitrant, then it is quite likely other countries will also start supporting the anti-Taliban forces, which will add to India's diplomatic and strategic heft in Afghanistan.

#### **Way Forward:**

- There are never any full stops in Afghanistan and, therefore, there is no reason why India should put any full stops in the path of its policy in Afghanistan. Pragmatism combined with some hard-nosed moves is the way to not just get back in the game, but also guide its course to the extent possible.