

# *FAULTLINES*

The K.P.S. Gill Journal of Conflict & Resolution

Volume 29



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Volume 29

edited by  
AJAI SAHNI



Kautilya Books

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THE INSTITUTE FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT



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The Institute for Conflict Management, New Delhi  
September 2022

ISBN : 978-93-90885-25-1

Price: ₹ 250

Overseas: US\$ 30

**Printed by:** Kautilya Books

4378/4B, Ansari Road, Daryaganj

New Delhi-110 002

Phone: 011 47534346, +91 99115 54346

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FAULTLINES: THE K.P.S. GILL JOURNAL OF CONFLICT & RESOLUTION

Edited by Ajai Sahni

## **FAULTLINES - THE SERIES**

FAULTLINES focuses on various sources and aspects of existing and emerging conflict in the Indian subcontinent. Terrorism and low-intensity wars, communal, caste and other sectarian strife, political violence, organised crime, policing, the criminal justice system and human rights constitute the central focus of the Journal.

FAULTLINES is published each quarter by the INSTITUTE FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT.

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# Foreword

For all their benign pretensions, the shadow of great power interventions has tended, on balance, to malevolence, often doing greater harm than any good that may be claimed or intended. The first two decades of the current century are testimony to the devastations wrought across the world by the hubris and folly of the world's 'sole superpower'.

There is a new bully on the block, now. China's emergence as an increasingly dominant economic, military and political force presents an open challenge to what Chinese commentators are fond of describing as the 'global hegemon', projecting both hope and fear across the world, but acutely in its own neighbourhood. China's rampaging growth and its translation into military power – a defence budget of USD 216 billion in 2021 – dwarfs the outlay of all countries in the world, with the exception of the United States – at USD 601 billion. After decades of strategic investment in the South China Sea and the Pacific region, China has established area dominance in its littoral regions and the Far East; its ambitions have now turned to the wider Asia-Pacific, with aggressive moves into the Indian Ocean Region. Critically, the future is likely to see this dominance rising, as China makes major technological advances. The country already accounts for 23 per cent of the global spending on Research and Development. Crucially, as the 'world's factory', China today has a depth and resilience that most of the nations of the world have sacrificed at the altar of quick profits.

It is crucial for the world, and particularly China's neighbours, to examine and understand the various components of the complex strategy of aggression and encirclement that Beijing is deploying. The military components of this strategy appear far more comprehensible than the insidious manoeuvres it employs in the spheres of economics, diplomacy, cyberspace, and lawfare, among others. The current volume contains two tentative explorations of China's widening intrusions into the Indian Ocean Region, and Beijing's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, as well as strategic moves in the South China Sea.

The collapse of the American 'mission' in Afghanistan has left behind a gaping vacuum, and the disordered powerplay to fill up the spaces is radiating instability beyond the country's borders. As the Taliban regime struggles to establish a modicum of order and legitimacy, the country has slipped into a gigantic humanitarian crisis which can only be addressed by a massive infusion of international aid. Unfortunately, while fitful flows provide some relief, the Taliban's own style of governance and failure to establish an inclusive system, and to concede minimal rights to women, continue to obstruct the possibilities of international recognition of the regime and a freer flow of aid.

Within the growing uncertainties of Asia, India has sought to project 'soft power', in the manifest dearth of capacities to explore any harder options. The Chagos dispute is one area where intercession by New Delhi has some potential to speed up resolution. Despite the International Court of Justice's non-binding advisory, to "complete the decolonization of Mauritius" by vacating the Archipelago, there is little movement towards removing the joint UK-US military base at Diego Garcia. It remains to be seen if a satisfactory *via media* is, in fact, attainable, and if New Delhi is able to play a significant role in securing it.

New and baffling realities are crystallizing across the world, and most national leaderships have demonstrated a persistent inability to adequately understand these, and to deal with them.

Asia has emerged as one of the most unstable regions of the world, riddled with existing and potential conflicts. If policy is to succeed in these exacting circumstances, it must be underpinned by strong research and analysis, rooted in the dynamic and rapidly transforming realities of the world around us. *Faultlines* continues with its endeavour to provide a realistic appraisal of the dynamics of an unstable and evolving world order.

Ajai Sahni  
New Delhi,  
September 1, 2022



# An ‘Assassin’s Mace’ in the Indian Ocean?

Ajai Sahni\*

Can India maintain its dominance in the Indian Ocean? The powershift in the Asia-Pacific demands that India’s security establishment not only address this question with extreme urgency, but also examine the strategic options available and design a fleet, arsenal and technology profile, both on land and sea, in accordance with the imperatives emerging out of the destabilizing shift in the military balance in and around this region.

The Indian Naval leadership emphasizes “India’s quintessentially maritime character,”<sup>1</sup> and the Navy’s security objectives require it, *inter alia*, “To develop requisite maritime force levels and maintain the capability for meeting India’s maritime security requirements.”<sup>2</sup>

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1 Admiral R.K. Dhowan, “Foreword,” *Ensuring Secure Seas: India’s Maritime Security Strategy*, Naval Strategic Publication (NSP 1.2), Indian Navy, October, 2015, p. i.

2 *Ensuring Secure Seas: India’s Maritime Security Strategy*, Naval Strategic Publication (NSP 1.2), Indian Navy, October 2015, p. 12.

Among the most significant challenges to this perspective and objective is the reality that the “Chinese footprint in the Indian Ocean was getting bigger and will continue to expand even further in the future” even as the “Indian Ocean is increasingly playing an important role in Chinese efforts to establish a position as a leading maritime power in the region.”<sup>3</sup>

Currently, despite Chinese forays into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), India’s natural advantages are significant.

India’s central position in the IOR, astride the main International Shipping Lanes (ISLs), accords distinct advantages. It places the outer fringes of the IOR and most choke points almost equidistant from India, thereby facilitating reach, sustenance and mobility of its maritime forces across the region. India is, therefore, well positioned to influence the maritime space, and promote and safeguard its national maritime interests, across the IOR.<sup>4</sup>

Such advantages are, however, far from permanent as, “At the same time, India’s vast coastline and maritime zones require significant resources and investments to ensure their security.”<sup>5</sup> In particular, the establishment of a number of potentially dual-use bases in a ‘string of pearls’ encircling India, constitute an imminent threat to India’s current and arguable dominance, even as a massive expansion of Chinese blue water capabilities is underway.

It should come as no surprise to us if in the next few years PLA (Peoples Liberation Army) Navy ships and nuclear submarines are put regularly into harbours

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3 Harsh V. Pant, “Sino Indian Maritime Ambitions Collide in the Indian Ocean,” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, Volume 1, Number 2, 2014, p. 188.

4 *Ensuring Secure Seas: India’s Maritime Security Strategy*, op.cit., p. 17.

5 Ibid.

like Chittagong, Sittwe, Hambantota or Gwadar in our immediate neighbourhood. In pursuit of their grand design, the Chinese are planning or in the process of building container terminals in all these ports.<sup>6</sup>

China's expansionist intent is amply evident, the US Department of Net Assessment noted, as far back as in 2004,

China is building strategic relationships along the sea lanes from the Middle East to the South China Sea in ways that suggest defensive and offensive positioning to protect China's energy interests, but also to serve broad security objectives.<sup>7</sup>

These 'broad security objectives' put Beijing in direct contest, if not immediate conflict, with the other established powers in the IOR, principally including India and the United States. There is, consequently, a clear convergence of interests between the latter two powers, and much is now made of a security partnership in the IOR comprehending India and the US, and extending to powerful US allies. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy (2022) thus explicitly states that the

...intensifying American focus is due in part to the fact that the Indo-Pacific faces mounting challenges, particularly from the PRC (Peoples Republic of China). The PRC is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world's most influential power. The PRC's coercion and aggression spans the globe, but it is most acute in the Indo-Pacific. From the economic coercion

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6 Admiral Arun Prakash, "A Vision of Maritime India 2020," in Prakash Nanda ed., *Rising India, Friends and Foes*, Lancer Publishers, New Delhi, 2007, p. 137.

7 "China builds up strategic sea lanes," *The Washington Post*, January 17, 2005.

of Australia to the conflict along the Line of Actual Control with India to the growing pressure on Taiwan and bullying of neighbors in the East and South China Seas, our allies and partners in the region bear much of the cost of the PRC's harmful behavior.<sup>8</sup>

Further, the US has expressed the commitment to a strong strategy of alliances and to develop warfighting capabilities to this end:

Consistent with our broader strategic approach, we will prioritize our single greatest asymmetric strength: our network of security alliances and partnerships. Across the region, the United States will work with allies and partners to *deepen our interoperability and develop and deploy advanced warfighting capabilities* as we support them in defending their citizens and their sovereign interests.<sup>9</sup>

And further,

The United States will defend our interests, *deter military aggression against our own country and our allies and partners—including across the Taiwan Strait*—and promote regional security by developing new capabilities, concepts of operation, military activities, defence industrial initiatives, and a more resilient force posture.<sup>10</sup>

Curiously, the Quad Leaders' Summit 2022 was strangely silent on the issue of military strategy or any planned response to PRC's aggression. Conflicting statements by President Joe

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8 "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States", The White House, February, 2022, p. 5, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

9 Ibid., p. 12.

10 Ibid., p. 15.

Biden and the US State Department also indicate significant ambivalence with regard to the US response in case of Chinese military action to forcibly 'integrate' Taiwan with mainland China. President Joe Biden has, of course, made some bold statements on the issue, warning, "They are already flirting with danger right now by flying so close and all the manoeuvres that they are undertaking," and confirming that the US would intervene militarily if China were to invade Taiwan.<sup>11</sup> However, "It took the US State Department only minutes to start walking back Joe Biden's comments," indicating that there was no change in US policy on Taiwan, which does not require direct US military intervention.<sup>12</sup>

There are certainly great advantages to be gained from a deepening of relationships with the US and its Western allies – though it would be sheer folly if these come at the expense of India's traditional partners, particularly Russia. Crucially, any excessive reliance on extra-regional powers would be extremely unwise. "Friendly they may be, but one should never forget that they are in these waters, not for altruistic motives but specifically to safeguard their perceived national interests; economic and strategic."<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the idea that the US, the Quad or Western powers, or any subset thereof, will unite with the affected states to fight a war against PRC in case of aggression against Taiwan or India is quite delusional, given the record. Indeed, unequal partnerships with the US have left a trail of death, destruction and utter ruination in their wake, across the world and, after the entrapment and betrayal of Ukraine by the Western powers, it must be abundantly clear that India must prepare to stand on its

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11 Tessa Wong, "Biden vows to defend Taiwan in apparent US policy shift," *BBC News*, May 24, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-61548531>.

12 Ibid.

13 Admiral Arun Prakash, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

own in case of any direct aggression on its territories, as well as to protect its strategic interests in the IOR. Any assistance it may receive from others would be unexpected bounty, but cannot be relied upon. Its alliances, both regional and extra-regional, may have some deterrent value, but are unlikely to survive the stresses of open war.

It is necessary, consequently, for India to evolve an architecture of Naval defence on its own, without presumption of dependence or aid in the event of Chinese aggression (particularly in an envisaged two-front war) or of a strategy of belligerent ‘salami slicing’ in the IOR. The evolution of India’s Naval strategy and its priorities will define the mix of platforms, weaponry and technology that must be acquired or developed within a clearly defined time-frame. Such an exercise would certainly have been carried out by the Naval and defence leadership, though it naturally does not find space in publicly available documents on the Naval vision and strategy. Crucially, moreover, it is necessary to reconcile any such strategy and priorities, both with its clearly articulated objectives and with the available resources. Given onerous and growing resource constraints – particularly in comparison with China’s defence and technology investments – this will require a selective or staged pursuit of objectives and priorities.

It is not the objective, here, to pretend to suggest any outline or detail of a Naval strategy for India, or even to examine a limited set of its components. Nor is anything below likely to be unknown to India’s Naval leadership. What is attempted, here, is to examine the strategic development of the adversary – the PLA Navy – and determine whether it contains elements of a progression that India could learn from. Critically, China was also preparing itself, in stages, to defend its littoral interests against a far greater power, and subsequently, to evolve capabilities to deter, and eventually challenge that power far

from its own shores. In the first two of these objectives, the PLA Navy has been substantially successful; and it is working actively towards securing the last.

### **CHINA: RHETORIC AND REALITY**

China's official declarations have long been articulated in the rhetoric of a 'peaceful rise' or 'peaceful development.' China's President Xi Jinping has continued with this entrenched rhetoric, emphasizing 'peaceful coexistence' and 'mutual benefit' between nations, and has called for "consultation and cooperation instead of conflict and confrontation." Xi has also asserted that China seeks an international order where "the strong should not bully the weak", and Beijing has sought to project itself as a protector of the weak and of international laws, rules and norms.<sup>14</sup>

This rhetoric is, however, increasingly irreconcilable with China's actions, particularly in its own neighbourhood and, in some measure, across the world, as well as with the nature and scale of the military build-up of its various armed forces, including the Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN or PLA Navy). China's recent transgressions across the land border with India, and probing transgressions by PLA Navy into the IOR, and into Indian waters, are part of a pattern of violations, of breach of promise and violations of treaties, of the incremental invention of territorial claims, and the entrapment of weak nations in patterns reminiscent of calibrated colonial encroachments in the guise of commercial activity and inequitable trade. Crucially, China has shown contempt, not only for treaty obligations and other national commitments, but for international law and international institutions, including the UN. Thus,

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14 John Feng, "Xi Jinping sends strong message to Joe Biden in pointed Davos speech," *Newsweek*, January 26, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/xi-jinping-sends-strong-message-joe-biden-pointed-davos-speech-1564421>.

China has repeatedly reneged on its various tactical concessions or returned accommodation by others with eventual hostility or more expansive claims. This suggests that Beijing focuses more on interests and power than the question of whether its commitments remain credible—complicating efforts at “cooperation spirals” or grand bargains. When India recognized the CCP’s control over China and accepted its claims of sovereignty over Tibet—a complicated concession for the Indian government to make at the time—the gesture did not preclude China’s decision to initiate a conflict over the Sino-Indian border a few years later, nor did it stop Beijing from believing that New Delhi was too closely aligned to Washington and too expansionist. Other efforts at reassurance, including US efforts after the Global Financial Crisis to delay arms sales to Taiwan, a somewhat concessionary joint statement on China’s “core interests,” and a willingness to temporarily put aside human rights disputes, did not preclude a more assertive turn in Chinese foreign policy – instead, it may have encouraged it. Chinese suggestions that it would not build an aircraft carrier later proved unfounded; its promise not to build overseas bases were likewise belied by its acquisition of a facility in Djibouti (and plans for facilities elsewhere); its promises not to militarize the South China Sea were contradicted just months after they were made; and its agreement on cyber issues in 2015 later collapsed.<sup>15</sup>

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15 Rush Doshi, *The Long Game*, Oxford University Press, Kindle Edition, 2021, pp. 307-308; see also, “The Elements of the China Challenge”, US State Department, pp. 18-19, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20-02832-Elements-of-China-Challenge-508.pdf>.

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Significantly, the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague found in favour of the Philippines, explicitly rejecting China's sweeping and ambiguous claims in the South China Sea, against the documented claims of Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei based, *inter alia*, on principles enumerated in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). China has simply ignored The Hague ruling and, indeed, accelerated its projects on the contested Spratly Islands, Mischief Reef and Subi Reef, among others. China ratified UNCLOS in 1992.<sup>16</sup>

Deception has traditionally been a core element of Chinese political and military thought, and is a key component of contemporary foreign policy and military planning. It is, moreover, at the very heart of China's current 'rejuvenation.' Chinese policy and military strategy documents repeatedly emphasize the importance – indeed, centrality – of deception and denial. The CCP's leadership maintains a tight control on the dissemination of *all* information, both domestically and externally, consistently manipulating and subordinating the narrative to its own policy goals. Research on deception and denial is an integral part of strategic and policy research and as well as of military manuals. As one recent and authoritative document notes,

...strategic projection and strategic deployment should usually be carried out in a concealed manner, and measures such as strategic disguise, strategic deception, and strategic accompaniment should be taken to confuse the enemy and conceal one's true intentions and actions.<sup>17</sup>

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16 Centre for Preventive Action, "Territorial disputes in the South China Sea," updated May 4, 2022, *CFR Global Conflict Tracker*, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>.

17 Xiao Tianliang et. al., *Science of Military Strategy 2020*, National Defence University Press, translation by the In Their Own Words project, China

This factor becomes immensely more important since there is a steady stream of commentary advocating ‘improved relations’ between India and China, and particular the promotion of greater trade, as ‘mutually beneficial’ – despite mounting evidence, both, of Chinese malfeasance as well as of the devastating impact the ‘dumping’ of Chinese goods in India has had on Indian industry and the prospects of the manufacturing sector.<sup>18</sup>

In the Indo-Pacific region, in order to challenge ‘US hegemony,’ China has advanced a number of apparently benign concepts, including, for instance, the ‘four nos’: “no hegemonism, no power politics, no arms race, and no military alliance.”<sup>19</sup> That its own actions militate against each of these has not deterred such advocacy, even as compulsions of the lesser powers in the region have forced them to, at least formally, accept the Chinese concepts and go along with the institutional frameworks offered by Beijing for their purported realization.

Crucially, therefore, an examination of China’s specific actions, and their impact on various sectors and activities in India, the wider IOR, and the world, is necessary to decipher both Chinese intent and strategy. In the present context, China’s choices in terms of Naval platforms, technologies and deployments are critical indicators of intent, and will prove far more decisive than the postures adopted by Beijing in international forums or in most publicly accessible documents.

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Aerospace Studies Institute, Alabama, USA, January 2022, p. 221, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2022-01-26%202020%20Science%20of%20Military%20Strategy.pdf>.

18 See, for instance, “Impact of Chinese Goods on Indian Industry”, Parliamentary Standing Committee on Commerce, Rajya Sabha Secretariat, July 2018, [http://164.100.47.5/committee\\_web/ReportFile/13/97/145\\_2018\\_7\\_13.pdf](http://164.100.47.5/committee_web/ReportFile/13/97/145_2018_7_13.pdf).

19 For some details of this advocacy, see, Rush Doshi, op. cit., pp. 124-126.

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It is useful, consequently, to examine the trajectory of strategic thought and policy, as well as of the development of various weapons' platforms and their deployment, particularly, in the present context, of the PLA Navy.

### INTENT AND STRATEGY

China's policy framework currently operates on the premise that the global order is in flux, and that unprecedented technological changes have transformed the international balance of power, creating a vacuum and opportunities for a rising Chinese power, even as the great powers of the West fall into what Beijing estimates is an inevitable and irresistible decline. As President Xi Jinping expressed it in January 2021,

The world is in a turbulent time that is unprecedented in the past century... But time and momentum are on our side. This is where we show our conviction and resilience, as well as our determination and confidence.<sup>20</sup>

And further,

The extensiveness of these opportunities and challenges is unprecedented but, all in all, the opportunities we face outweigh our challenges...<sup>21</sup>

In this calculated 'rise' and effort to displace the erstwhile 'hegemon,' identified, albeit obliquely as the US in numerous party documents and authoritative statements, commentators perceive a two-stage process:

The first strategy is to blunt the hegemon's exercise of those forms of control, particularly those extended over the rising state; after all, no rising state can displace the

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20 Kinling Lo and Kristin Huang, "Xi Jinping says 'time and momentum on China's side' as he sets out Communist Party vision," *South China Morning Post*, January 12, 2021.

21 Ibid.

hegemon if it remains at the hegemon's mercy. The second is to build forms of control over others...<sup>22</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union and Tiananmen Square led the Chinese leadership to believe that the West, and the US in particular, were, on the one hand, in irreversible decline, and also that they were irreconcilably hostile to China and the ideology and vision of the CCP. The latter conviction was enormously reinforced by the sanctions and threats to trade that followed the Tiananmen Square massacre. The Chinese leadership understood, moreover, the risks of the growing dependence of the national economy on Western trade, capital and technology. A combination of these factors contributed to the consolidation of Deng Xiaoping's overarching strategy to 'hide capabilities and bide time' and 'maintain a low profile.'<sup>23</sup> Crucially, "This strategy requires more than just the cultivation of strategic patience. In Chinese literature, it includes the grudging acceptance of humiliation by a stronger adversary until one is ready and the time is right."<sup>24</sup>

In 1991, Deng Xiaoping had articulated his '24 Character Strategy' which counseled the country's leadership, *inter alia*, to "hide our capacities and bide our time."<sup>25</sup> This was the strategy China employed well into the 2000s in all principal policy spheres – most significantly, economic, military and technological – using every device, including technology theft, covert acquisitions, and dodgy financial transactions, to consolidate power till it had acquired sufficient capacities and

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22 Rush Doshi, op. cit., p. 3.

23 Eu Yen Kong, *Deciphering Chinese Strategic Deception: The Middle Kingdom's First Aircraft Carrier*, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, 2013, p. 55.

24 Ibid.

25 For a discussion, see, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2008*, Office of the Secretary of Defence (USA), p. 8, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2008/2008-prc-military-power02.htm>.

capabilities to openly declare its intentions and challenge the prevailing world order.

**SHASHOUJIAN: THE ASSASSIN'S MACE**

Wary of US intent, committed to its policy of the 'reunification' of Taiwan and fearing that the US would intervene to protect Taiwan, China adopted an asymmetric strategy in the Indo-Pacific region, described in Beijing's military literature as *Shashoujian*, or "assassin's mace." The objective of this strategy was to block or blunt any effort by the US to intervene on Taiwan's behalf, or to launch any effective attack against the mainland. PLA Navy experts closely studied ongoing wars, including US interventions abroad, to identify the most effective tools to block or blunt what was, at that time, an overwhelming US military power, including Naval power in the Asia Pacific. As a US Department of Defence report noted in 2005,

China's leaders appear to recognize the PLA's deficiencies relative to potential adversaries in the region and may have concluded that the PLA is presently unable to compete directly with other modern military powers. We assess that this conclusion might have given rise to a priority emphasis on asymmetric programs and systems to leverage China's advantages while exploiting the perceived vulnerabilities of potential opponents – so-called Assassin's Mace (sha shou jian) programs.<sup>26</sup>

And further,

Preventing foreign military intervention, particularly along China's coast, has been a goal for Beijing

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26 *The Military Power of the People's Republic of China*, 2005, Annual Report to Congress, <https://nuke.fas.org/guide/china/dod-2005.pdf>, p. 26.

throughout history, reinforcing the geostrategic value of Taiwan for China's security planners. As the Soviet threat ebbed in the late 1980s, China's concern about its 9,000 mile coastline rose. China's concept of sea denial in the Western Pacific subsequently broadened beyond the independent use of naval assets to multi-dimensional defence using air, surface, and subsurface elements. Reflecting the emphasis China appears to be placing on anti-access strategies, most of the capabilities believed to fall under the Assassin's Mace program are designed to blunt adversaries' military advantages or deny entry into the theater of operations.<sup>27</sup>

In its pursuit of this 'blunting' strategy, China drew critical lessons from an incident in the NATO campaign in Serbia, when a Nighthawk F-117A aircraft – the cutting edge of Stealth technology – was taken down by an enterprising Serbian air-defence unit “equipped with early 1960s outdated Soviet era equipment” (an S-125 Neva/Pechora surface-to-air missile) using “innovative tactics.”<sup>28</sup> “The strike stunned the world: one of the world's stealthiest aircrafts long considered virtually invisible had been downed by one of the world's most dated air defence systems—a system not at all dissimilar from China's own at the time.”<sup>29</sup> Commenting on the incident, Zhang Wannian, then Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, observed, “the forces of Yugoslavia have provided a useful reference point for our army on the question of *how an inferior equipped force can defeat a superior-equipped force under high-tech conditions.*”<sup>30</sup>

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27 Ibid, p. 33.

28 Rush Doshi, op. cit., p. 68.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., p. 69, emphasis added.

A second and valuable lesson came the US experience in the Iraq war (1991), where it was noticed that “mines were a way weak states could repel strong ones and that American mine countermeasure (MCM) capabilities were demonstrated by Iraq to be ‘relatively feeble.’”<sup>31</sup>

From this point onwards, the PLA Navy focused on a ‘sea denial’ strategy “focused on preventing the US military from traversing, controlling, or intervening in the waters near China.”<sup>32</sup> This was, in essence, an asymmetric strategy that recognizes clearly that China could not compete head-to-head with the technologically and militarily advanced powers of the world. Instead, the Military Strategic Guidelines of 1993 noted, “We must proceed from our country’s conditions and cannot compare everything with advanced international standards...”<sup>33</sup> The then Chairman of the Central Military Commission emphasised, that they would “do some things but not other things, catch up in some places but not others places.”<sup>34</sup> The PLA’s General Zhang Wannian declared,

Our funds are limited, our time is constrained, and we cannot do everything. If we do everything, then we will do everything badly, so we must prioritize, distinguish between primary and secondary [investments], and prioritize those that are urgently needed and develop them... *The general idea is that what the enemy is afraid of, we develop that.*<sup>35</sup>

The Chinese leadership, including a succession of PLA Navy leaders, did have plans, indeed, ambitions, to acquire cutting edge technological platforms, particularly including

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31 Ibid., p. 88.

32 Ibid., p. 11.

33 Ibid., p. 78.

34 Ibid., p. 78.

35 Ibid., p. 79, emphasis added.

aircraft carriers that focused on projecting national power [an elaborate and protracted campaign of deception attended China's acquisition of the *Varyag*,<sup>36</sup> a process that commenced in 1992 and culminated in the transfer of the carrier to the PLA Navy in 2002]. Nevertheless, these aspirations were deferred, and the *Shashoujian* arsenal was built principally on three platforms – submarines, mines and missiles – thought to be the most effective platforms for denial or blunting. “Beijing then built the world’s largest mine arsenal, the world’s first anti-ship ballistic missile, and the world’s largest submarine fleet—all to undermine US military power.”<sup>37</sup> At the same time, there was a “contemporaneous underinvestment in carrier aviation, anti-submarine warfare, anti-air warfare, mine countermeasures, and amphibious warfare...”<sup>38</sup> Rush Doshi notes,

China already exceeds [US submarine production] five times over” and the seventy-five or more Chinese submarines in the Pacific will be able to counter a far smaller US force... anti-ship cruise missile offers it both greater range relative to torpedoes (4–10 times more) as well as speed (generally supersonic) in targeting enemy surface vessels. In 1990, none of China’s submarines could launch anti-ship cruise missiles; now well more than 64 percent have this capability – virtually every submarine built or acquired since 1994. The US Office of Naval Intelligence argues that China’s submarine-launched anti-ship cruise missiles – including the Russian SS-N-27 Sizzler and the indigenous YJ-18 – are world-class... the Office of Naval Intelligence finds that “China has a robust

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36 Eu Yen Kong, op. cit., esp., “The Liaoning Deception: Crossing the Ocean without Heaven’s Knowledge,” pp. 63-87.

37 Rush Doshi, op. cit., p. 11.

38 Ibid., p. 82.

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mining capability,” with 50,000 to 100,000 sea mines, as well as a “robust infrastructure for naval mine-related research, development, testing, evaluation, and production.”<sup>39</sup>

China had, in effect, secured its objectives of blunting or sea denial of the technologically superior US force in the Asia Pacific region. Indeed,

In tabletop exercises with America as the “blue team” facing off against a “red team” resembling China, Taiwan’s air force is wiped out within minutes, U.S. air bases across the Pacific come under attack, and American warships and aircraft are held at bay by the long reach of China’s vast missile arsenal.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, Peter Beinart notes, “the US commitment to Taiwan is ‘insolvent’.”<sup>41</sup> Short of total war, with the possibility of apocalyptic nuclear escalation, US capacities to confront Chinese misadventures in the region have been effectively ‘blunted.’ Chinese action in Taiwan is unlikely to attract any overwhelming US response.

### REGIONAL DOMINANCE & GLOBAL AMBITIONS

Chinese naval force posture and, indeed, overall defence strategy underwent a radical transformation after 2008, as confidence grew that the US could no longer effectively counter Beijing’s rising ambitions. America’s strategic incoherence,

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39 Ibid., pp. 85-87.

40 Dan De Luce and Ken Delanian, “China’s growing firepower casts doubts on whether U.S. could defend Taiwan,” *NBC News*, March 27, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/china-s-growing-firepower-casts-doubt-whether-u-s-could-n1262148>.

41 Peter Beinart, “America Needs an Entirely New Foreign Policy for the Trump Age,” *The Atlantic*, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/shield-of-the-republic-a-democratic-foreign-policy-for-the-trump-age/570010/>.

the disastrous and mismanaged interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the ability of relatively minor powers to thwart US intent, Washington's inability to sustain military operations in distant theatres, and Beijing's own growing capacities to frustrate the US, certainly within a hundred miles of China's shores, convinced the Chinese leadership that the US was no longer capable of retaining global leadership. It was, however, the global financial crisis of 2008 that eventually convinced China that the West was destined for collective suicide, and that a new regional – and possibly global – order with a 'Chinese character,' could be constructed.

“Hide and bide” ended with the 2008 financial crisis. Most analysts now agree that Beijing interpreted the crisis as the beginning of the end of U.S. supremacy and evidence of the superiority of its own political and economic system.

Since then President Xi has made repeated calls for problems in Asia “to be solved by Asians,” and for the U.S. alliance system to be dismantled, calling it a Cold War relic – even though China greatly benefitted from the regional stability it provided. Since the financial crisis, the Party has also rejected international law in settling disputed maritime borders and pursued rapid militarization in the South China Sea.<sup>42</sup>

The role of the PLA Navy, in these changing circumstances, was to be expanded vastly from the blunting strategies of offshore defence.

Under the conditions of the new era, the Navy must accelerate the transition from offshore defence to

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42 Srdjan Uljevic, “What happened to China's ‘peaceful rise’?” *Eurasianet*, November 12, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-what-happened-to-chinas-peaceful-rise>.

far-sea defence in accordance with the strategic requirements of offshore defence and far-sea defence, and improve strategic deterrence and counterattack, maritime mobile operations, maritime joint operations, integrated defence operations, and comprehensive support capabilities, and strive to build a powerful modern navy.<sup>43</sup>

...Maintaining national security requires expanding the depth of maritime defence, which can form an effective deterrence and strike capability against powerful naval forces in the ocean far away from the country.<sup>44</sup>

The PLA's Science of Military Strategy 2020 also envisages "The use of carrier-based UAVs" to "bring revolutionary changes to surface warship operations;" and the development of unmanned warships that can

...take up the missions of reconnaissance, mine-laying and mine-clearing... also expand the commander's observation range and control area of the battlefield. Unmanned ships carrying long-range missiles can also assault enemy naval aircraft carrier formations and attack enemy-occupied islands and reefs...<sup>45</sup>

Unmanned submarines would add to this projection of power, adding to the range of the "unmanned intelligent weapon equipment platform that uses submarines or surface ships as support platforms and can autonomously and remotely navigate underwater for a long time."<sup>46</sup>

An increasing proportion of this floating arsenal is intended for the IOR. China's global proclamations are that it needs to

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43 Xiao Tianliang et. al., op. cit., p. 362.

44 Ibid., pp. 360-61.

45 Ibid. p. 361

46 Ibid.

project naval power to protect its sea lines of communication (SLOC) and growing international ‘interests.’ Thus,

The expansion of national interests and the protection of sea passages require the navy to go to the open sea and complete diversified military tasks. Therefore, the development of aircraft carriers, large destroyers, strategic nuclear submarines, large ocean-going supply ships, long-range carrier-based aircraft, etc., will become an important trend in the construction of naval equipment.<sup>47</sup>

As the ‘belt and road’ initiative expanded and as China’s massive growth increased the demand for imports, particularly fuel, especially from the Gulf region, there was increasing emphasis on protecting ‘China’s overseas interests.’ In 2014 Xi Jinping stated, “The maritime channel is China’s main channel for foreign trade and energy imports. Safeguarding the freedom and safety of maritime navigation is of vital importance to China.”<sup>48</sup> Protecting the SLOC was a principal strategic task of the Navy.

There is little to quarrel with here. Every state has the right to protect its interests, to the extent that such ‘protection’ does not impinge on the sovereign interests of other states. The “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,”<sup>49</sup> however, envisages much more. China seeks to displace the ‘declining’ US power and establish a dominant position across the world. In 2013, shortly after he became President, Xi Jinping declared, that the national objective was to “lay the foundation for a future where

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47 Ibid.

48 Cited in Rush Doshi, op. cit., p. 188.

49 See, for instance, Allison, Graham “What Xi Jinping Wants,” *The Atlantic*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/what-china-wants/528561/>.

we will win the initiative and have the dominant position.”<sup>50</sup> Xi envisages the creation of a “community of common destiny for mankind,” under a “new type of international relations,” implicitly under Chinese leadership. While there is much talk of “win win cooperation,”<sup>51</sup> this new global order would have ‘Chinese characteristics,’ and would be based on the divergent treatment of a ‘big country’ (China) and ‘little countries.’<sup>52</sup>

Militarily, China “must more actively promote the resolution of international and regional hot-spots related to China’s core interests, and regarding the issues concerning our core interests, we must strengthen our strategic planning, make more *offensive moves*, and actively guide the situation to develop in a *favourable direction*.”<sup>53</sup> Doshi notes, “This assertive language essentially called for taking the initiative and resolving disputes on China’s terms.”<sup>54</sup>

The PLA Navy’s mandate, within this framework, is critical. Xi Jinping declares, “On the journey of the new era, in the struggle to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, the task of building a powerful People’s Navy has never been so urgent as it is today.”<sup>55</sup> The power projection sought is “not just to deal with traditional maritime security threat,” but, further, “From the perspective of power utilization, the navy

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50 Tanner Greer, “The Challenge of Ideological Insecurities,” Lowy Institute Rules Based Order Project, September 23, 2020, <https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/china-rules-based-order/articles/ideological-insecurities/>.

51 Zhao Xiaochun, “In pursuit of a community of shared future,” *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Volume 4, Number 1, 2018, p. 23, <https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/pdf/10.1142/S2377740018500082>.

52 *The Elements of the China Challenge*, op. cit., p. 34.

53 Rush Doshi, op. cit., pp. 179-80, quoting Hu Jintao.

54 Ibid. p. 180.

55 Xiao Tianliang et. al., *Science of Military Strategy 2020*, op. cit., p. 358, citing “Build the People’s Navy into a world-class navy in an all-round way,” *People’s Liberation Army Daily*, April 13, 2018, first edition.

must not only have the ability to win maritime wars, but also have the ability to deter wars and shape the maritime security environment.”<sup>56</sup> Doshi notes,

Beijing sought capabilities to more effectively deal with its neighbors in the Indo-Pacific so it could create the military foundations for regional hegemony—all as part of a broader... grand strategy to build regional order.<sup>57</sup>

Further, abandoning a long-standing commitment to avoid overseas interventions and not to create overseas bases the Science of Military Strategy 2013 emphasised,

...the need to structure overseas strategic branch points that rely upon the home territory, radiate to the periphery, and venture toward the two oceans [i.e., Pacific and Indian Oceans], in order to provide support for overseas military activities, or to serve as forward bases for the disposition of overseas military strengths, to bring about political and military influences on the relevant regions and form into a posture with the homeland territory strategic layout that considers both the internal and external, links up the distant with the approximate (*sic*), and mutually supporting.<sup>58</sup>

Such a push envisaged significant potential aggression, “We must grab hold [zhuā zhù] of the key channels, key nodes, and key projects... (and) build maritime public service facilities with countries along the route... The security of

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56 Rush Doshi, op. cit., p. 359.

57 Ibid p. 185.

58 *Science of Military Strategy 2013*, China Aerospace Studies Institute, p. 320, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2021-02-08%20Chinese%20Military%20Thoughts-%20In%20their%20own%20words%20Science%20of%20Military%20Strategy%202013.pdf>.

sea lanes is the key to sustaining the stable development of the Maritime Silk Road, and ports and docks are the highest priority for securing the sea lanes.”<sup>59</sup>

Crucially, Doshi notes, “China’s ambitions are not limited to Taiwan or to dominating the Indo-Pacific. The ‘struggle for mastery,’ once confined to Asia, is now over the global order and its future. If there are two paths to hegemony— a regional one and a global one—China is now pursuing both.”<sup>60</sup>

### **POWER & PROJECTION**

China, today, has the largest navy in the world, backed by the largest mine arsenal and the largest submarine fleet. Its battle force exceeds 355 frontline warships [and another 85 patrol combatants and craft that carry anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs)].<sup>61</sup> The number of frontline warships is expected to increase to 420 ships by 2025, and 460 ships in 2030. The US total in 2020 was 305 frontline warships. However, the sophistication and tonnage of the US force remains significantly greater. “At 4.5 million tons, the U.S. fleet displaces more than twice as much as the Chinese fleet does. Assuming reasonable weapons-loads, tonnage is a rough analogue of combat capability.”<sup>62</sup> Further,

As of 2020, the PLAN is largely composed of modern multi-role platforms. In the near-term, the PLAN will

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59 Liu Cigui, cited in Rush Doshi, op. cit., p. 206.

60 Ibid., p. 5.

61 *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, Annual Report to Congress, Office of the Defence Secretary (USA), <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>, p. 49.

62 David Axe, “Yes, The Chinese Navy Has More Ships Than The U.S. Navy. But It’s Got Far Fewer Missiles,” *Forbes*, November 10, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2021/11/10/yes-the-chinese-navy-has-more-ships-than-the-us-navy-but-its-got-far-fewer-missiles/?sh=190e9d1c61b6>.

have the capability to conduct long-range precision strikes against land targets from its submarine and surface combatants using land-attack cruise missiles, notably enhancing the PRC's global power projection capabilities. The PRC is enhancing its anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities and competencies to protect the PLAN's aircraft carriers and ballistic missile submarines.<sup>63</sup>

The PLAN continues to develop into a global force, gradually extending its operational reach beyond East Asia into a sustained ability to operate at increasingly longer ranges, including a continuous presence in the Gulf of Aden. The PLAN's latest surface and subsurface platforms enable combat operations beyond the reach of the PRC's land-based defences. In particular, the PRC's aircraft carriers and planned follow-on carriers, once operational, will extend air defence coverage beyond the range of coastal and shipboard missile systems and will enable task group operations at increasingly longer ranges. The PLAN's emerging requirement for sea-based land-attack systems will also enhance the PRC's ability to project power.<sup>64</sup>

China also possesses a rocket force of 2,250 missiles, including 150 ICBMs, 300 IRBMs and 600 MRBMs that could play a role in any naval confrontation in the Indian Ocean, in addition to the relatively shorter-range missiles that may be mounted on naval platforms.<sup>65</sup>

By comparison, the Indian Navy boasts a fleet of 150 frontline ships, with another 50 ships and submarines currently

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63 *Military and Security Developments involving the People's Republic of China*, op. cit., p. 48.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

under construction. With a home advantage in the Indian Ocean, and proximate access to land and air support, India would currently be capable of holding off any significant Chinese naval action in the IOR region, particularly in view of the fact that China cannot significantly draw down its deployments in the Pacific without jeopardizing its coastal defence eastward.

However, given the rapidity of Chinese naval expansions and the adoption and evolution of a wide range of new platforms, including unmanned surface and submarine craft and China's large and expanding arsenal of missiles, the future is far more uncertain. Crucially, China's naval power must not be assessed in isolation, as any disadvantages can quickly be countered by exerting disproportionate pressure on India's land borders.

China's overwhelming economic and technological advantages must also be factored into any medium to long-term calculus, as must its far greater investments in defence and its emphasis on Naval dominance.

There is sufficient reason to believe, moreover, that China intends to raise a dedicated Indian Ocean Fleet and "multiple Chinese sources have started to articulate an emerging Indian Ocean strategy for the PLAN... Beijing is actively laying the groundwork for such a fleet both in terms of potential bases and logistical centers, as well as naval hardware."<sup>66</sup> This has been acknowledged in the official discourse as well, and the Science of Military Strategy 2013 (Academy of Military Science, Beijing) notes,

Because our at-sea sovereignty and interests have frequently come under intrusions, while intensification in the crises may very possibly ignite conflicts or war,

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66 Christopher Colley, "A Future Chinese Indian Ocean Fleet?" *War on the Rocks*, April 2, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/a-future-chinese-indian-ocean-fleet/>.

we need to form into a powerful and strong two oceans layout in order to face the crises that may possibly erupt.<sup>67</sup>

The “potential bases and logistical centres” are what has long been referred to as the ‘string of pearls’ in the Indian strategic discourse. It is significant, in this context, that China has already established a presence – principally civilian but potentially military – in Pakistan’s Gwadar and Ketu Bandar (Karachi) ports, Sri Lanka’s Hambantota port, Bangladesh’s Chittagong port, the Maldives’s Feydhoo Finolhu Port, Cambodia’s Sihanoukville Port, Myanmar’s Kyaukphyu Port and Thailand’s Laem Chabang Port. Far in the Western periphery of the Indian Ocean, a full-fledged Naval Base has been established at Doraleh, Djibouti. The base is sufficient to harbour China’s largest Liaoning Aircraft Carrier as well as nuclear submarines.<sup>68</sup> Significantly, while the naval facilities established at Doraleh are vastly in excess of the requirements of any such objective, China’s justification was that they were needed for anti-piracy operations.

The trajectory of the Djibouti Base is significant, as it started as a commercial and logistics base in 2017, but the pressure of debt forced Djibouti to allow the establishment

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67 In their Own Words: The Science of Military Strategy 2013, Chinese Aerospace Studies Institute, Montgomery, USA, p. 310, [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2021-02-08%20Chinese%20Military%20Thoughts-%20In%20their%20own%20words%20Science%20of%20Military%20Strategy%202013.pdf?ver=NxAWg4BPw\\_NylEjxaha8Aw%3d%3d](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2021-02-08%20Chinese%20Military%20Thoughts-%20In%20their%20own%20words%20Science%20of%20Military%20Strategy%202013.pdf?ver=NxAWg4BPw_NylEjxaha8Aw%3d%3d).

68 Michael Tanchum, “China’s new military base in Africa: What it means for Europe and America,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, December 14, 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/chinas-new-military-base-in-africa-what-it-means-for-europe-and-america/#:~:text=In%202017%2C%20in%20the%20middle,of%20the%20Horn%20of%20Africa.>

of a military base. China's 'debt trap' strategy, compounded by Beijing's rising military power, is likely to force many of the weaker states in the region to eventually concede similar facilities. With a USD 400 billion deal with Iran signed in March 2021, and alarms raised about Teheran being ensnared in a potential debt trap,<sup>69</sup> Beijing may also, eventually, secure multiple berths at Iran's ports, potentially hemming in the Chahbahar Port developed by India.

China's rampaging 'belt and road' and 'maritime silk road' projects sharply underline the fact that any assessment of China's naval power and strategy must also take into consideration China's rapid growth and global economic influence, as well as the inevitable consequences of these in terms of military, diplomatic and international institutional influence. Graham Allison observes in *The Atlantic*,

Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, who before his death in 2015 was the world's premier China-watcher, had a pointed answer about China's stunning trajectory over the past 40 years: "The size of China's displacement of the world balance is such that the world must find a new balance. It is not possible to pretend that this is just another big player. *This is the biggest player in the history of the world.*"<sup>70</sup>

China's power and potential are, of course, yet to be fully realized, and multiple counters to their consolidation are already in play. But if this 'displacement' is to be effectively confronted, particularly in the Indian Ocean, this power and potential must first be recognized and then strategically tackled.

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69 Behnam Gholipour, "Iranian Think-Tank Raises Alarm Over 'Debt Trap' Chinese Contracts", *Iran Wire*, February 14, 2022, <https://iranwire.com/en/features/11304>.

70 Allison, Graham "What Xi Jinping Wants," op. cit.

## INDIA: THE SEEDS OF A STRATEGY

Given the wide and widening gap between India and China on economic, technological, defence investment and military parameters, no purpose can be served by a head-to-head competition – ship for ship, port for port, base for base – against the PLA Navy. India simply does not have the economic muscle to compete directly, nor is it presently developing its scientific and technological capabilities at a sufficient pace to keep up with China’s technological and military investment, and modernization.

We must, consequently, begin with the acceptance that, at this point in history, China has become, by far, the greater power in Asia. If its attempts to secure dominance or control in the Indian Ocean (or, indeed, along India’s land borders) are to be effectively thwarted, we can take a lesson right out of the Chinese workbook – to adopt *Shashoujian* or the ‘assassin’s mace’ strategies, platforms and tactics; asymmetric measures that would simply drive up the costs of adventurism beyond the Chinese calculus of gain. In order to secure these objectives and effectively deter China, we must understand the key elements of China’s Naval (and military) strategy, and to adapt it to our own objectives.

Toshi Yoshihar and James R. Holmes explicate China’s Maritime strategy, emphasizing that it is based on Communist China’s traditional way of war, and on Mao’s notions of protracted war.<sup>71</sup>

The Chinese strategic orientation in the *Shashoujian* phase focused on blunting or sea denial, and was informed by Mao Zedong’s concept of Active Defence “the essence

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71 The descriptive in this section is based on Toshi Yoshihar and James R. Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific*, Second Edition, Naval Institute Press, 2018, Kindle Edition, esp. pp. 180-219.

of the [CCP's] military thought.”<sup>72</sup> This involves the use of offensive tactics and operations to weaken a stronger foe while you remain on the strategic defence yourself. You can gather your resources for battle, you can harness new resources you can try to get the opponent to divide its forces, or you can try to break your opponent's alliances to weaken him. Over time, the weak will make themselves the stronger contender, go on the strategic offensive, and win. Mao talks about allowing the adversary to exhaust its energies and weaken itself, even as it does what it can to weaken the adversary. He noted that the Red Army could be stronger than the enemy at a particular place on the map at a particular time, even while it remained weaker on the whole. Thus, the objective is to seek out opportunities to encircle and annihilate isolated enemy forces. This is compounded by what contemporary Chinese strategists call *systems destruction warfare*, striking at the systems that hold the enemies forces together, and then closing in on isolated enemy units one by one.

China's active defenders don't deceive themselves that they can block US Forces from entering regional waters or skies altogether. Instead, Active Defence is intended to raise the price of entry into the Western Pacific, higher than any US President would pay, and thus deter America from keeping its alliance commitments. Failing that, it seeks to slow the US Forces down, so that it can finish what it starts, before the main adversary force can reach the scene of battle and make a difference in the outcome of the conflict. Successful Active Defence would thus compel the US to undo a done deal, and to dislodge the PLA from whatever it had seized, whether it is Taiwan, whether it is the Senkaku Islands. Since Tactical defence is the strongest form of warfare, military logic would be an ally for China in this contest.

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72 Ibid., p. 181.

In putting this strategy into practice, the PLA Navy renews two old concepts. The first comes from Admiral Thayer Mahan (1840-1914), the idea of the Fortress Fleet. Mahan was critical of a Navy that operated almost solely under cover of shore-based firepower at a time the range of a gun was less than 10 miles offshore. Fleets could accomplish little while remaining within the range of supporting coastal artillery. Today, however, coastal artillery and missiles can target moving fleets at sea hundreds, even thousands, of miles off-shore. Such a Fortress Fleet can roam across vast expanses, while still enjoying the support of the coastal artillery. Precision long range coastal artillery is precisely what the PLA has fielded with manned aviation and a family of anti-ship and cruise missiles. Coastal sites today can strike more than 5,000 kilometres out at sea – a tremendous manoeuvring space for the PLA Navy surface fleet. Ultra-long-range coastal artillery provides fire support to the fleet, while weakening any enemy Forces' thrust into the region.

The second was the French Navy's *Jeune École* ("Young School") concept developed during the 19th century, which advocated the use of small, heavily armed vessels to combat larger battleships. In its modern Chinese interpretation, small super-empowered submarines and surface craft with heavy-hitting new weaponry threaten battleships and other capital ships. If all a coastal state cares about is to deny a global navy access to its waters, a fleet of inexpensive small craft can do the trick. Earlier, it was torpedo boats and torpedo armed diesel submarines. Today, it's submarines, small and unmanned crafts sporting torpedoes, cruise missiles and other exotic armaments. *Jeune École* crafts fan out between the main fleet and the coastal artillery, inflicting crippling damage on the adversary. If the Active Defence strategy works in practice, then the PLA Navy can remain in reserve till very late in the

conflict, as the coastal artillery and small craft soften the enemy up as a precursor to a major engagement.

Further, “The PLA’s increasing ability to integrate surface, subsurface, and aerial warfare into a defensive thicket against seaborne threats to China is remaking the strategic environment in maritime Asia...”<sup>73</sup> In the Active Defence of the South China Sea,

PLA forces will integrate weapons systems, new and old, into joint “orthodox” and “unorthodox” attacks, executing offensive actions to attain strategically defensive goals. They will not depend on any single method or system, or solely on aerial, surface, or subsurface warfare. Multiple axes of attack, multiple weapon types, and preparedness to shift nimbly between the main and secondary efforts will represent hallmarks of China’s way of naval war.<sup>74</sup>

In all this, fixating on particular weapons systems or platforms is not what provides the key to the PLA Navy’s strategies and tactics in any potential confrontation with a technologically or numerically superior adversary. The entire PLA strategy is underpinned by the rejection, articulated by Mao Tse-tung in his lecture *On Protracted War*, of the theory that weapons decide everything, “which constitutes a mechanical approach to the question of war and a subjective and one-sided view. Our view is opposed to this; we see not only weapons but also people. Weapons are an important factor in war, but not the decisive factor; it is people, not things, that are decisive.”<sup>75</sup>

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73 Ibid., p. 185.

74 Ibid., p. 188.

75 Mao Tse-tung, *On Protracted War*, May 1938, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2\\_09.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_09.htm).

## INDIA'S STRATEGIC RESPONSE

Every adversary, however strong, has weaknesses. The world focuses constantly on China's strengths; China focuses on the vulnerabilities of its adversaries. This is the equation that needs to be turned on its head.

There must be clarity of purpose and a strategy that is tailored to a particular stage of development and equation of power. Despite blue water ambitions and a perception at the highest level that that battlefleets built around aircraft carriers were of utmost importance if China was to emerge as a marine power, these objectives were long deferred. Instead,

...Beijing declared it would “catch up in some areas and not others” and vowed to build “whatever the enemy fears” to accomplish it—ultimately delaying the acquisition of costly and vulnerable vessels like aircraft carriers and instead investing in cheaper asymmetric denial weapons. Beijing then built the world's largest mine arsenal, the world's first anti-ship ballistic missile, and the world's largest submarine fleet.<sup>76</sup>

This is not to suggest that India must replicate the process and stages of evolution that China followed. Rather, that India's *strategic priorities* must be clearly defined in terms of a reality-based assessment of threats and resources. Crucially, the Chinese experience demonstrates that success is primarily a function of strategic will and persistence.

The question of the Chinese presence in the IOR is, moreover, not a question of naval power alone. It is a question of comprehensive power projection. If the economic and technological gap between the two countries continues to widen

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76 Rush Doshi, op. cit., p.11.

at the present pace, there is no configuration of attainable naval power that can maintain India's dominance in the IOR.

China is, however, not yet in a position to effectively challenge India's naval dominance in the Indian Ocean. Its focus has overwhelmingly been on coastal protection the issue of 'reunification' – the seizure of Taiwan – and other territorial ambitions in the South China Sea. There have been evident forays into the South East Asian region and a rising belligerence against all proximate neighbours over dubious territorial claims. Its far seas capabilities of projection are also hampered by the failure to develop or acquire aircraft suitable for its carriers – though this may be a problem now close to resolution.<sup>77</sup> At the present stage of development of its "strategic strong points" and "maritime stations" in the IOR, the PLA Navy would be unable to counter India's geographical advantages.

Nevertheless, China has established a permanent naval presence in the IOR on the grounds of preventing piracy, its 'string of pearls' strategy is a glaring work in progress and its naval arsenal is expanding rapidly. India has a limited window to frame an effective counter – a decade, perhaps two. A comprehensive defence strategy and a naval component aligned with such a strategy is, consequently, an urgent necessity. While it cannot be the purpose, here, to frame such a strategy – this is a task that would require greater experienced naval and expertise – some issues can be flagged for systematic evaluation:

- i. Could developments in missile technology, including ASBMs, and unmanned intelligent systems put a

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77 Sakshi Tiwari, "After J-20 Fighters, China's Aircraft Carrier Battle Group Starts 'Combat Patrols' In The Western Pacific," *The Eurasian Times*, May 4, 2022, <https://eurasianimes.com/after-j-20-fighters-chinas-liaoning-battle-strike-group-starts-combat-patrols/>.

question mark on the future utility of a carrier centred battlefleet?

- ii. Would a focus on *Jeune École* platforms – small, heavily armed vessels to tackle enemy battlefleets – produce disproportionate advantages, at least at the present stage, as compared to carrier centred battlefleets, or as complements to the latter?
- iii. What proportion of the focus and resources should be committed to weapons of sea denial – *Shashoujian* weapons such as mines, shore-based sea and air defence systems, undersea strategic deterrent forces, etc. – as against platforms of sea dominance.
- iv. India has significant achievements in rocketry and missile technology. What measure of priority should the mass production and strategic deployment of missiles be given? It is useful to reiterate, here, that the PLA has already established a Rocket Force separate from traditional artillery units. However, the quality and range of missiles cannot suffice without the capacity to locate and target the adversary with precision. This would require the further development and dedication of a range of surveillance platforms, including AWACs and space-based systems.
- v. The strategies and tactics of active defence in the IOR need to be examined, crystallized and deployed.
- vi. What strategy of alliances, disruption and diplomacy can be evolved to undermine the further development of China's 'string of pearls.' Without access to dispersed bases across the IOR, China would fail to consolidate its strategic position in the region. China's heavy-handed approach to its neighbours as well as its 'partners' in the 'belt and road' as well as the 'maritime

sea road' provides opportunities for India and its allies to counter the rapid expansion of the Chinese footprint over the past decade. The turn Belt and Road projects and the trajectory of the Chinese debt trap have taken in the recent past in several countries has created new opportunities and has, indeed, put the Chinese strategy in significant jeopardy. A sober assessment of these opportunities and a considered, long-term strategy of response are now urgently needed to reconfigure relations in India's neighbourhood.

- vii. Taiwan's autonomy is at acute risk at present. Were China to overrun or otherwise gain possession of Taiwan (possibly by 'selling' the 'one country two systems' myth to the US and Western powers who have no stomach for a military confrontation), this would free up enormous marine and financial resources for redeployment into the IOR. The impact on India's security and the implications for force posture and deployment require urgent assessment.
- viii. The development of suitable weapons and platforms must also be complemented with the "increasing ability to integrate surface, subsurface, and aerial warfare into a defensive thicket against seaborne threats."<sup>78</sup> Further, while hi-tech solutions and modernizations are certainly imperative, the possibilities of integrating new and old weapons systems, and to mix multiple axes of attack – aerial, surface and subsurface – must also be explored. It is important, in this context, to recognize that Indian Forces have, in the past, often prevailed against superior technologies through sheer grit and tactical innovation.

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78 Toshi Yoshihar and James R. Holmes, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

- ix. Crucially, what is the nature of the threat from China? Most assessments tend to examine the Chinese threat in Clausewitzian terms of a decisive confrontation, but the likelihood is that China will, in fact, seek to establish strategic dominance, avoiding all but marginal confrontations, within its established traditions of ‘protracted war.’ It is significant that Beijing has exercised calibrated aggression in the South China Sea, as well as along India’s land borders, creating ‘facts on the ground’ and ‘salami slicing’ bits of territory, without provoking adequate conventional retaliation to reverse China’s gains. It is necessary to understand that what China likely seeks – both in the South China Sea and eventually in the IOR – is not massive confrontation, conquest, or outright victory in open war, but rather strategic dominance that leaves its adversaries with diminishing room for manoeuvre. The approach to Taiwan is a case in point. While there are continuous provocations that test the will of the leadership both of Taiwan and its allies, China has gradually created the capacities for a strategic encirclement that the West is unlikely to contest; to reiterate, it’s “commitment to Taiwan” has been rendered “insolvent.”<sup>79</sup> Over time, Taiwan’s options are being sealed off. A protracted strategy of compellence is in play, even as Taipei’s alliances are undermined by a complex of stratagems that, at once, deter, seduce and bribe the West to concede Beijing’s objectives. While the world continues to ‘game’ a massive Chinese military operation to overrun and forcibly integrate Taiwan, a calibrated strategy continues to narrow down Taipei’s choices. If

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79 Peter Beinart, “America Needs an Entirely New Foreign Policy for the Trump Age,” *op. cit.*

this pattern of graduated strategic dominance is what Beijing seeks to push into the IOR, how would this impact on the Indian Navy's objectives, force posture and composition? And what are the available patterns of effective retaliation that can block off Beijing's calibrated aggression without unacceptable risks of escalation?

Directly countering China's naval power at present is neither possible – given the size of India's economy and defence budgets – nor sufficient, as China would simply shift the competition to other theatres or spheres – land, air, covert or unconventional strategies, cyber or space dimensions, disinformation and diplomacy, etc. A strategy of denial in conventional defence, and of low-cost competition across the widest possible spectrum, within a coherent strategic framework, is the one approach that can make Chinese adventurism too expensive for Beijing to risk. Deterrents will also have to be evolved for Beijing's lesser forays at establishing a strategic dominance that can potentially prove even more devastating to Indian interests and sovereignty, and which are likely to be far more difficult to counter, given China's duplicitous approach.

It is useful to remind ourselves, moreover, that “The PLA Navy is not some superhuman force. It remains a relative newcomer to naval warfare.”<sup>80</sup> China's gains at sea have largely gone uncontested, as Beijing's provocations have been calibrated to provoke limited responses, and the world has chosen to rely overwhelmingly on (often ineffectual) diplomacy, rather than military confrontation. China's strategic focus and commitment, and the lack of a comparable focus and commitment in China's adversaries, is what has created

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80 Ibid., p. 208.

Ajai Sahni

a significant advantage in terms of the PLA Navy's capacities and (untested) capabilities. While available timeframes for India are limited, these are obstacles that can still be overcome through enduring acts of strategic will.



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# **The Belt and Road Initiative and the South China Sea conflict**

## **Chinese ambitions in the new era**

Goran Ilik and Vesna Shapkoski\*

Since 2013, China has initiated a building and development process based on increased investments in infrastructure at the international level. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) based on promotion of trade, infrastructure, and commercial associations with 65 countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe, was announced as the ‘road of peace, and prosperity,’ and from then on it continues to characterize China’s positioning in the international context. The BRI is an initiative that tends to revive China’s ancient trade routes, through development and investment in infrastructure in two directions: Eurasia, which represents the Economic Belt, and the Indo-Pacific which is referred as the Maritime Silk Road. Since the launch of the BRI, China has persistently devoted investments to building ports, highways, high-speed rails, land bridges, as well as digital connectivity centers across the countries that joined the initiative. Together, these hard and soft infrastructure projects form a network of ‘dots’ and ‘lines’ on the BRI map, connecting interests, cultivating stakes, and consolidating

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interdependence between Beijing and other capitals along and far beyond its peripheries.<sup>1</sup> In this setting, the Southeast Asian region occupies a central place on the map of the BRI. Mainland Southeast Asia is one of the six economic corridors of the BRI, while maritime Southeast Asia is where the Indian and Pacific Oceans converge, sitting on the intersection of sea lanes vital for communication, trade, and transportation of energy and other critical resources.<sup>2</sup>

Although initiated by Xi Jinping, BRI is also true to Deng Xiaoping's essentially conservative maxim on the aims of Chinese foreign policy: "to create a stable external environment for China's domestic economic growth."<sup>3</sup> However, almost nine years since its initiation, it is obvious that BRI's huge infrastructure investments are not mere building of railways, airports and shipping docks. They are also about building political and diplomatic influence, reshaping positions of power and pushing toward developing the multipolar world order.

At the same time, there is the South China Sea (SCS) dispute, which has been going on for years in Southeast Asian region. China has competing claimants over the islands and various zones in the South China Sea, with several countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. The areas are rich with natural resources and fishing areas, and also have critical strategic importance.

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1 Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Irresistible Inducement? Assessing China's Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia", Council on Foreign Relations, June 2021, [https://www.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/kuik\\_irresistible-inducement-assessing-bri-in-southeast-asia\\_june-2021.pdf](https://www.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/kuik_irresistible-inducement-assessing-bri-in-southeast-asia_june-2021.pdf).

2 Ibid.

3 "China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Southeast Asia", CIMB ASEAN Research Institute and LSE IDEAS, October 2018, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/reports/LSE-IDEAS-China-SEA-BRI.pdf>.

With this in mind, it is useful to evaluate the two points independently, as they represent different issues based on different foundations; the South China Sea conflict is focused on territorial claims over islands, the creation of artificial islands, and the setting up of military infrastructure in several islands (including the Spratly and Paracel Islands, among others); on the other hand, BRI engages with infrastructure investment and trade throughout Asia, Europe and Africa.

However, if we scratch the surface, we would find that there is a lot more behind the SCS dispute, connected to the BRI development and future. If we look back in the history, the South China Sea was an important part of the ancient Silk Route trade. The eastern shore of China was the point where trading vessels sailed from, in order to transport goods to markets around the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean. With the narrative of “renewing China’s ancient trade roots” in mind, it becomes clear that there is far greater interest at stake in the SCS, than just a few rocks and islands.

### **BRI AS CHINA’S MAIN TOOL OF STRATEGIC EMPOWERMENT**

Since 2013, China has taken giant steps toward increasing its presence on the international stage, with the BRI being one of the key pillars in this activity. The BRI framework operates through commercial loans that the Chinese government provides to recipient countries where BRI projects are to be implemented. The construction of infrastructure in BRI projects is usually outsourced to Chinese firms, using Chinese labour and suppliers. However, although announced as purely infrastructural-based, the central goal of the BRI is not only economic but also political and strategic; through cross-border infrastructure, China aims to increase its influence in the rest of the world. This form of support to a wide range of initiatives and to enhancing connectivity throughout Eurasia strengthens

China's economic and security interests, and provides opportunities for overseas development at the same time. Comprised of a multitude of projects designed to promote the flow of goods, investment, and people, the BRI is intended to reshape relationships, reset economic routes and activities and shift power between states.

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in March 2015 published an Action plan on the Belt and Road Initiative, that pointed out its specific policy goals, such as:

- Improving intergovernmental communication to better align high-level government policies like economic development strategies and plans for regional cooperation;
- Strengthening the coordination of infrastructure plans to better connect hard infrastructure networks like transportation systems and power grids;
- Encouraging the development of soft infrastructure such as the signing of trade deals, aligning of regulatory standards, and improving financial integration;
- Bolstering people-to-people connections by cultivating student, expert, and cultural exchanges and tourism.<sup>4</sup>

Investments in hard infrastructure offer quite attractive opportunities for the beneficiary countries worldwide. Using its economic strengths to meet infrastructure needs of the underdeveloped and developing countries can bring, and is already bringing, significant political gains for China. China is making use of the fact that some of the countries where BRI investments are aimed are struggling to raise such investments

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4 “Full text: Action plan on the Belt and Road Initiative”, The State Council, The People's Republic of China, March 30, 2015, [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2015/03/30/content\\_281475080249035.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2015/03/30/content_281475080249035.htm).

at a domestic level and are ranked among the lowest on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI).

This is particularly the case with some of the ASEAN countries that are broadly targeted with the BRI such as Laos – ranked 137<sup>th</sup> on the HDI, Cambodia – 144<sup>th</sup> and Myanmar – 147<sup>th</sup>.<sup>5</sup>

Laos is an extreme example of particularly high dependence on China in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), much of it connected to the BRI. According to the ASEAN investment report, in 2017 and 2018, China was the source of 77 per cent and 79 per cent, respectively, of inbound FDI into Laos PDR; the Bank of Laos’ provisional numbers suggest that in 2020, China accounted for 87 per cent of the inflow.<sup>6</sup> China is also the top investor and donor for Cambodia, and cumulative Chinese investment capital from 1994 to 2019 in the country was USD 23.43 billion, accounting for 49.84 per cent of total foreign direct investment in Cambodia.<sup>7</sup> When it comes to Myanmar, just five months after the military grabbed power, the coup leaders’ moves reveal that they have put China-backed projects at the top of their economic agenda,

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5 UNDP, “Human Development Index (HDI) Ranking - From the 2020 Human Development Report”, [https://hdr.undp.org/en/content/latest-human-development-index-ranking?utm\\_source=EN&utm\\_medium=GSR&utm\\_content=US\\_UNDP\\_PaidSearch\\_Brand\\_English&utm\\_campaign=CENTRAL&c\\_src=CENTRAL&c\\_src2=GSR&gclid=EA1aIqobChMI7caeyoCK9wIVO5BoCR3f6w\\_EEAAYASAAEgIjPD\\_BwE](https://hdr.undp.org/en/content/latest-human-development-index-ranking?utm_source=EN&utm_medium=GSR&utm_content=US_UNDP_PaidSearch_Brand_English&utm_campaign=CENTRAL&c_src=CENTRAL&c_src2=GSR&gclid=EA1aIqobChMI7caeyoCK9wIVO5BoCR3f6w_EEAAYASAAEgIjPD_BwE).

6 Stewart Paterson, “Are China’s investment projects in Laos a window into the future?”, *Hinrich Foundation*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.hinrichfoundation.com/research/article/fdi/china-investment-projects-in-lao/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20ASEAN%20investment,on%20one%20source%20for%20FDI>.

7 Vannarith Chheang, “BRI Projects in Cambodia and Laos Roll On Despite Covid-19”, *ISEAS - Yusuf Ishak Institute*, July 27, 2021, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2021\\_99.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_99.pdf).

despite the fact that deep-seated resentment towards China is increasing across Myanmar.<sup>8</sup>

To support the BRI, China has invested significant amounts of money through its public financial institutions, such as the Chinese Development Bank (CDB) and the Export-Import Bank of the Republic of China (China Eximbank). In this way, Chinese state-own companies that are engaged in BRI projects can take very cheap loans from these banks, since their bonds are treated as government debt with very low interest rates. These cheap loans make Chinese companies highly competitive in bidding for infrastructure project abroad, against other foreign companies that have no such benefits in their countries.

The BRI is, furthermore, dedicated to gaining political benefits. Financial aid given to partner countries is already used in influencing the policies of these countries, and this is particularly the case in certain countries of Central and South Asia, which lack good governance and rule of law (such as Turkmenistan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka). Chinese financial aid is also highly attractive for countries that lack quality anti-corruption policies, because it comes with more simple procedure, with less conditions to fulfill. Other potential sources of finance (World Bank and others), require fulfilling certain conditions prior to providing infrastructure loans, such as limitations to government spending or introducing stricter anti-corruption legislation. Chinese investment on the other hand, has been historically less likely to require recipient countries to adhere to such conditions. China emphasizes the fact that its development cooperation does not include any strings attached.<sup>9</sup>

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8 “Myanmar Junta Implementing China’s BRI Projects by Stealth”, *The Irrawaddy*, July 23, 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/analysis/myanmar-junta-implementing-chinas-bri-projects-by-stealth.html>.

9 A Krstinovska, “China’s development assistance to the Western Balkans and its impact on democratic governance and decision-making”, *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, Volume 8, Number 1, 2022, pp. 229-242.

However, Chinese investments, although generous in amount, and loose when it comes to respecting the rule of law and anti-corruption policies, are provided on quite harsh financial terms for the beneficiary countries. Most of these strict conditions are thus not aimed at building the system of the beneficiary countries toward democratization and liberalization, but at strengthening the Chinese position and influence, thus increasing Beijing's economic and political influence.

For example, there is a widespread use of the 'No Paris Club' and 'no comparability of treatment' clauses – that expressly prohibit the borrower country from restructuring their outstanding debts to China in coordination with Paris Club creditors and/or on comparable terms with them, meaning that Chinese state-owned banks are effectively seeking to position themselves as 'preferred creditors' exempt from restructuring.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Chinese contracts give lenders considerable discretion to cancel loans and/or demand full repayment ahead of schedule, a provision that gives lenders an opening to project policy influence over the sovereign borrower, and effectively limit the borrower's policy space to cancel a Chinese loan or to issue new environmental regulations.<sup>11</sup>

In a situation where the global context is filled with complex challenges, the BRI initiative is becoming even more significant in terms of boosting bilateral investment between China and countries along the route, promoting regional economic development. As a skillful crisis manager, China has a clear vision of the need to give context to its overall strategy and international positioning, and therefore in January 2021, it published a White Paper *China's International Development*

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10 A. Gelpren. et. al., "How China lands, A Rare Look into 100 Debt Contracts with Foreign Governments", 2020, <https://docs.aiddata.org/reports/how-china-lands.html>.

11 Ibid.

*Cooperation in the New Era*, confirming that it would push forward the Belt and Road Initiative as its main platform, further support developing countries, and contribute to tackling international humanitarian challenges.<sup>12</sup> With this document, China reaffirmed its open position towards international cooperation, support for multilateralism, and willingness to participate in the reform and creation of the global governance structure.

The BRI is aimed at gaining both economic and political points for China. This is something the Chinese officials have explicitly acknowledged throughout various initiatives, such as the expansion of China's export markets and the promotion of Renminbi (RMB) as an international currency, in that way "emphasizing the Chinese currency's role as a vehicle to raise capital in overseas financial centers to fund railways, highways, ports, airports and other infrastructure projects across Eurasia."<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the BRI tends to build comprehensive ties investing in both hard and soft infrastructures. The first one is used for reducing transport time and costs and the second allows for a broader range of goods to be traded with fewer regulatory obstacles. Raising capital for these infrastructure projects by issuing bonds in RMB will also encourage the use of this currency in international financial centers. In particular, China's lower-income western provinces stand to gain, as the creation of overland economic connectivity with Central Asia will boost growth there. BRI is also aimed at re-orienting a

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12 "Full text: China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era", The State Council, The People's Republic of China, January 10, 2021, [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202101/10/content\\_WS5ffa6bbbc6d0f72576943922.html](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202101/10/content_WS5ffa6bbbc6d0f72576943922.html).

13 Kynge James, "One Belt, One Road set to turbocharge renminbi usage", *Financial Times*, November 30, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/6f105c2a-7f02-11e5-98fb-5a6d4728f74e>.

large part of the world economy toward China. Increasing the amount of trade, investment, and connectivity between China and countries throughout Eurasia is making these countries more dependent on the Chinese economy, increasing China’s economic leverage over them. This empowers China as a rule-maker, particularly in the economic affairs of the region.

South East Asia, being geographically close to China, is one of the most important regions in the realisation of BRI projects, with increased numbers of trade and financial investments year after year. Figure 1 represents total BRI investments in all regions, compared to the BRI investments in South East Asia in the period 2014-2020, where we can see that percentage of SEA investments in the total BRI investments rising from around 13 per cent in 2014 up to more than 36 per cent in 2020.<sup>14</sup>

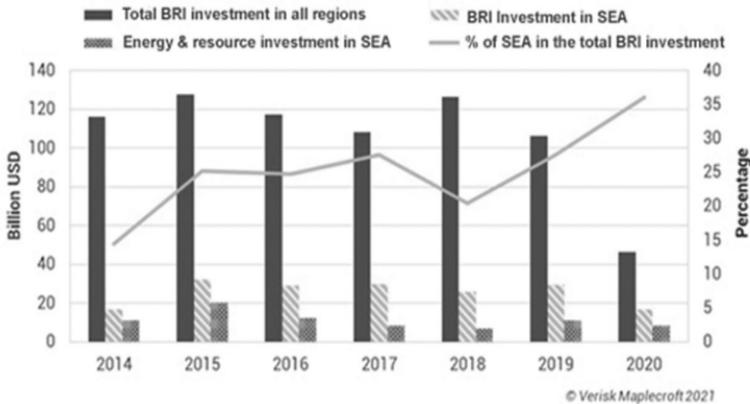


Figure 1: The trend of BRI investment in South East Asia 2014-2020. Source: <https://www.iseas.edu.sg>.

14 Kaho Yu, “The Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia after COVID-19: China’s Energy and Infrastructure Investments in Myanmar”, *ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak Institute*, April 6, 2021, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-39-the-belt-and-road-initiative-in-southeast-asia-after-covid-19-chinas-energy-and-infrastructure-investments-in-myanmar-by-kaho-yu/>.

What is particularly notable in these numbers is that, despite a sharp drop in total BRI investments in 2020, Southeast Asia (USD16.9 billion) became the BRI's largest investment destination, accounting for 36 per cent of the total investment.<sup>15</sup>

#### **THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE AND ITS ROLE IN CHINA'S AMBITIONS IN THE NEW ERA**

The South China Sea has hundreds of small islands with a bounty of natural resources. This has provoked decades-long disputes over competing claims on these islands and the maritime zones between them. Legal and territorial disputes in the South China Sea are mainly over the Spratly Islands, where more than 60 features are claimed by various countries such as Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, China and Malaysia; as well as the Paracel Islands where there are overlapping claims by China, Vietnam and Taiwan. China makes the largest claim in the South China Sea, within a 'dash-line' map published by the Kuomintang Government in 1947; the ambiguous nine or ten 'dash line,' which China asserts is based on evidence of historical usage, is disputed by other South China Sea territorial claimants and lacks a legal foundation under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).<sup>16</sup> 2012 was the first time the map delineating China's claims had been officially published since 1948.<sup>17</sup>

In the background of the SCS territorial claims, there are also Chinese historical traumas from the Second Sino-Japanese

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15 Ibid.

16 Lowy Institute, "South China Sea", <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/issues/south-china-sea>.

17 Lidya C. Sinaga, "China's Assertive Foreign Policy in South China Sea under Xi Jinping: Its Impact on United States and Australian Foreign Policy", *Journal of ASEAN Studies*, Volume 3, Number 2, 2015, <https://media.neliti.com/media/publications/27009-EN-chinas-assertive-foreign-policy-in-south-china-sea-under-xi-jinping-its-impact-o.pdf>.

War (1937-1945), when Japan took particular advantage of the South China Sea to cut China off from fuel and military equipment supplies, thus provoking one of the worst periods of economic devastation, hunger and political crisis. With the development of the BRI, not only has China invested in strengthening its land routes as an alternative in case of any constraints in the functioning of its ports, but it is also devoted substantial financial, diplomatic and military resources to securing the maritime routes traversing the South China Sea, so that it can prevent any recurrence of the ordeals of the past. China's position in the Sea is therefore a reflection of its aim to become a greater maritime power, both an instrument and symbol of the Communist Party's larger goal of 'national rejuvenation,' a concept referring to the restoration of China's pre-eminence following the 'century of humiliation' at the hands of the West and Japan.<sup>18</sup>

As the BRI gained strength and established its position in the region, the South China Sea again developed a central position in transpacific relations. With the development of trade between China and its partners in Europe, Africa and South Asia, dominating the South China Sea – which includes most of the shipping routes and crossings – became pivotal. It is not a coincidence that China started setting up military infrastructure in the Spratly Islands (located in the South China Sea, off the coasts of The Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam) in 2014, only one year after the announcement of the BRI. This was only the beginning of a long-term initiative to claim possession and control over most of the area. In 2016, an *ad hoc* tribunal constituted under the UNCLOS invalidated

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18 "Competing Visions of International Order in the South China Sea", International Crisis Group, Asia Report No.315, November 29, 2021, [https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/315-competing-visions-of-international-order%20\(1\).pdf](https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/315-competing-visions-of-international-order%20(1).pdf).

China's expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea, in a case brought by the Philippines.<sup>19</sup> However, not only did China reject this ruling, it committed increased efforts to reclaim land in the South China Sea by physically increasing the size of islands or artificially creating new islands.

China also built ports, military installations and airstrips in these areas, demonstrating its strong determination to concretize and physically demonstrate its claims over most of the SCS. Continuous military exercises and regular sending of patrol boats to the SCS are a reiteration of Chinese intentions to maintain and strengthen its claims. In December 2013, China sent its first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, to the SCS, which heightened regional tensions, especially following China's unilateral declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone/ADIZ in the East China Sea – some people worried that China would make a similar declaration regarding the SCS.<sup>20</sup>

Another assertive Chinese adventure was the 2014 placement of the Haiyang Shiyou-981 oil rig at a location within Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which triggered massive anti-Chinese protests in Hanoi; after nearly two months, on July 16, 2014, the China National Petroleum Corp finally shut down the rig and moved it closer to Hainan Island in southern China.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, in all of its activities related to the South China Sea, the authoritarian Chinese government is creating a narrative to distract the public from what is really happening and from its real intentions. As Chinese activities in the SCS region started drawing more attention, the Chinese response was that they were only protecting the livelihoods of the

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19 Ibid.

20 C. Sinaga, *op. cit.*

21 Ibid.

citizens living on remote islands. Later, the story shifted to providing the region with storm and weather warning systems. Nowadays, with the deployment of SA-6 missiles and coast guard frigates, none of these alibis works anymore, so more open military language is used.

The actions taken in the SCS are also in conflict with the ongoing “soft diplomacy” initiatives China is adopting in South East Asia. In its effort to further strengthen the effects of BRI in the South East Asia, China is practicing the initial steps of hard power. Significantly, China’s activities in the SCS are opposed by the United States’ interest in freedom of navigation. As the world’s pre-eminent maritime power, the US opposes what it calls China’s “excessive maritime claims;” claims to jurisdiction unsupported by UNCLOS or efforts to deny rights afforded to other states provided by international law, also known as restrictive claims.<sup>22</sup>

The expanding imprints and growing assertiveness are not necessarily resulting in greater Chinese influence in the region. Even if most ASEAN states have chosen not to confront China openly on the SCS issue, they show tendencies to diversification of collaboration and to avoid economic and political dependency only on China. Cambodia, a country widely perceived as a ‘client state’ of China, has been developing strong defense and trade partnerships with Japan, while Laos retains its longstanding ‘balanced’ policy between China and Vietnam.<sup>23</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The region of South East Asia and the ASEAN partners are among the most important directions of China’s expansion

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22 Ibid.

23 Cheng-Chwee Kuik, *op. cit.*

in the new era. The BRI provides broad and much-needed opportunities for the countries of this region to overcome the issue of poor and inadequate infrastructure, which is a major obstacle for economic growth and development. The lack of finance has long hobbled the implementation of such projects, and the BRI projects, with the support of China's national funding, has provided necessary finance, at the same time increasing investments into productive sectors such as manufacturing, energy and services. The importance of this investment is demonstrated by the fact that they have been held at a solid level even after the beginning of the pandemic.

However, China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, although connected to the progress of the BRI, could be a threat to its further implementation. The BRI is slowly becoming a representation of hard power, which is contrary to the projected basic principles of Chinese foreign policy in the last decades. Although dependent on Chinese investments to a certain level, most of the countries of the SEA region are now slowly starting to shift position and lower that dependency. The position of other great powers plays a critical role in this process as well. The United States and the European Union are now providing alternatives for developing countries to pursue quality and affordable infrastructure-building and connectivity development, at the same time pushing towards diplomatic resolution of the South China Sea issue.

China will however continue being a highly important partner of the SEA countries, particularly in the post-pandemic world and the recovery efforts countries are making. Much of the progress of this partnership will depend on the resolution of regional disputes, such as those in the SCS, that can turn into a game-changer for economic and infrastructure investment. Reaching comprehensive resolution can increase economic

## Chinese ambitions in the new era

collaboration, the same way that undertaking hard power measures can push SEA countries toward seeking alternatives to Chinese dependence. Either these developments are an index of the political multi-polarism of the new era and the interdependence of geo-economics and geo-politics, two aspects that can no longer be analyzed separately.

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# The Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan & Terrorism in Pakistan

Zahid Shahab Ahmed\*

After independence from the British Empire in 1947, Pakistan inherited territorial disputes with Afghanistan and India and relations with both have been conflictual from the start. Afghanistan was the only country that opposed Pakistan's membership in the United Nations due to the border demarcation issue over the Durand Line. Differences grew because of the mutual trust deficit as Kabul formed close relations with Pakistan's arch-rival India. Hence Islamabad has always desired a friendly government in Kabul which was not possible until the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) in 1996. As a US frontline ally in the Afghan-Soviet War, Pakistan managed to forge close relations with Pashtun *mujahideen* of Afghanistan, including many who later created the Taliban.<sup>1</sup> In the shape of the IEA, Pakistan

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1 Ahmed, Zahid Shahab, "Political Islam, the Jamaat-E-Islami, and Pakistan's Role in the Afghan-Soviet War, 1979–1988", in Philip E. Muehlenbeck ed., *Religion and the Cold War: A Global Perspective*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, 2012, pp. 275-96.

found not just a pro-Pakistan regime in Kabul but also one that had no links with India. New Delhi had closed its only diplomatic mission in Kabul in 1996. Because of this, Pakistan was among the only three countries alongside Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that had recognised the IEA. Islamabad's support was the Taliban regime's lifeline as there was close cooperation in terms of human and financial resources, weapons and Pashtun combatants from Pakistan to fight the Northern Alliance.<sup>2</sup> Despite their head-on collision following Pakistan's partnership with the US under the 'war on terror', the Taliban and Pakistan did have cooperative relations. This was reflected by Islamabad facilitating the US-Taliban peace deal by hosting several Taliban delegations in Pakistan during 2020-2021.

Like all of Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, Pakistan has also been supportive of the US-Taliban peace deal signed in Qatar in February 2020 and the ultimate withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan. As the withdrawal came closer, Islamabad was concerned about the possible spill-over of a rushed withdrawal of foreign troops without an intra-Afghan peace settlement.<sup>3</sup> Worried about the developments in Afghanistan in July 2021, then Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan said, "We are petrified that there will be another influx of refugees and we do not have the capacity or the economic strength to bear it".<sup>4</sup> Also, Khan directly replied

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2 Safiullah Taye and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "Dynamics of Trust and Mistrust in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Relationship", *Asian Studies Review*, Volume 45, Number 4, 2021, pp. 557-75.

3 Madiha Afzal, "An Uneasy Limbo for Us-Pakistan Relations Amidst the Withdrawal from Afghanistan", *Brookings*, August 6, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/08/06/an-uneasy-limbo-for-us-pakistan-relations-amidst-the-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/>.

4 Syed Irfan Raza, "PM Delivers Stinging Rebuke after Ghani's Outburst", *Dawn*, July 17, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1635491>.

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to allegations from the former Ashraf Ghani government in Afghanistan by saying that it is unfair to blame Pakistan for the situation in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> This approach also reflected that Pakistan did not want to take any blame for the Taliban's takeover of the country in July-August 2021. As the Taliban was capturing various regions, #SanctionPakistan was one of the most popular *Twitter* campaigns against Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> Also, fake news was rampant blaming Pakistan's military support for the Taliban in crushing the last resistance in Panjshir. Simultaneously however Pakistan did help dozens of other states in rescuing their citizens from Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

The situation is already alarming for Pakistan as the number of terrorist incidents has increased significantly since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. In eight months during August 2021-March 2022, 272 terrorism-related incidents occurred in Pakistan.<sup>8</sup> This is higher than in any year from 2018 to 2020.<sup>9</sup> A UN report had already warned Pakistan that there were roughly 6,000 anti-Pakistan terrorists in Afghanistan, mainly Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) members.<sup>10</sup> TTP has increased its activities in Pakistan,

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5 Ibid.

6 Tallha Abdulrazaq, "Sanction Pakistan? Try Blaming America for Afghanistan." *TRT World*, August 13, 2021, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/sanction-pakistan-try-blaming-america-for-afghanistan-49159>.

7 Jyoti Dwivedi, "Fact Check: Old Video Goes Viral with Claim of Pakistani Fighter Being Caught in Panjshir", *India Today*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/fact-check/story/fact-check-old-video-goes-viral-with-claim-of-pakistani-fighter-being-caught-in-panjshir-1850272-2021-09-07>.

8 "Yearly fatalities – Pakistan", *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, April 1, 2022, <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/fatalities/pakistan>.

9 Ibid.

10 Kathy Gannon, "UN Says Thousands of Anti-Pakistan Militants in Afghanistan", *Associated Press*, July 26, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-afghanistan-international-news-islamic-state-group-taliban-ab3668337f310b4be8e1ed2442470992>.

mainly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), since August 2021.<sup>11</sup> Islamabad has been in discussions with the Afghan Taliban to address its terrorism problem. While the Taliban has assured all countries that it would not allow its soil to be used against other countries, it also brokered Pakistan's dialogue with TTP. Pakistan's success against terrorism depends on how it manages its relationship with the Afghan Taliban.

Despite the fact that Pakistan has achieved its national interest in the shape of India's exit from Afghanistan with the closure of all its diplomatic missions, Islamabad has its own growing worries regarding extremism and terrorism. There have been many incidents since the Taliban's takeover demonstrating that Pakistan has an uncomfortable relationship with the group. Islamabad however realises that it must cooperate with the Taliban to address its terrorism and other problems, for example, drug trafficking. This paper focuses on Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban to understand how that relationship will play out in terms of Pakistan's terrorism problem.

## **BACKGROUND**

After Pakistan's creation in 1947, Afghanistan became the only country to oppose Pakistan's membership in the United Nations. It was mainly because Kabul disputed the validity of the Durand Line agreement with the British Empire and claimed huge territories of Pakistan's KP and Balochistan. The conflictual start to the relationship got worse after Afghanistan's attacks in ex- Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Balochistan in the 1950s. As Daoud Khan ousted King Zahir Shah, Pakistan faced a major challenge in

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11 "TTP is asking for extortion in Peshawar, says Sheikh Rasheed," *Geo News*, February 4, 2022, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/397037-sheikh-rasheed-reveals-ttp-has-started-asking-extortion-in-peshawar>.

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the shape of a prominent advocate of Pashtunistan in Kabul.<sup>12</sup> This drastically affected the bilateral relationship as Khan was supporting Pashtun and Baloch groups in Pakistan. This eventually resulted in a shift in policy of Pakistan as Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto established the 'Afghan Cell' within Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and began forging relations with anti-Daoud politicians like Burhanuddin Rabbani.<sup>13</sup>

Pakistan has always desired a friendly regime in Kabul but that was not possible until the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in 1996. It was also for this reason that Pakistan became a frontline ally of the US in the Afghan-Soviet War. Also, the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan viewed this as an ideal opportunity to gain legitimacy at home and abroad.<sup>14</sup> At that time, Pakistani security strategists believed that the USSR had a bigger ambition in Afghanistan and could attack Pakistan to reach the warm waters of the Arabian Sea.<sup>15</sup> Following withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989, there was a civil war after which an interim government was established in 1996. Then Pakistan kept supporting Rabbani and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) continued to support the Islamist even after the creation of the Taliban in 1994. Hezb-e-Islami failed to capture Kabul and the government of Benazir Bhutto began looking for other options and forged relations with the Taliban while the ISI was still

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12 Abdul Sattar, *Pakistan's Foreign Policy 1947-2016: A Concise History*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2017.

13 Khalid Homayun Nadiri, "Old Habits, New Consequences: Pakistan's Posture toward Afghanistan since 2001", *International Security*, Volume 39, Number 2, 2014, pp. 132-68.

14 Mohammad Ziaul Haque Sheikh and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "Military, Authoritarianism and Islam: A Comparative Analysis of Bangladesh and Pakistan", *Politics and Religion*, Volume 13, Number 2, 2020, pp. 333-60.

15 Abdul Sattar, op. cit.

supporting the Hezb-e-Islami.<sup>16</sup> Eventually, the ISI also began backing the Taliban and this played a key role in the Taliban's establishment of the IEA in 1996.

After the fall of the IEA in 2001, many of its members and top leaders took refuge in Pakistan and formed the Quetta Shura in the capital city of Balochistan. As Pakistan again became a US partner, this time in the 'War on Terror', it faced pressure from Washington to 'do more' against terrorism. Then the regime of General Musharraf did launch some military operations to capture Taliban leaders but the conflictual relationship with the Afghan Taliban did not last long. As Pakistan's archrival India became a prominent actor in post-2001 Afghanistan – through aid and security cooperation<sup>17</sup> – Pakistan looked towards the Taliban to have a friendly regime once again in Afghanistan. The Taliban also needed Pakistan's support in various forms, including diplomatic support, to win in Afghanistan. Islamabad was one of the prominent supporters of a political settlement with the Taliban and backed such negotiations in various ways, for example, hosting such dialogues and participating in other peace dialogues hosted in Qatar, Russia and China. Now that the Taliban have established the interim government after their takeover in August 2021, Pakistan is providing aid and diplomatic support in the shape of more aid for Afghanistan. Unlike the case of recognising the IEA in 1996, Pakistan's current approach is cautious as it does not want to unilaterally recognise the new Taliban regime. This however leaves Pakistan with a difficult choice as it wants to engage with

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16 Khalid Homayun Nadiri, "Old Habits, New Consequences: Pakistan's Posture toward Afghanistan since 2001", *International Security*, Volume 39, Number 2, 2014, pp. 132-68.

17 Belquis Ahmadi and Wikram J Singh, "Can India Help Bring Peace to Afghanistan?", *The United States Institute of Peace*, April 21, 2020, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/04/can-india-help-bring-peace-afghanistan>.

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the Taliban not just for its geopolitical and geo-economical gains but also to address its own security problems that have increased since August 2021.

Pakistan suffered tremendously after the US intervention in Afghanistan in 2001. This has been demonstrated through the loss of over 80,000 lives and economic damages of more than USD 100 billion from 2001 to 2021.<sup>18</sup> This was mainly an outcome of Al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban fighters relocating to KP and Balochistan in Pakistan. Then Pakistan's tribal areas – bordering regions with Afghanistan – known as the FATA were not merged with KP and it was very easy for Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters to settle in ex-FATA and the Afghani Taliban also managed to re-organise in Pakistan through Quetta Shura. As Lian Wang argues, the Talibanisation of Pakistan's peripheral areas facilitated the formation of several terrorist groups to the detriment of the country's domestic security.<sup>19</sup>

Table 1: Terrorist incidents in Pakistan, 2012-2021

<b>Year</b>	<b>Incidents</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Incidents</b>
2012	2,347	2017	294
2013	2,034	2018	162
2014	1,569	2019	136
2015	950	2020	193
2016	526	2021	267

Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal<sup>20</sup>

18 Adeel Mukhtar Mirza, "Pakistan Has Contributed Significantly to the Fight against Terrorism", *The Diplomat*, January 8, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/pakistan-has-contributed-significantly-to-the-fight-against-terrorism/>.

19 Lian Wang, "Talibanization in the Tribal Areas of Pakistan", *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, Volume 4, Number 1, 2010, pp. 74-100.

20 "Yearly fatalities – Pakistan", *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, April 1, 2022, <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/fatalities/pakistan>.

Pakistan's response to terrorism has witnessed ups and downs. Even in Swat, the government's first response was to peacefully handle the situation and a peace deal was signed in 2009. As the local Taliban began their control by challenging the writ of the state, the Pakistani military launched an operation and retook the area in 2009. Then it seemed that even the focus on kinetic measures was neglected and it was only after the terrorist attacks on the Army Public School in Peshawar in 2015 that the government decided to develop a strategy involving kinetic and non-kinetic measures to address terrorism. This resulted in the development of the 20-point National Action Plan (NAP) and Operation Zarb-e-Azb was launched against various terrorist groups like TTP in 2015. This led to a significant decline in terrorism-related incidents in Pakistan from 2,347 in 2012 to 193 in 2020 (See table 1).

#### **PAKISTAN AND THE AFGHAN TALIBAN**

Firstly, it is important to understand the current level of relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban because that will play a key role in terms of Pakistan's ability to handle the terrorism problem. Historically Pakistan has managed its influence over the Taliban in various ways. After the collapse of the IEA in 2001, there were many key Taliban figures who took refuge in Pakistan alongside their families. Many who form the Taliban's current leadership have emerged out of the Quetta Shura. These include the Taliban's chief Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada.<sup>21</sup> As however was the case in the past, the Taliban is not fully under the control of Pakistan. Even during the IEA's first term, the Taliban had never recognised the Durand Line as a permanent border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. This happened even though when the Taliban

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21 Hamzah Rifaat Hussain, "Haibutullah Akhundzada and the resurgence of the Taliban", *The Diplomat*, June 4, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/haibatullah-akhunzada-and-the-resurgence-of-the-taliban/>.

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were more dependent on Pakistan by virtue of having limited external links. Now the case is different, as the Taliban have developed relationships with Iran, China, Russia and Gulf countries too.<sup>22</sup>

Now let us see what has happened since the Taliban's takeover with a focus on Pakistan's role. Diplomatically Pakistan remains the most important actor as Islamabad has been lobbying for more international support for Afghanistan to avoid any humanitarian crisis. In this regard, Pakistan has been relying on other majority Muslim states and organised two events of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), including the 17<sup>th</sup> session of the emergency meeting of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministries in December 2021. Afghanistan was a key focus of the emergency meeting in which Pakistan advocated providing more aid to Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup> Islamabad had pledged USD 28 million in humanitarian aid for Pakistan including 50,000 metric tons of food and medical supplies.<sup>24</sup> Also, it has allowed aid from India to go by land through Pakistan to Afghanistan. Still, there have been incidents that show that Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban might not be a fully comfortable one. This is also because there are many within the Taliban who share anti-Pakistan sentiments with the

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22 Zahid Shahab Ahmed, Abbas Farasoo and Shahram Akbarzadeh, "The Taliban develops regional relationships as it makes territorial gains in Afghanistan", *Melbourne Asia Review*, September 10, 2020, <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/the-taliban-is-actively-developing-relationships-with-regional-powers-as-it-makes-territorial-gains-in-afghanistan/>.

23 "OIC secretary general and Pakistan Prime Minister discuss the situation in Afghanistan and in Jammu and Kashmir, and Islamophobia", *Organization of Islamic Cooperation*, December 19, 2021, [https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t\\_id=30616&t\\_ref=19567&lan=en](https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t_id=30616&t_ref=19567&lan=en).

24 Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan Sends Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan", *Voice of America*, December 30, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-sends-humanitarian-aid-to-afghanistan-/6375649.html>.

public of Afghanistan. In 2021, there was an incident involving a Taliban official who took the Pakistani flag from a truck carrying humanitarian aid from Pakistan and said he was going to burn it. This official was later arrested by the Taliban.<sup>25</sup>

There have been other incidents that show that the relationship between the Taliban and Pakistan is conflictual on a major issue, i.e., the Durand Line demarcation. As was the case in the past, the Taliban do not recognise the Durand Line as the permanent border between the two countries. Abdul Qahar Balkhi of the Taliban wrote on *Twitter* that incidents along the Durand Line demand both sides address this problem.<sup>26</sup> Border management has been a key component of Pakistan's counterterrorism strategy due to which it has been fencing the Durand Line. Like the erstwhile government in Kabul, the Taliban also oppose the fence. Enayatullah Khwarazmi, the Afghan Defense Ministry spokesman, labeled the fencing as "illegal".<sup>27</sup> Hence, Taliban fighters have been stopping the Pakistani military from fencing the border.<sup>28</sup> Despite this opposition, Pakistan continues with the project that is estimated to cost more than USD 500 million but will play a crucial role in terms of handling terrorism as many terrorist groups have been using regions along the Durand Line for their operations.<sup>29</sup>

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25 Arif Hayat, "Afghan Taliban Arrest Officials Who Removed Pakistan's Flag from Aid Truck", *Dawn*, September 22, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1647759>.

26 Umair Jamal, "Taliban-Pakistan Ties Run into Trouble", *The Diplomat*, January 11, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/taliban-pakistan-ties-run-into-trouble/>.

27 "Taliban stop Pakistani troops from fencing border", *Reuters*, December 23, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1665245>.

28 Ibid.

29 Abdul Basit, "Pakistan-Afghanistan Border Fence, a Step in the Right Direction." *Al Jazeera*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/2/25/the-pak-afghan-border-fence-is-a-step-in-the-right-direction>.

### PAKISTAN'S GROWING TERRORISM PROBLEM

The country has fought hard with substantial gains in the shape of a decline in terrorist attacks since 2010. All that now is at risk because the Taliban has a cooperative relationship with various terrorist organisations, especially TTP, but there are also risks associated with other terrorist groups having a strong presence in Afghanistan like the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP). TTP is a Pashtun Islamist terrorist group based along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and was formed in 2007 as an umbrella organisation of 13 groups. Since its inception, the group has consistently carried out terrorist attacks in Pakistan and it was declared as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO) by the US in 2010. As a result of Pakistan's security operations in former FATA, thousands of TTP terrorists managed to take refuge across the Durand Line in Afghanistan. In 2020, a UN report had suggested that there were more than 6,000 anti-Pakistani insurgents in Afghanistan including TTP closely collaborating with the Taliban.<sup>30</sup> Some accounts suggest that the Taliban fighters not only released TTP and other prisoners from jails across Afghanistan, but that TTP helped the Taliban towards its ultimate victory.<sup>31</sup> While TTP was in the past anti-Pakistan, it has recently started to

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30 UNSC, "Twelfth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2557 (2020) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace Stability and Security of Afghanistan", June 1, 2021, <https://www.undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/S/2021/486>.

31 Oved Lobel, "How Afghanistan's fall to the Taliban increases the global terrorism threat", *The Strategist*, September 6, 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/how-afghanistans-fall-to-the-taliban-increases-the-global-terrorism-threat/>; Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shah Meer Baloch, "Pakistan Divided over Success of Taliban in Afghanistan", *The Guardian*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/17/pakistan-divid-ed-over-success-of-taliban-in-afghanistan>.

target Chinese projects in Pakistan which indirectly hurts Pakistan's economic and geopolitical interests.

In July 2021, there was a terrorist attack on a bus in which nine Chinese citizens were killed in Dasu, KP. This was not the first time that Chinese citizens working on projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) were attacked but this time Beijing's frustration was clear. As the stakes are higher with USD 64 billion Chinese investment in Pakistan, both sides are closely collaborating to deal with the collective threat of terrorism. Initial intelligence from Pakistan found that the attack was launched by the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM),<sup>32</sup> possibly in collaboration with TTP, Beijing was quick to invite a Taliban delegation to discuss this matter.<sup>33</sup> The Taliban has assured time and again that they would not let anyone use Afghan soil against other states but the Taliban-led new government does not have the capacity to do that as reflected through TTP's growing attacks against Pakistan.<sup>34</sup> Islamabad's worries are increasing, and it is pushing the Taliban to act against TTP which is operating from Afghanistan. There were rumours of the Taliban setting up an internal committee to investigate TTP's anti-Pakistan activities<sup>35</sup> but so far, the Taliban have not provided any clear

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32 ETIM is an Uyghur Islamic extremist organisation which was founded in Xinjiang, China, and the United Nations Security Council declared it a terrorist group in 2002.

33 Stephanie Findlay and Christian Shepherd, "Taliban officials visit China to discuss security after US pulls out", *Financial Times*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/d7d7f627-92f9-4f1d-a07d-5c6a8ef18a2e>.

34 Gul Yousafzai, "Three soldiers killed in suicide attack in southwest Pakistan", *Reuters*, September 5, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/three-soldiers-killed-suicide-attack-southwest-pakistan-2021-09-05/>.

35 "Afghanistan's Taliban Forms Commission to Look into TTP's Anti-Pak Acts", *Livemint*, August 22, 2021, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/afghanistans-taliban-forms-commission-to-look-into-ttp-s-anti-pak-acts-11629590158995.html>.

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roadmap on how they will counter TTP and other terrorist groups.

Since the start of the 'War on Terror' in 2001, Pakistan has been using a variety of kinetic and non-kinetic strategies to counter extremism and terrorism. While it has been successful in reducing the influence of numerous terrorist groups like TTP, it continues to struggle to handle the root causes, i.e., radicalisation and extremism. With the Taliban's success next door, many in Pakistan are worried that this might inspire mullahs and Islamists to demand the expansion of *Sharia* (Islamic law) in the country which for now exists parallel to Pakistani law which is based on the legal system of British India. Pakistani expert Ayesha Siddiqi argued in a newspaper interview that "the Taliban takeover will empower all extremist-religious elements in Pakistan".<sup>36</sup> It is therefore important to look at the initial reactions of how different religious groups and organisations have reacted to the Taliban's victory. While there are dozens of mullahs and Islamists that have congratulated the Taliban, it is important to see how and why the prominent Pakistani religious political parties view the situation in Afghanistan. In this regard, the discussion will focus on the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazal (JUI-F) and the Jamaat-e-Islami because both these parties collaborated closely with the state of Pakistan during the Afghan-Soviet War and are historically pro-Taliban. The chief of the Jamaat-e-Islami "expressed jubilation over the return of the Taliban", JUI-F's chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman sent a congratulatory letter to Akhundzada.<sup>37</sup>

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36 Ellis-Petersen and Baloch, op. cit.

37 Khurram Abbas and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "Why are some Pakistanis celebrating the Taliban takeover?" *The Diplomat*, September 30, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/why-are-some-pakistanis-celebrating-the-taliban-takeover/>.

Since August last year, TTP’s activities in Pakistan have grown. This has various dimensions, such as fundraising, recruitment and attacks. The group’s activities are no longer limited to just ex-FATA as it has been even collecting extortion money in KP’s capital, Peshawar. TTP has been against the fencing of the Durand Line and opposes FATA’s merger with KP. The terrorist group has increased its attacks against various targets in Pakistan but there are also other groups like IS-KP that have become more active in Pakistan since the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan. The monthly data on terrorist incidents also show this trend, see Table 2.

Table 2: Monthly data of terrorist incidents in Pakistan during August 2021-March 2022

Month	Incidents	Month	Incidents
August 2021	46	December 2021	43
September 2021	30	January 2022	33
October 2021	38	February 2022	32
November 2021	28	March 2022	22

Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal<sup>38</sup>

Despite TTP’s offensive, the government of Pakistan’s initial reaction was to reach a political settlement with the group. These negotiations were facilitated by the Taliban, especially Siraj Haqqani who is the first deputy leader of the Taliban since 2016. The TTP initially also wanted the government to reserve its decision on ex-FATA’s merger with KP but then withdrew this demand as the negotiations proceeded.<sup>39</sup> In November 2021, the TTP announced a ceasefire in exchange for the government releasing TTP prisoners. In December 2021, Pakistan released

38 “Yearly fatalities – Pakistan”, *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, April 1, 2022, <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/fatalities/pakistan>.

39 Jamshed Baghwan, “TTP Withdraws Demand of Reversing FATA Merger”, *The Express Tribune*, November 27, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2331189/ttp-withdraws-demand-of-reversing-fata-merger>.

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80 TTP prisoners and there was a plan to release 46 more.<sup>40</sup> Still, the TTP suspended the ceasefire in December 2021 by blaming the government of Pakistan for not keeping its commitments such as releasing 102 TTP prisoners before November 2021. Also, the TTP blamed the government for violating the ceasefire agreement through security operations against the group in Lakki Marwat, Swat, Bajaur, Dir and Swabi.<sup>41</sup> This could be because the Imran Khan government had reached no decision regarding amnesty for TTP.<sup>42</sup>

The Khan government still wanted to reinstate negotiations with the TTP. The second round of negotiations started in February 2022 and the government until then had released at least 100 TTP prisoners. A major hurdle in the way was still the issue of a presidential pardon for the TTP which was not signed by President of Pakistan Arif Alvi. From March to April 2022, this was not a priority for the Khan government as it faced a major challenge in the shape of the vote of no confidence against the Prime Minister from opposition parties. No progress was therefore made with reference to a peace agreement with the TTP.<sup>43</sup>

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40 Mushtaq Yousafzai, "Govt releases dozens of low key prisoners as peace talks continue with TTP", *The News*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/915306-govt-releases-dozens-of-low-key-prisoners-as-peace-talks-continue-with-ttp>.

41 Asad Hashim, "Pakistani Taliban Ends Ceasefire, Future of Peace Talks Uncertain", *Al Jazeera*, December 10, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/10/pakistan-taliban-ceasefire-peace-talks-ttp#:~:text=Islamabad%2C%20Pakistan%20%E2%80%93%20The%20Tehreek%2D,peace%20talks%2C%20a%20statement%20says>.

42 "No decision on amnesty for TTP: Moeed Yusuf", *The Express Tribune*, November 12, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2329080/no-decision-on-amnesty-for-ttp-moeed-yusuf>.

43 Niha Dagia, "Talks with TTP Take Back Seat as Pakistan's Prime Minister Turns Attention to Political Turmoil", *The Diplomat*, March 16, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/talks-with-ttp-take-back-seat-as-pakistan-prime-minister-turns-attention-to-political-turmoil/>.

## WHAT IS NEXT?

In April 2022, Imran Khan lost the no-confidence motion and was replaced by Shahbaz Sharif as the new Prime Minister of Pakistan. This however is not the only factor that will influence the government's negotiations with TTP as the military is in favour of a peaceful settlement. Nonetheless, there are two camps within the country, with some clearly against the idea of a peaceful settlement with TTP.<sup>44</sup> There are concerns that a settlement would just allow TTP to regroup – a process that is already underway. Syed Ali Zia Jaffery is of the view that Pakistan should use its leverage with the Afghan Taliban to crush TTP's roots in Afghanistan.<sup>45</sup> It is, however, clear that Islamabad is concerned about another wave of terrorism, as TTP has already demonstrated that they are stronger than before and can harm Pakistan. Pakistan clearly feels that it can gain from its geo-economic significance, but this would require peace and stability. These perspectives were clearly reflected in the country's first National Security Policy.<sup>46</sup> There is, consequently, no viable option other than to reach a peaceful settlement with TTP.

The new United Government led by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz has also allowed negotiations with TTP, and there was little alternative after the Afghan Taliban told Islamabad that it would not take any military action against the group, and there is little possibility of taking military action

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44 Syed Ali Zia Jaffery, "Negotiating with the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan is a bad idea", *Atlantic Council*, June 10, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/negotiating-with-the-tehreek-i-taliban-pakistan-ttp-is-a-bad-idea/>.

45 Ibid.

46 Kashoon Leeza, "Pakistan's National Security Policy: Opportunities and contradictions", *South Asian Voices*, February 4, 2022, <https://southasianvoices.org/pakistans-national-security-policy-opportunities-and-contradictions/>.

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against TTP hideouts in Afghanistan.<sup>47</sup> Any expectations from the Taliban would be misplaced, as the regime is experiencing multiple crises, which are likely to worsen as the Taliban regime has not been recognized by any country, including Pakistan. Islamabad is also cautious because anti-Pakistan sentiments are very high in Afghanistan, as millions blame Pakistan for bringing back the Taliban.<sup>48</sup>

TTP has unilaterally announced a ceasefire, and this shows its interests in creating a conducive environment for negotiations. For now, negotiations continue and the Pakistan Army is a key stakeholder, while the new civilian government has little involvement in the process.<sup>49</sup> The Pakistan Army is quite likely to use its influence with the Afghan Taliban and Pashtun leaders in former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA, now part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) to reach an agreement. While these initiatives may serve Pakistan's interests in short-run, any settlement – and for now none is in sight – is unlikely to be sustainable in terms of resolving Pakistan's TTP problem.

If there is no settlement, TTP likely will again launch another wave of terrorism in Pakistan, especially against Pakistan's armed forces. If there is a peaceful settlement and TTP's demands are met, other terrorist groups could use the same strategy to achieve a settlement, paving the way for them to become legitimate political or community actors.

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47 Naveed Hussain, "TTP talks: Lasting peace may still be a longshot", *The Express Tribune*, June 12, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2361085/ttp-talks-lasting-peace-may-still-be-a-longshot>.

48 Asfandyar Mir, "Pakistan's twin Taliban problem", *United States Institute of Peace*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/pakistans-twin-taliban-problem>.

49 Muhammad Taqi, "Pakistan: An Army-imposed deal with the Pakistani Taliban could spell disaster", *The Wire*, June 13, 2022, <https://thewire.in/south-asia/pakistan-an-army-imposed-deal-with-the-pakistani-taliban-could-spell-disaster>.

## CONCLUSION

There is more at stake for Pakistan than was ever the case. A key factor in the situation is the CPEC, due to which Pakistan has shifted its focus towards geo-economics and Afghanistan is centrally placed within that vision. Pakistan does not enjoy full control over the Afghan Taliban, and the group also wants to gain more autonomy. While the Afghan Taliban in the past has fought IS-KP and very likely will continue to do so despite its limited capacity, Pakistan's key worries include the Afghan Taliban's refusal to act against TTP.

If Pakistan wants to comprehensively address its growing terrorism problem, then it needs to focus on collaborating with the Afghan Taliban. This again would require a regional approach in which Pakistan will have to count on regional actors like China, Iran and Russia. This is not easy as no country has recognized the Taliban-led interim setup in Afghanistan and unilateral actions may lead to international sanctions. This could be more problematic for Pakistan, which is already on the grey list of the Financial Action Task Force in connection with terrorism financing.

Pakistan's position is weak as the TTP leadership also understands that its sudden offensive has forced Islamabad or the Pakistan Army to the negotiating table. TTP has shown its willingness and desire to negotiate by extending a unilateral ceasefire, and negotiations brokered by the Afghan Taliban are likely to continue. For the time being, however, there is no end in sight, as both sides have stuck to their positions, and Islamabad is unwilling to accept TTP's terms, including a presidential pardon to TTP.



FORM IV  
(See Rule 8)

1. Place of Publication: Delhi
2. Periodicity of Publication: Quarterly
3. Printer's Name: Kautilya Books  
Whether citizen of India? Yes, Indian  
Address: 4378/4B  
Ansari Road, Daryaganj  
New Delhi – 110 002
4. Publisher's Name: Ajai Sahni  
Whether citizen of India? Yes, Indian  
Address: Suite 58 & 70,  
India International Centre,  
Max Mueller Marg,  
New Delhi 110003.
5. Editor's Name: Ajai Sahni  
Whether citizen of India? Yes, Indian  
Address: Suite 58 & 70,  
India International Centre,  
Max Mueller Marg,  
New Delhi 110003.
6. Names and addresses of individuals who own the newspaper and partners or shareholders holding more than one per cent of total capital. Ajai Sahni  
Suite 58 & 70,  
India International Centre,  
Max Mueller Marg,  
New Delhi 110003.

I, Ajai Sahni, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

September, 2022

(Sd) Ajai Sahni  
Signature of Publisher

## Return of the Taliban in Afghanistan

# The Road Ahead

Ajit Kumar Singh\*

By aiding and abetting murder, the Taliban regime is committing murder. And tonight, the United States of America makes the following demands on the Taliban: Deliver to United States authorities all the leaders of al Qaeda who hide in your land. Release all foreign nationals, including American citizens, you have unjustly imprisoned. Protect foreign journalists, diplomats and aid workers in your country. Close immediately and permanently every terrorist training camp in Afghanistan, and hand over every terrorist, and every person in their support structure, to appropriate authorities. Give the United States full access to terrorist training camps, so we can make sure they are no longer operating. These demands are not open to negotiation or discussion. The Taliban must act, and act immediately. They will hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate... Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated... We will starve

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terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime... These measures are essential. But the only way to defeat terrorism as a threat to our way of life is to stop it, eliminate it, and destroy it where it grows... As long as the United States of America is determined and strong, this will not be an age of terror; this will be an age of liberty, here and across the world... The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them.

The then US President George W. Bush's statement on September 20, 2001.<sup>1</sup>

Within two decades of this statement, made during the historic address to a Joint Session of United States (US) Congress and the American People by the then US President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, World Trade Centre and Pentagon (9/11) attacks, the terrorist Taliban took over the *Arg* (the Presidential Palace in Kabul, Afghanistan) on August 15, 2021, forcing the incumbent President Ashraf Ghani to flee the country. Taliban, which had been harbouring Al Qaeda, the perpetrators of 9/11 attacks,

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1 Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, Office of the Press Secretary, President George W. Bush, The White House, September 20, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

during this entire intervening period, returned to power in a country where the ‘mighty’ US had launched *Operation Enduring Freedom*, declaring that they would wipe them out forever. Within a fortnight after the Taliban takeover of the *Arg*, the last US soldiers fled Kabul in a hasty and chaotic air evacuation, on August 30, 2021,<sup>2</sup> abandoning the people of Afghanistan, insecure and in acute agony, contrary to what had been promised almost two decades earlier. Among the most significant reasons responsible for the US defeat, was the abject failure to abide by the declared resolve that “any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime”, as Washington persistently ignored Islamabad’s disruptive role – both covert and overt – in Afghanistan in particular, and the wider South Asian region at large.

#### THE QUICK OVERTHROW OF THE TALIBAN REGIME

Soon after the 9/11 attacks, the US Administration sought United Nations (UN) support for military action in Afghanistan. On September 12, 2001, a day after the attack, the UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 1368 which, *inter alia*, expressed “its readiness to take all necessary steps to respond to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, and to combat all forms of terrorism, in accordance with its responsibilities under the Charter of the United Nations.”<sup>3</sup> Though the resolution did not directly authorize the US to use force, the US and its allies interpreted it as a UN authorization for military action in response to the attacks. Accordingly, on September 18,

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2 A. Youssef and Gordon Lubold, “Last U.S. Troops Leave Afghanistan After Nearly 20 Years”, *The Wall Street Journal*, September 30, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/last-u-s-troops-leave-afghanistan-after-nearly-20-years-11630355853>.

3 “Resolution 1368 (2001)”, United Nations Security Council, September 12, 2001, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1368\(2001\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1368(2001)).

2001, Bush signed the joint resolution “Authorization for Use of Military Force”, which authorized the use of US Armed Forces against those responsible for the 9/11 attacks, i.e., the Al Qaeda-Taliban combine.<sup>4</sup>

Exactly 25 days after the attack, the US and its allies launched *Operation Enduring Freedom* on October 7, 2001. The Taliban regime which, according to official statistics, as on October 7, 2001, controlled more than 80 per cent of Afghanistan,<sup>5</sup> ended completely on December 9, 2001, when the Taliban lost Qandahar, the last Province where it retained power.<sup>6</sup> Exactly, 76 days after the launch of the operation, on December 22, 2001, a new Interim Administration was established in Kabul under Chairman Hamid Karzai<sup>7</sup> following the signing of the December 5, 2001, Bonn Agreement<sup>8</sup>, which was endorsed by the UNSC Resolution 1383.<sup>9</sup> The Bonn Agreement also paved the way for the establishment of the International Stability and Assistance Force (ISAF) to support the Chairman of the Afghan Interim Administration. The then US Central Command Commander-in-Chief General Tommy R. Franks, in a statement on February 7, 2002 declared, “Today,

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4 Joint Resolution, September 18, 2001, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-107publ40/html/PLAW-107publ40.htm>.

5 Statement of General Tommy R. Franks, USA, Commander in Chief, United States Central Command, Hearing before the Committee on Armed Services United States Senate, One Hundred Seventh Congress, Second Session, U.S. Government printing office, Washington 2002, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-107shrg83471/html/CHRG-107shrg83471.htm>.

6 “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy” *CRS Report*, December 13, 2017, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RL30588.pdf>.

7 Statement of General Tommy R. Franks, op.cit.

8 “Afghanistan-Bonn Agreement”, December 5, 2001, <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?pdf0652?000>.

9 “Resolution 1383 (2001)”, United Nations Security Council, December 6, 2001, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1383\(2001\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1383(2001)).

the Taliban have been removed from power and the Al Qaeda network in Afghanistan has been destroyed.”<sup>10</sup>

***Operation Enduring Freedom:*** The US ensured that the Taliban lost their large physical assets such as radar, aircraft, and command-and-control systems at the very beginning of the operation. To this end, the use of Air power was gradually increased. By the middle of October 2001, the US had succeeded in decimating most of the Taliban’s fixed assets worth striking. Subsequently, it started targeting Taliban and Al Qaeda Forces in the field to ensure that they were increasingly isolated and, as a result, unable to resupply or reinforce dispersed units, or to communicate effectively. Further, Air power was used to support local forces opposing the Taliban – Al Qaeda on the ground. By early November 2001, almost 80 per cent of US combat sorties were used to directly support opposition forces in the field, increasing to 90 per cent, by late November.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to fighter jets, the US also deployed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) – Predators and Global Hawks. Apart from reconnaissance, the UAVs were also used to drop weapons on the ground. This was the first-of-its-kind use of UAVs. In Afghanistan, Predators had fired some 40 Hellfire missiles by the end of 2002.<sup>12</sup>

The US also used Joint Surveillance and Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS), a joint development project of the US Air Force and Army which provides an airborne, stand-off

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10 Statement of General Tommy R. Franks, op.cit.

11 Michael E. O’Hanlon, “A Flawed Masterpiece”, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2002, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2002-05-01/fla-wed-masterpiece>.

12 Daniel L. Haulman, “U.S. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in Combat, 1991-2003,” *Air Force Historical Research Agency*, June 9, 2003, <https://www.afhra.af.mil/Portals/16/documents/Studies/AFD-070912-042.pdf>.

range, surveillance and target acquisition radar and command and control centre.<sup>13</sup>

The majority of the bombs used were precision weapons which were dropped from a wide range of aircraft, including carrier-based jets, ground-based attack aircraft, and B-52 as well as B-1 bombers. In addition to the laser-guided bomb, the US also used Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM). By the end of January 2002, the US had dropped more than 4,000 laser-guided bombs and more than 4,000 JDAMs as well. Also, up to 1,000 cluster bombs were used.<sup>14</sup>

On the ground, the US gradually increased the number of special operations forces teams in Afghanistan. While there were just three such teams, each consisting of a dozen personnel, in Afghanistan in mid-October 2001, their number was increased to 10 in mid-November, and 17 by December 8. They helped the US to increasingly call-in supplies for the opposition, help it with tactics, and designate Taliban and Al Qaeda targets for US air strikes, using global positioning systems technology and laser range finders, resulting in extremely precise air strikes. Ground spotters have appeared in the annals of warfare for as long as airplanes themselves, but this was the first time they were frequently able to provide targeting information accurate to within a few meters, and do so quickly. The Marine Corps also began to provide logistical support for these teams as the war advanced.<sup>15</sup>

All this, happened so quickly that the Taliban-Al Qaeda did not have the time to realize what was happening. They could not hide themselves and their arsenal near mosques, hospitals, and homes, in major cities, which would have protected them

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13 Ibid.

14 Michael E. O'Hanlon, *op.cit.*

15 Ibid.

from air attacks. Taliban forces were caught outside the major cities and became easy targets.

Talking about the entire operation, Senator Carl Levin, in his opening statement to Committee on Armed Services, US Senate, on February 7, 2002, noted,

We have used innovative techniques and revolutionary technologies to destroy the heart of the al Qaeda network, to topple the Taliban, and to liberate the Afghan people from tyranny...We have seen small teams of special operations forces serving alongside Afghan opposition forces, 21st century warriors on horseback coordinating attacks and calling in precision air strikes against Taliban and al Qaeda targets. We have seen precision-guided munitions more often than ever before...We have seen unmanned aerial vehicles, Global Hawk and Predator, reveal the location of enemy forces and quickly relay that information to fighters and bombers overhead for precision air strikes, sometimes within minutes.<sup>16</sup>

However, the Al Qaeda and Taliban leadership survived the onslaught and took shelter in Tora Bora, near the Af-Pak border. In December, 2001, as Taliban control over Afghanistan collapsed, Mullah Mohammad Omar left Kandahar and reportedly crossed into Pakistan.<sup>17</sup>

***Flight to Tora Bora:*** As the US-Allied troops were gaining around across Afghanistan, bin Laden headed for the mountain redoubt by early November and he arrived there by the end of November, along with 1,000 to 1,500 hardened fighters

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16 Statement of General Tommy R. Franks, op.cit.

17 Steve Coll, "Looking for Mullah Omar", *The New York*, January 15, 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/01/23/looking-for-mullah-omar>.

and bodyguards. In a television interview on November 29, 2001. Though the CIA knew about his presence there and a massive three-week bombing campaign aimed at killing Al Qaeda fighters in their caves was carried out, Laden survived. On the other hand, US troops could not be dispatched to Tora Bora because the area surrounding Tora Bora was controlled by tribes hostile to the US and other outsiders. The US feared large casualties. It therefore, unjustifiably, relied on Pakistani Frontier Corps and Anti-Taliban Afghan Forces and asked them to block any escape attempt by bin Laden and others. It did not happen. Though Pakistan deployed about 4,000 regular army forces along the border itself, it was not always fully committed to the mission. Afghan opposition forces were also less than fully committed, and they were not very proficient in fighting at night. Unsurprisingly, after staying there till mid-December, Laden moved in tribal areas of Pakistan<sup>18</sup>. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Zubaydah, and other top al Qaeda officials also escaped.<sup>19</sup>

**Operation Anaconda:** On March 2, 2002, with an aim to clean out remaining Al Qaeda fighters and their Taliban allies in the Shah-i-Khot Valley of the Paktia Province, the US and the Afghan Forces conducted *Operation Anaconda*.<sup>20</sup> The opposition forces were mostly non-Afghan Al Qaeda and Taliban members, and included some Arabs, Chechens, Uzbeks, and Pakistanis. The terrorists had come to villages in

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18 “Tora Bora Revisited: How we failed to get Bin Laden and why it matters today”, The US Government, November 30, 2009, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-111SPRT53709/html/CPRT-111SPRT53709.htm>.

19 “Account of Osama’s escape from Tora Bora”, *NDTV*, April 26, 2011, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/account-of-osamas-escape-from-tora-bora-453986>.

20 Adam Geibel, “Operation Anaconda, Shah-i-Khot Valley, Afghanistan, 2-10 March 2002”, *Military Review*, May-June, 2022, pp. 72-77, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2017-Online-Exclusive-Articles/Operation-Anaconda-Shah-i-Khot-Valley-Afghanistan/>.

the Valley six weeks before the battle began. Between March 2 and March 5, coalition air forces, using a mix of long-range bombers and tactical aircraft, dropped more than 450 bombs, 350 of which were precision munitions. The ground operation was also going on. As wind and sandstorms slowed allied air and ground operations, on March 7, local anti-Taliban Afghan commanders started moving towards Paktia. On March 9, as the armoured column of local Afghan commanders reached the battle zone, Al Qaeda fighters retreated into the caves. The operation ended at this stage, but was again inconclusive. Indeed, on March 10, an unnamed Special Forces officer estimated that between 100 and 200 Al Qaeda forces remained in the Valley and that US Forces were not approaching the most dangerous part of the war. The outcome was aptly summarized by enemy commander Maulvi Saifurrahman Mansoor, who said that Al Qaeda fighters would “continue to wage jihad until our last breath against the Americans for the glory of Islam and for the defense of our country.”<sup>21</sup>

#### ESTABLISHMENT OF THE GOVERNMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

On June 13, 2002, Karzai, who had then been serving as Chairman of the Afghan Interim Administration since December 2001, was elected as President of the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan by the *Loya Jirga*.<sup>22</sup> Later, on June 19, 2002, he was sworn in as the President.<sup>23</sup> He remained in office as President of the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan till December 7, 2004, when he was sworn in as

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21 Ibid.

22 “Loya jirga elects Hamid Karzai”, *The Guardian*, June 13, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/jun/13/afghanistan>.

23 Carlotta Gall and James Dao, “A Buoyant Karzai Is Sworn In as Afghanistan’s Leader”, *The New York Times*, June 20, 2002, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100228162323/http://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/20/world/a-buoyant-karzai-is-sworn-in-as-afghanistan-s-leader.html>.

Afghanistan's first democratically elected President.<sup>24</sup> Earlier, on November 3, 2004, Karzai had been declared the winner of presidential election held on October 9, 2004.<sup>25</sup>

## **REGROUPING IN PAKISTAN**

Despite all the military success, US and its allied forces could only succeed in changing the regime in Kabul, but failed substantially to decimate the Taliban-Al Qaeda complex. The fleeing Taliban-Al Qaeda fighters found their way or were facilitated to move into, the tribal areas of Pakistan, along the Af-Pak Border.

In a major strategic blunder, reports revealed that thousands of Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters who had retreated inside the northern hill town of Kunduz, in Kunduz Province, along with Pakistani Army officers and intelligence advisers, and Pakistani volunteers who were fighting alongside the Taliban-Al Qaeda, were air lifted to Pakistan, evidently with Washington's consent.

Indeed, Pakistan had constantly rejected reports of presence of Pakistani officials inside Afghanistan, and was worried that its blatant lies would be exposed, as the fall of Kunduz to Northern Alliance Forces was imminent. There were also fears that, once the Northern Alliance took Kunduz, there would be wholesale killings of the defeated fighters, especially the foreigners, including Pakistanis. In any event, it would have been impossible for Pakistan to hide the truth.

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24 Eric Schmitt Br and Carlotta Gall, "Karzai Is Sworn In, Pledging 'New Chapter'", *The New York Times*, December 7, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/07/international/karzai-is-sworn-in-pledging-new-chapter.html>.

25 Adam Jay, "Karzai confirmed as Afghan president", *The Guardian*, November 3, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/nov/03/afghanistan.afghanistantimeline>.

Islamabad, therefore, argued that among thousand Taliban fighters in Kunduz, there were many Taliban leadership elements who could play a role in a postwar Afghan government and convinced Washington that they must be taken to safe places inside Pakistan. The then Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf was also able to convince the US that that the humiliation of losing hundreds – and perhaps thousands – of Pakistani Army personnel and intelligence operatives would jeopardize his political survival. The US was not ready to risk any political crisis in Pakistan at that time.

Consequently, the US gave consent to Pakistan to carry out evacuations of its officials. However, along with Pakistani Army and intelligence personnel, came Taliban-Al Qaeda cadres. The US said that what was supposed to be a limited evacuation apparently slipped out of control, and, as an ‘unintended consequence’, an unknown number of Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters managed to join in the exodus.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the matter of greatest concern was the fact that the leadership of the Taliban and Al Qaeda managed to escape into Pakistan. They included Mullah Omar, and he and his group continue to refer to themselves as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan from their safe havens across the border. The Taliban saw themselves as the legitimate government of Afghanistan and aimed to restore their control over the entirety of the country.

For the purpose of running their ‘government in exile’ and to continue their activities, the Taliban formed the Quetta Shura, and continued to provide the same support to Al Qaeda as

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26 Seymour M. Hersh, “The Getaway”, *The New Yorker*, January 20, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/01/28/the-getaway-2>.

they had during their reign in Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup> The Quetta Shura comprised around a dozen or so members who meet several times a year; while certain members and sub-committees may meet more frequently. The ISI had representatives on the *Shura*, either as participants or observers, and the agency was thus involved at the highest level of the movement. Significantly, even a limited ISI presence on the Shura would allow the agency to monitor the Shura's decisions and take steps against members who were not perceived to be acting in Pakistan's interests.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, the Taliban-Al Qaeda combine was provided safe shelter and hospitality by Pakistan's ISI to ensure that they could be used for Islamabad's own advantage, and to install a government of its own choice in Kabul, at an opportune moment. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) had already tasted success in the 1980s, while siding with the Afghan *mujahideen*, pushing the Soviet Forces out of Afghanistan. They knew well how to use the services of mercenaries as well as religiously mobilized militias. The resurgence of Taliban-Al Qaeda combine was engineered by the ISI on the basis of this experience.

There was overwhelming evidence to prove that the Taliban-Al Qaeda combine enjoyed the ISI's hospitality. Mullah Omar died in a hospital in Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan, on April 23, 2013,<sup>29</sup> while Bin Laden was killed by the US Special Forces in the garrison town of Abbottabad in Pakistan on May

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27 Jeffrey Dressler and Carl Forsberg, "The Quetta Shura Taliban in Southern Afghanistan: Organization, Operations and Shadow Governance", *Institute for the Study of War*, December 21, 2009, [https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/QuettaShuraTaliban\\_1.pdf](https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/QuettaShuraTaliban_1.pdf).

28 Matt Waldman, "The Sun in the Sky: The relationship between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan insurgents", *Crisis States Discussion Papers*, June, 2010, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/117472/dp%2018.pdf>.

29 "Taliban admit covering up death of Mullah Omar", *BBC*, August 31, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34105565>.

2, 2011.<sup>30</sup> Bin Laden had been set up in Abbottabad by the ISI and the then President General Pervez Musharaff knew about this.<sup>31</sup> The ISI's commanding general, Mahmud Ahmad, told the Taliban's Ambassador in Pakistan, Abdul Salam Zaeef, in late in 2001, "We want to assure you that you will not be alone in this jihad against America. We will be with you."<sup>32</sup> The pattern of unchecked movement, often facilitated by Pakistani border forces and the Army, of Taliban and affiliated fighters, as well as materials of war into Afghanistan, over the following decades was amply documented, drawing repeated threats of retaliation from Western Coalition commanders and political leaders, as well as constant protestations from successive regimes in Kabul – to little avail.

### **RESURGENCE OF TALIBAN AND THE ROLE OF ISI**

ISI involvement in the early stages of the insurgency has been widely acknowledged. From 2003-2004 the ISI operated training camps for Taliban recruits, and facilitated the supply of funds, equipment and weaponry from the Gulf countries. The Pakistan Army established medical facilities for Taliban fighters, and provided covering fire for border crossings. Communications intercepts showed that Taliban commanders liaised regularly with Pakistani military officers to ensure safe passage across the border.<sup>33</sup>

The scale of ISI support became evident in the major Taliban offensives launched in southern Afghanistan in 2006.

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30 Macon Phillips, "Osama Bin Laden Dead", May 2, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/05/02/osama-bin-laden-dead>.

31 Bruce Riedel, "Pakistan's Musharraf Accused of Knowing Osama bin Laden's Hideout", *Brookings*, February 14, 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/pakistans-musharraf-accused-of-knowing-osama-bin-ladens-hideout/>.

32 Matt Waldman, op. cit.

33 Ibid.

In June that year a joint US, NATO and Afghan intelligence assessment concluded that the ISI not only provided a vital sanctuary for the Taliban, but also paid and pressured them to fight. As Ahmed Rashid puts it: Over time evidence slowly collected by U.S. and NATO intelligence officers on the ground showed a systematic and pervasive system of ISI collusion.<sup>34</sup>

Though a number of analysts suggest that, due to American and international pressure in 2006, 2007 or later, Pakistan curtailed its support for the insurgents, there is little evidence to support this. Indeed, in February 2010, the US Director of National Intelligence admitted that the “Pakistan safe-haven is an important Taliban strength”, and made no mention of any change in the ISI’s behaviour *vis-à-vis* the Afghan insurgents.

A former Taliban minister confirmed that there continued to be close cooperation on cross-border movement between the Taliban and ISI or Pakistan military, of which he had seen written evidence. He claimed in March 2010,

I have seen a letter from the Taliban governor in Helmand to Pakistani officials, one year ago, which asks for them to let some vehicles go through the border, giving their type and number plate.<sup>35</sup>

ISAF officials readily accept that insurgents continue to cross the border in significant numbers. Indeed, ne southern commander confirmed,

When we need ammunition, we go to Miranshah [in North Waziristan]; our base is there and we get ammunition and expenses. If I go across the border,

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34 Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: How the War Against Islamic Extremism is Being Lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*, Allen Lane, London, 2008.

35 Matt Waldman, *op. cit.*

even if the Pakistani authorities know I am a commander they open the way for me, all the way to the base.<sup>36</sup>

## US 'ROLE' IN RESURGENCE

The resurgence was also facilitated by the US flawed policy. Even while the Taliban-Al Qaeda was not totally decimated and in fact regrouping in Pakistan, the US decided to get engaged in reconstruction activities.

On May 1, 2003, the then US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld disclosed that in regard to Afghanistan, Bush, Tommy R. Franks, and Karzai "have concluded we're at a point where we clearly have moved from major combat activity to a period of stability and stabilization and reconstruction activities. The bulk of this country today is permissive, it's secure."<sup>37</sup> Still, he added, there are dangers, and "pockets of resistance in certain parts of the country," which US Forces will help the Afghan government and army to deal with. US military sources also warned that Afghanistan's border with Pakistan, where remnants of Al- Qaeda and the Taliban still operated, were of particular concern.

Much earlier, the US forces gave up the combat role and proclaimed themselves as 'supportive forces'. General Tommy R. Franks, stated on February 7, 2002,

I am privileged to command today more than 78,000 men and women, of them 14,000 coalition forces from 17 nations in the theater as we speak today. Our activities today remain focused on gaining and exploiting intelligence in order to preempt and disrupt planned future terrorist acts, to positively confirm or

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36 Ibid.

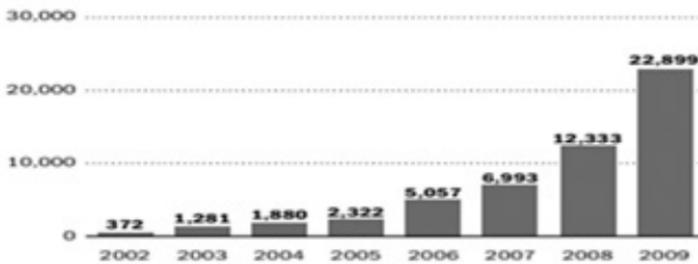
37 "Rumsfeld: Major combat over in Afghanistan", *CNN*, May 1, 2003, <https://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/asiapcf/central/05/01/afghan.combat/>.

deny all over Afghanistan the presence of Taliban or al Qaeda fighter pockets, to search through each possible location for evidence of weapons of mass destruction. We remain committed to the conduct of military operations to eliminate pockets of resistance to the interim administration of Afghanistan and to a long-term government. We work to support Afghan forces as required, and we continue to conduct and support civil military operations in an advisory capacity in the country of Afghanistan.

### THE TALIBAN’S COMEBACK

The regrouped and resurgent Taliban-Al Qaeda combine soon upped the ante, beginning to make definite inroads in Afghanistan. Virtually all the anti-State groups operating in the country swore allegiance (in varying degrees) to the Taliban’s leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar.<sup>38</sup> The number of terrorist attacks gradually increased manifold between 2002 and 2009.

Number of Terrorist Attacks: 2002 to 2009<sup>39</sup>



Moreover, where there were just 11 suicide attacks between 2001 and 2004 (one each in 2001 and 2002, three in 2003 and

38 Jeffrey Dressler and Carl Forsberg, op. cit.

39 John F. Sopko, “What we need to learn: Lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan Reconstruction, *SIGAR*, August, 2011, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>.

six in 2004), 2005 alone recorded 27 attacks. The number rose exponentially in 2006, when there were 139 such attacks.<sup>40</sup> It remained at almost the same level between 2007 and 2009 (140 in 2007, 146 in 2008 and 140 in 2009).<sup>41</sup> The Taliban used suicide attacks as their biggest weapon during this period.

Clearly, by 2005, the Taliban had re-emerged as a serious threat to Afghanistan<sup>42</sup> and the security situation had started to deteriorate.

Though there is no authoritative and comprehensive data available, since the Western Coalition started suppressing numbers in various categories, according to partial data compiled by the *Institute for Conflict Management (ICM)* from the open source, a total of 28,904 people were killed in terrorism-linked violence between 2005 and 2009.

Fatalities in Afghanistan: 2007-2009

Year	Civilians	SFs	Terrorists	Total
2005	NA	NA	NA	1,700
2006	NA	NA	NA	3,000
2007	1,523	1,231	4,500	7,254
2008	2118	1,395	5,000	8,513
2009	2412	1,415	4610	8,437

Data compiled by ICM<sup>43</sup>

40 Matt Waldman, op. cit.

41 Ghulam Farooq Mujaddidi, "Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan: Why Now?", 2013, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1025&context=poliscitheses>

42 Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan (2001-2007), *United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan*, September 1, 2007, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Afgh%202007SuicideAttacks.pdf>.

43 "Afghanistan Fatalities: 2005-2020", *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, <https://satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/afghanistan/Afghanistan-Fatalities-2005-2020>.

The Taliban was back full strength. Several reports confirmed this. In a report published on August 5, 2009, *Reuters* wrote,

Almost half of Afghanistan is at a high risk of attack by the Taliban and other insurgents or is under “enemy control,” a secret Afghan government map shows, painting a dire security picture before presidential elections. The threat assessment map, a copy of which was obtained by Reuters, shows 133 of Afghanistan’s 356 districts are regarded as high-risk areas with at least 13 under “enemy control.” The map, which bears the logos of Afghanistan’s Interior Ministry and the army as well as the United Nations Department of Safety and Security, was produced in April 2009, before a dramatic escalation of violence ahead of the August 20 ballot.<sup>44</sup>

Bill Roggio, the editor of *The Long War Journal*, confirmed that the Taliban government collapsed after the US invasion, but the group regained control of multiple districts between 2005 and 2009.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, in an interview published on October 10, 2009, Bruce Riedel, a former Central Intelligence Agency officer, referring to Mullah Omar noted, “He’s a semiliterate individual who has met with no more than a handful of non-Muslims in

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44 Paul Tait, “Government map shows dire Afghan security picture”, *Reuters*, August 5, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-map-idUSSP43015420090805>.

45 Sarah Almukhtar and Karen Yourish, “More Than 14 Years After U.S. Invasion, the Taliban Control Large Parts of Afghanistan”, *The New York Times*, April 19, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/29/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-maps.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=DAA9DD9C5D7FD5799814EAC38BF0A0C6&gwt=regi&assetType=REGIWALL>.

his entire life. And he's staged one of the most remarkable military comebacks in modern history."<sup>46</sup>

In a report submitted to the US Senate on November 30, 2009, John F. Kerry, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, observed,<sup>47</sup>

Al Qaeda shifted its locus across the border into Pakistan, where it has trained extremists linked to numerous plots... The terrorist group's resurgence in Pakistan has coincided with the rising violence orchestrated in Afghanistan by the Taliban, whose leaders also escaped only to re-emerge to direct today's increasingly lethal Afghan insurgency.

The report further noted,

Mullah Omar has re-emerged at the helm of the Taliban-led insurgency, which has grown more sophisticated and lethal in recent years and now controls swaths of Afghanistan. The Taliban, which is aligned with a loose network of other militant groups and maintains ties to Al Qaeda, has established shadow governments in many of Afghanistan's provinces and is capable of mounting increasingly complex attacks on American and NATO forces.

Further, on December 1, 2009, the then US President Barack Obama in his address to the nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan acknowledged,

The situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated. After escaping across the border into Pakistan in 2001 and

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46 Scott Shane, "A Dogged Taliban Chief Rebounds, Vexing U.S.," *The New York Times*, October 10, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/11/world/asia/11mullah.html>.

47 "Tora Bora Revisited: How we failed to get Bin Laden and why it matters today", op. cit.

2002, al Qaeda’s leadership established a safe haven there... Gradually, the Taliban has begun to control additional swaths of territory in Afghanistan...

Out of Afghanistan’s total of 400 districts, Taliban controlled 69 districts as on November 11, 2019; the number of Government controlled districts stood at 135; 196 districts were under contention.<sup>48</sup> In early, 2009, Taliban had reinitiated its bid to retake the country from its safe haven in Pakistan, and its influence expanded in the south, east and north. Several Provincial capitals were under Taliban threat.

### THE US POLICY TO COUNTER THE THREAT

To “break the Taliban’s momentum” Obama, during the same address, declared he would “send an additional 30,000 US troops to Afghanistan” to be deployed at “the fastest possible pace” (by the first part of 2010). There was a total of 67,000 US troops at that point of time in Afghanistan.

Earlier, in March 2009, Obama had stated, “I’ve already ordered the deployment of 17,000 troops that had been requested by General McKiernan [General David McKiernan, commander-in-charge of the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Afghanistan] for many months.”<sup>49</sup> US force levels peaked at roughly 100,000 in 2011.<sup>50</sup> There were around 130,313 ISAF personnel from 49 Troop-Contributing Nations on December 8, 2011, including

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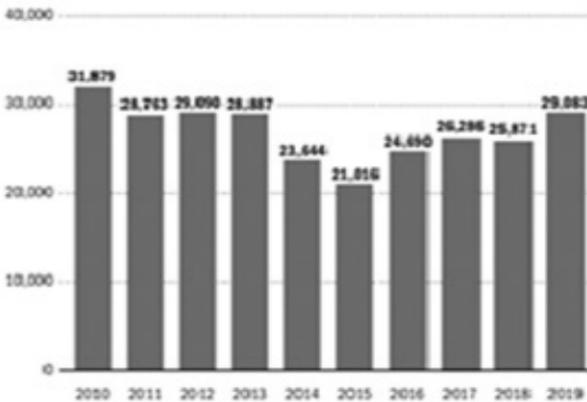
48 Bill Roggio, “Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan”, *FDD’s Long War Journal*, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>.

49 The White House, “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan”, March 27, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-a-new-strategy-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.

50 US Department of State, “U.S. Relations With Afghanistan”, January 20, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-afghanistan/>.

90,000 US troops.<sup>51</sup> These 90,000 US troops were out of a total of 100,000 stationed in Afghanistan. The remaining roughly 10,000 were deployed under *Operation Enduring Freedom*, as both the operations went on simultaneously<sup>52</sup>.

Number of Terrorist Attacks: 2010 to 2019<sup>53</sup>



After the surge, despite the decrease in number of attacks in initial years between 2010 and 2015, the number of overall fatalities continued to rise.

Nevertheless, the surge initially helped the international troops put some pressure on the Taliban. The surge relieved the pressure on the provincial capitals and drove the Taliban out of key areas in South, East, and North. The Taliban went underground. The success was, however, short-lived. The reason was simple. The number of troops, at 130,500 in 2010,

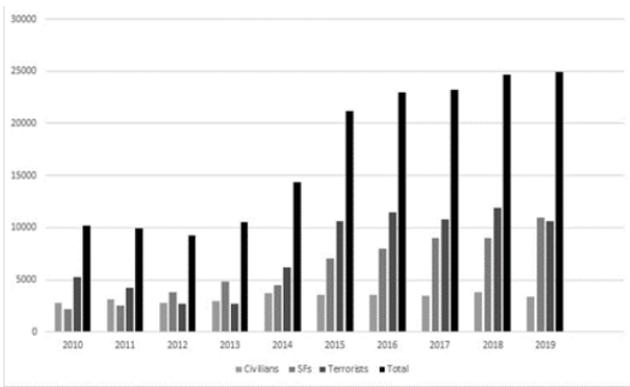
51 NATO, “International Security Assistance Force”, December 8, 2011, [https://www.nato.int/isaf/placemats\\_archive/2011-12-08-ISAF-Placemat.pdf](https://www.nato.int/isaf/placemats_archive/2011-12-08-ISAF-Placemat.pdf).

52 Ali A. Jalali, “Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Mission, Challenges and Sustainability”, May 2016, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW115-Afghanistan-National-Defense-and-Security-Forces-Mission-Challenges-and-Sustainability.pdf>.

53 John F. Sopko, op.cit.

went up only marginally to 131,300 in 2011, but came down to 105,900 in 2012, and further down to 87,100 in 2013. By the end of 2014, this number was down at 44,500, and to a mere 13,600 in 2015. The lowest point was reached in 2016, when the international troops numbered just 12,900. An increase was registered in 2017 (20,400) and 2018 (21,600), which declined, again, to 16,600 in 2019.<sup>54</sup>

Fatalities in Afghanistan: 2010-2019<sup>55</sup>



The surge was found to fail simply because of Obama’s strategic blunder, when, during his December 9, 2009, address, he talked about the surge in number of troops, he also announced that “After 18 months, our troops will begin to come home.” This announcement made the Taliban strongly believe that they would certainly be restored to power, and all they needed was to keep the fight alive till the US and its allies left.

### DOHA DEAL

Twice – in 2003 and again in 2014 – the US Government declared an end to combat operations, episodes of wishful

54 Sam Gollob and Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Afghanistan Index”, August 2020, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FP\\_20200825\\_afghanistan\\_index.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FP_20200825_afghanistan_index.pdf).

55 Afghanistan Fatalities: 2005-2020, op.cit.

thinking that had no connection to the realities of the ground.<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, assured of imminent defeat, the US signed the Doha deal on February 29, 2020,<sup>57</sup> to ensure a ‘respectful exit’. The deal *inter alia* included; (i) the Taliban will start intra-Afghan negotiations with Afghan sides on March 10, 2020; (ii) A permanent and comprehensive ceasefire will be an item on the agenda of the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations; (iii) Taliban will not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including Al Qaeda, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies; Afghanistan Government will release up to five thousand (5,000) prisoners of the Taliban and up to one thousand (1,000) prisoners of the other side will be released by March 10, 2020.

Aware that it was in no position to force the Taliban to meet any of the conditions mentioned in the Deal, the US coerced the Afghanistan Government to release 5,000 prisoners. In fact, Kabul released an additional 500 terrorists to please the Taliban. Rahmatullah Andar, spokesperson of the Afghan National Security Council noted, “Liberating 5,500 [Taliban] prisoners did not achieve the expected results. The [Taliban] did not honour their promise [in the deal] to reduce violence, and also the released inmates rejoined battlegrounds.” The Taliban, meanwhile, asked for the release of another 7,000 prisoners. “[US Special Envoy for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad] is trying to implement the annexures of the Doha deal, which were not shared with anyone. The push for the

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56 Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2021.

57 “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America”, February 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

release of 7,000 prisoners is from that part of the agreement,” said Rahmatullah Nabil, a former Afghan spy chief.<sup>58</sup> Another expert had claimed, “This was a Taliban demand and the US is speaking on their behalf. The list of 7,000 detainees was compiled before the 29 February deal.”<sup>59</sup>

Though the Taliban also released 1,000 prisoners, it did not meet any other conditions mentioned in the Doha Deal and in fact escalated violence and also intensified its military operations to bring more and more areas of Afghanistan under its control.

Indeed, despite the deal, Afghanistan recorded a total of 19,472 fatalities, including 3,035 civilians; 10,908 SF personnel and 5,529 terrorists in 2020 alone. There were a whopping 40,535 enemy (anti-state) initiated attacks.<sup>60</sup> By October 2020, of 400 districts, Taliban had established control over 78, up from 69 on November 11, 2019. 187 districts were under contentions and the Government controlled 135 districts.<sup>61</sup> The Taliban, had thus significantly consolidated its position after the Doha deal.

## **THE RETURN OF THE TALIBAN**

The Taliban further intensified its offensive in 2021. According to the ICM database based on open-source reportage, between January and August 2021, the country recorded 7,946 fatalities including 844 civilians and 787 SF personnel. These numbers, however, are likely a gross

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58 Ruchi Kumar, “Taliban expecting release of 7,000 prisoners additional to US deal”, *The National*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/asia/taliban-expecting-release-of-7-000-prisoners-additional-to-us-deal-1.1125631>.

59 Ibid.

60 John F. Sopko, op. cit.

61 Bill Roggio, op. cit.

underestimate as, according to United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), at least 1,659 civilians were killed between January and June 2021 alone.<sup>62</sup>

Fatalities in Afghanistan: January-August 2021

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Total
<b>Civilians</b>	54	29	63	85	199	91	45	278	844
<b>SFs</b>	96	124	89	112	68	202	34	62	787
<b>Terrorists</b>	862	787	542	467	649	964	984	1060	6315
<b>Total</b>	1012	940	694	664	916	1257	1063	1400	7946

Data Compiled by ICM<sup>63</sup>

By June 16, 2021, the Taliban controlled 104 districts and the number Government controlled districts had reduced to 94, while 201 had come under contention. The number of Taliban controlled districts jumped to 220 by July 21, while the number of Government controlled districts fell further to 73, leaving 114 under contention. On August 15, when the Taliban entered Kabul, it was already in control of 304 districts, leaving just under 37 under ‘government’ control and 66 under contention. On August 16, 2021, 305 districts were under Taliban control, while 94 districts were unconfirmed Taliban claimed districts. Eight districts were under the control of Panjshir fighters.

Though 94 districts were not considered under Taliban control, despite its claims, there was very little evidence to show any resistance in these areas. If these districts were also added, very little remained outside the Taliban’s spheres of dominance.

62 Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Midyear Update: 1 January to 30 June 2021, *United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan*, [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama\\_poc\\_midyear\\_report\\_2021\\_26\\_july.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_poc_midyear_report_2021_26_july.pdf).

63 “Monthly Fatalities in Afghanistan: 2021”, *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/fatalities/afghanistan>.

In the evening of August 15, 2021, the Taliban captured the Presidential Palace in Kabul. Declaring the ‘end of war’, Taliban’s political office spokesperson Mohammad Naeem declared,<sup>64</sup>

Today is a great day for the Afghan people and the *mujahideen*. They have witnessed the fruits of their efforts and their sacrifices for 20 years. We have reached what we were seeking, which is the freedom of our country and the independence of our people. Thanks to God, the war is over in the country.

Meanwhile, the incumbent Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, reportedly to neighbouring Tajikistan. In a *Facebook* post, Ghani claimed, “To avoid bloodshed, I thought it would be better to leave.”<sup>65</sup> Commenting on Ghani’s ‘escape’ Naeem observed, contemptuously, “even those close to him did not expect it,” adding “We are ready to have a dialogue with all Afghan figures and will guarantee them the necessary protection.” Earlier, on August 14, two of Afghanistan’s regional strongmen, Atta Mohammad Noor, the former governor of Balkh Province and the ethnic Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum, fled to neighbouring Uzbekistan, after the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif city.

The ouster of another “puppet Government” in Afghanistan within months of the start of the final drawdown of international troops from Afghanistan (the withdrawal began on May 1, 2021) demonstrates the failure of ‘superpowers’ to im-

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64 Shweta Sharma, “‘War is over in Afghanistan,’ says Taliban after Kabul falls to Islamist group”, *Independent*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/afghanistan-taliban-war-kabul-latest-b1903137.html>.

65 “Afghan president says he left country to avoid bloodshed”, *Reuters*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-president-ghani-says-he-left-country-order-avoid-bloodshed-2021-08-15/>.

pose their will on Kabul, with Mohammad Naeem asserting, “We do not think that foreign forces will repeat their failed experience in Afghanistan once again.”<sup>66</sup>

The humiliation of the US is, indeed, far greater than what the erstwhile Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) faced at the hands of the *Afghan Mujahideen*, when the USSR was forced to leave Afghanistan in 1988-89. The USSR was confronted with a proxy war backed by the combined Western powers led by the US. The US lost to the Taliban, backed by Pakistan alone.

Referring to America’s disgrace, US Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell argued that “terrorists and major competitors like China are watching the embarrassment of a superpower laid low.” While he blamed US President Joe Biden for what he called a “shameful failure of American leadership,” Biden was only realizing what has been in the making for over a decade, certainly since Obama’s incoherent “AfPak policy” of 2009, which initiated the trend of announcing withdrawal dates for US and coalition forces, signaling to the Taliban and their Pakistani backers that they simply had to wait their adversary out. As had been noted then:

President Obama’s AfPak strategy overwhelmingly concentrates on unrealistic short-term targets and goals, based on irrational settlements with the most dangerous elements in the region – the Pakistan Army, the ‘moderate Taliban’, and a powerless and unreliable political leadership in Pakistan. At the same time, the setting of hard deadlines for US withdrawal, both in Iraq and Afghanistan, encourage an extremist calculus

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66 “Taliban spokesman says “war is over in Afghanistan” - Al Jazeera”, *Reuters*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-spokesman-says-war-is-over-afghanistan-al-jazeera-2021-08-15/>.

within a protracted war framework that simply seeks to exhaust the political will of the Western leadership to remain engaged in the war. It is only when the US and the West accept and operate within the protracted war paradigm that a rational policy framework can emerge.<sup>67</sup>

Despite the many brave announcements of policy since then, little changed in the more than a decade that followed. The Western alliance was unwilling to commit to an open-ended engagement in Afghanistan, failed to define clear strategic goals, constantly sought a craven peace with the Taliban, and, crucially, knowingly ignored Pakistan's malicious actions that were, throughout, the very crux of conflict in Afghanistan.

However, the US political and defence leadership – indeed, the world leadership – was caught unawares by the sheer pace of the developments on the ground in the final phase of withdrawal from Afghanistan. On August 11, just four days before the final takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, an unnamed US defence official cited US intelligence as saying that Taliban fighters could isolate Afghanistan's capital in 30 days and possibly take it over within 90 days. The new assessment of how long Kabul could stand purportedly accounted for the pace of the Taliban's rapid gains in the preceding months. Moreover, the official further asserted that "this is not a foregone conclusion" and that the Afghan Security Forces could reverse the momentum by putting up more resistance.<sup>68</sup>

Nevertheless, there was not an iota of doubt that Taliban would eventually capture power. Indeed, on April 22, 2021,

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67 Ajai Sahni, "AfPak Cul De Sac", 2009, <https://www.satp.org/publication/ajaisahni/WarWithinBorderDetails.aspx?Id=122>.

68 Ajit Kumar Singh, "Afghanistan: Catastrophe Foretold", *SAIR*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.satp.org/south-asia-intelligence-review-Volume-20-No-8>.

General Frank McKenzie had warned that Afghanistan's military "will certainly collapse" without some continued American support, once all US troops were withdrawn.

Unlike 1993, however, not even the pocket of resistance in the Northern areas was left intact. The Taliban successfully pre-empted any consolidation of ethnic resistance in these areas, bringing large swathes in the North under its sway over the year preceding the final withdrawal of foreign Forces, excluding the possibilities of leverage or indirect intervention through ethnic minority proxies in the near future.

Through all this, the biggest, the most visible and most persistent blunder of US policy was the reliance on Islamabad/Rawalpindi. In the final stages preceding the Taliban takeover, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, on whom the US relied to help 'rein in' the Taliban, at least for a few months to help the US secure an 'honorable exit', was in no way going to miss the opportunity to install its proxy in Kabul, before any outbreak of civil war or consolidation of effective resistance, which many experts predicted or hoped for.

It needs to be emphasized that the Taliban entered the Presidential Palace at a time when almost a month was still left for Washington's declared drawdown deadline of September 11, 2021.

Eventually, after nearly 20 years, the US and its allies once again abandoned Afghanistan to the mercy of the terrorist Taliban, several of whose leaders continue to be on the UNSC sanctions list.<sup>69</sup> They left behind chaos everywhere in the country.

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69 UNSC, "Subsidiary Organs of the United Nations Security Council", February 23, 2022, <https://scsanctions.un.org/5z89ven-all.html>.

## TALIBAN'S TECHNOLOGICAL ADAPTATIONS

The West fought the war in much the same way from beginning to end. The first airstrikes in 2001 were conducted by their gigantic B-52 ‘Stratofortress’ bombers, the model that first saw service in 1955; in August 2021, the attacks that marked the end of the US presence came from the same venerable model of aircraft.<sup>70</sup>

Western forces did have access to a wide range of world-class technology, from space-based surveillance to remotely operated systems, including robots and drones. Despite their global technological dominance, the decisive issue was that, for them, the war in Afghanistan was not a war of survival; it was a war of choice. And because of this, much of the technology was aimed at reducing the risk of their own casualties, rather than achieving outright victory. Western forces invested heavily in weapons that could remove soldiers from harm’s way – air power, drones – or technology that could speed up the delivery of immediate medical treatment. Things that keep the enemy at arm’s length or protect soldiers from harm, such as gunships, armoured transports (including the lumbering million-dollar Buffalo Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) Vehicle), body armor, and roadside-bomb detection, were the focus for the West.

For the Taliban, the war in Afghanistan was existential. The Taliban, made huge and continuous technological adaptations – far from cutting edge science, of course, but enormously effectively in the dirty war on the ground. Much of their technology at the beginning and at the end of the war

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70 Christopher Ankersen and Mike Martin, “The Taliban, not the West, won Afghanistan’s technological war”, *MIT Technology Review*, August 23, 2021, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/08/23/1032459/afghanist-an-taliban-war-technological-progress/>.

remained the same – dominated by the AK-47 and a range of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), the latter augmented by the suicide bomber, as well as other simple, conventional weapons. Nevertheless, the progressively harnessed mobile telephony and the internet –to improve their weapons’ delivery, their command-and-control systems, and, crucially, to carry out strategic communications and influence operations.

While the bulk of their fighting equipment remained simple and easy to maintain (often no more than a Kalashnikov, some ammunition, a radio, and a headscarf), they sought out new technology from other insurgent groups, or developed their own.

A key area of innovation was the roadside bomb, or improvised explosive device. These simple weapons caused more allied casualties than any other. Originally activated by pressure plates, like mines, they had evolved by the midpoint of the war, so that the Taliban could set them off with mobile phones from anywhere, with a cell signal. Because the Taliban’s technological baseline was lower, the innovations they made were all the more significant.

But the real technological advance for the Taliban took place at the strategic level. Acutely aware of their past shortcomings, they sought to overcome the weaknesses of their previous stint in government. During their regime between 1996 and 2001, they preferred to be reclusive, and there was only one known photograph of their leader, Mullah Omar. Since then, though, the Taliban developed a sophisticated public affairs team, harnessing social media domestically and abroad. IED attacks would usually be recorded on mobile phones and were uploaded to one of the many Taliban *Twitter* feeds, to help with recruitment, fundraising, and morale. Another example was the technique of automatically scraping social media for

key phrases like “ISI support” – referring to Pakistan’s security service’s relationship with the Taliban – and then unleashing an army of online bots to send messages that attempted to refashion the image of the movement.<sup>71</sup>

### MISPLACED OPTIMISM

As the Taliban took over, a large number of hopeful commentaries started making rounds that “Taliban 2.0” was an improved and much-civilized version of Taliban 1.0, which ruled the country between 1996 and 2001. The Taliban, however, remain unshakable in their commitment to an “Islamic rule”, with their brutal interpretation of *Shariah* as the law of the land. In various statements, Taliban leaders reiterated that this would include the restoration of punishments, such as stoning to death and the cutting off of hands for various crimes.

Indeed, since August 15, 2021, Afghanistan has witnessed near-daily developments which confirmed that the hopeful commentaries were entirely divorced from ground realities. Some of the prominent developments, till the time of writing, included:

- August 15: Prisons, including Pul-e-Charkhi, in Kabul, were thrown open, leading to the release of numerous known Al Qaeda members and other terrorists.<sup>72</sup>
- August 19: The Taliban imposed a night curfew in Kabul; banned listening to music and broadcast of music or popular TV serials; imposed dress codes for boys and girls.
- Reports indicated that the Taliban had started searching media offices and directed journalists not to speak about

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71 Ibid.

72 “Afghanistan: Taliban militants ‘free inmates from Kabul jail’”, *BBC*, August 15, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-58220304>.

the Afghan Government, stop broadcasting Indian and Turkish content, and increase Islamic programming.

- August 27: Fawad Andarabi, a local artist, was dragged out of his home and killed by the Taliban in Kishnabad village of Andarab in Baghlan Province.
- August 30: 14 Hazaras were killed by the Taliban in Khadir district, Daikundi Province. On October 5, Agnes Callamard, the Head of Amnesty International, released a report which claimed that eleven of the victims were former Afghan National Defense and Security Forces soldiers who had surrendered to the Taliban. Callamard noted that the executions further established that the Taliban were committing the ‘same horrific abuses’ they were notorious for during their previous regime.
- August 31: Reporters Without Borders stated that fewer than 100 women journalists were still formally working in privately-owned radio and TV stations in the Afghan capital. Kabul had 108 media outlets with a total of 4,940 employees in 2020, including 1,080 female employees, of whom 700 were journalists. Of the 510 women who used to work for eight of the biggest media outlets and press groups, only 76 (including 39 journalists) were still working. Women journalists were in the process of disappearing from the capital.
- September 3: 18 civilians were killed and 40 injured in celebratory air gunfire by Taliban cadres across Afghanistan.
- September 7-November 3: The Taliban initially announced its new ‘caretaker government’, comprising mainly Taliban and Haqqani Network members. With

the exception of two Tajiks and one Uzbek, the entire Cabinet comprised Pashtuns; and five portfolios were given to the Haqqani Network, including Haqqani Network chief Sirajuddin Haqqani, who was appointed as the Interior Minister; Mullah Omar's son Mullah Yaqoub as Defense Minister; Amir Khan Muttaqi as Foreign Minister; and Khalil-ur-Rehman Haqqani as Refugees Minister. On September 21, the Taliban regime appointed two acting Ministers, 12 Deputy Ministers, and other officials. On October 4, the Taliban appointed Maulvi Abdul Kabir as Deputy Prime Minister (Political), along with four new Deputy Ministers, and filled several other civil and military positions. 21 ministers of the 51-member Cabinet were on the UN sanctions list.<sup>73</sup> On November 23, the Taliban regime appointed two Acting Ministers, 11 Deputy Ministers, and several other officials. With this expansion 24 sanctioned individuals found places in the 63-member cabinet. Despite calls for "inclusivity", no former regime figures, including former President Hamid Karzai and former Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation Abdullah Abdullah, were accommodated, either in the original Cabinet or in subsequent expansions. The Cabinet remained devoid of women as well. According to a survey published on July 15, 2022, 82.7 per cent of the cabinet combination was Pashtun, and 96.5 per cent of them were Taliban members. The survey also indicated that 82.3 per cent of Provincial governors were Pashtuns and every one of them was a Taliban member.<sup>74</sup>

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73 UNSC, *op. cit.*

74 "Eleven months of Taliban's domination; 81.5% of the cabinet and governors are Pashtuns and 98.4% are Taliban members without the

- September 8: Taliban detained video journalist Nemat Naqdi and video editor Taqi Daryabi of the digital media outlet Etilaat Roz, while they were covering a women’s protest against Pakistani involvement in Afghanistan and in support of women’s rights in Kabul city. They were brutally assaulted and whipped with cables.
- Shia-Hazaras in Daykundi Province were forced to migrate to other areas, with their properties handed over to outsiders.
- September 18: The building housing the Women’s Ministry was converted into the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice by the Taliban.
- September 19: The Taliban Mayor for Kabul city Hamdullah Namony announced that women employees had been ordered to stay at home, with exceptions only for those who could not be replaced by men.
- September 19: Taliban issued 11 rules for journalism that advised journalists that “Matters that have not been confirmed by officials at the time of broadcasting or publication should be treated with care” and that “Matters that could have a negative impact on the public’s attitude or affect morale should be handled carefully when being broadcast or published.”
- September 22: Senior Taliban leader Mullah Nooruddin Turabi stressed the “necessity” of imposing punishments such as amputations and summary executions according to the *Shariah*, and cautioned other countries against ‘interference’.

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presence of women and Hazaras”, *Aamaj News*, July 15, 2022, <https://aamajnews24.com/taliban-gov-6/>

- September 25: Taliban officials made a public display of the enforcement of strict Islamic punishments, by hanging four alleged kidnappers, and parading their dead bodies, suspended from cranes, in different parts of Herat city.
- October 5: Taliban cadres entered Gurdwara Kart-e-Parwan (a Sikh place of worship) in Kabul city and vandalized the premises.
- November 4: An Interior Ministry Spokesman declared that participating in or organizing a demonstration or protest without permission from Taliban authorities was illegal, and so was reporting on such 'illegal' demonstrations.
- November 21: The Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice prohibited TV channels from airing programs with female artists/presenters, and also directed that all satirical comments should be censored.
- November 25: Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid stated that all schools and universities would be reopened the following year, in accordance with 'Islamic standards.'
- December 25: The Taliban Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice issued new guidelines for taxi drivers, prohibiting the playing of music in taxis. The guidelines further instructed taxi drivers not to pick up female passengers without hijab (veil), while further stating that female passengers could not travel without a male mahram (chaperone) for long trips (45 miles and above).

- December 28: Several dozen women held a protest in Kabul, calling for their rights to education, employment and social freedom to be honoured, raising the slogans “we are the voice of hungry people” and “we are awake, we hate discrimination.” The protestors reiterated that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Government was keeping women away from society by imposing limitations. The protest did not last as Taliban forces fired into the air to disperse the protesters.
- January 1, 2022: Taliban members killed a former Police official, Shafiqullah Mohammadi, and injured his sister at their house in Pul-e-Khumri city, the provincial capital of Baghlan.
- January 3, 2022: The Taliban stated that they would create a special battalion of suicide attackers to be part of their future army. Deputy Minister of Information and Culture and spokesperson for the Taliban, Zabiullah Mujahid, declared that the battalion would be part of their special forces and would be active under the Defense Ministry, and would be used for special operations.
- January 23, 2022: Taliban fighters tortured a former employee of the erstwhile regime, Qari Usman, to death in Ghani Khel district, Nangarhar Province.
- March 25, 2022: Taliban fighters tortured to death a former Afghan Republic Police Officer, Shir Mohammad, in Helmand Province.
- March 23, 2022: Taliban did not allow schools for girls studying in class-VI and above to open. A number of female students in some parts of Kabul organized protests on being barred from attending schools/classes.

- March 27-28, 2022: The Taliban, disregarding international concerns over human and women's rights in the country, issued a series of directives, including the earmarking of separate days for men and women to visit public parks; prohibition on use of mobile phones in the universities and within the armed forces; and directing all male government employees to grow their beards and adhere to a Taliban-authorized traditional Afghan dress code. In addition, international broadcasts, including Pashto and Dari news services by the BBC and Voice of America, were blocked.
- April 16, 2022: Taliban fighters arrested and tortured to death an ex-officer of the former government of Afghanistan, Qasim Qaim, after his detention at an unidentified location.
- May 7, 2022: Taliban's Ministry of Vice and Virtue announced new rules regarding the hijab, saying it will be implemented in two steps, encouragement and punishment. The plan was confirmed by Taliban Amir (chief) Haibatullah Akhundzada, who according to Akif Mahajar, a spokesman for the Ministry of Vice and Virtue, stated, "If a woman doesn't wear a hijab, first, her house will be located and her guardian will be advised and warned. Next, if the hijab is not considered, her guardian will be summoned. If repeated, her guardian (father, brother, or husband) will be imprisoned for three days. If repeated again, her guardian will be sent to court for further punishment..."
- May 25, 2022: Taliban officials in Logar Province instructed female doctors to cover their faces while examining and treating patients. They had earlier issued the directions for female media presenters to cover their faces.

- The Taliban have been converting a number of high schools, technical institutes and higher education centres into madrassas. Earlier, the Ministry of Education announced that the regime would soon establish between three and 10 madrassas in each district.
- On May 26, 2022: The United Nations Security Council released the 13th report of the Sanctions Monitoring Team on Afghanistan. The report noted that 41 UN-sanctioned Taliban individuals held cabinet and senior-level positions in the Taliban administration, which favours Pashtuns and sidelines minorities in Afghanistan. The Haqqani Network under the leadership of Sirajuddin Haqqani was the most influential faction in the Taliban interim government, controlling key ministries. Al Qaeda was strengthening itself and maintained a close relationship with the Taliban. The group has renewed its allegiance to Haibatullah Akhundzada as Amir al Mu'mininthe ('commander of the faithful') and enjoys greater freedom under the current interim Afghan government. Other terrorist formations, including Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and Jaish-e-Mohammad are active in Afghanistan, as well.
- June 2, 2022: Taliban fighters killed 12 civilians while they were returning home from a party, at a checkpoint in Nahrin district, Baghlan Province. The victims were allegedly killed for attending night parties.

## **THE ROAD AHEAD**

Afghanistan has once again been pushed into a phase of uncertainty, with innumerable challenges before the terrorist Taliban regime. These include:

**Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP):** IS-KP (also known as IS-K), which emerged in 2014 with the defection of Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP), Al Qaeda, and Taliban fighters active in Afghanistan and Pakistan,<sup>75</sup> and started making deep inroads into Afghanistan in 2017, after suffering significant losses in 2019, has again started to strengthen its bases and operations in Afghanistan.

According to the ICM database, since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, IS-KP had killed at least 415 civilians till July 31, 2022. During the corresponding period preceding, IS-KP was responsible for only 34 civilian fatalities. IS-KP has also killed nine Taliban fighters, who had taken up responsibilities in the regime's Security Forces, as well as 13 US troopers after August 15, 2021. No trooper had been killed by the IS-KP in the preceding period corresponding.

After the Taliban takeover of Kabul IS-KP has opposed the regime, accusing the Taliban of abandoning Islamic values, *jihad* and the battlefield, in favour of a negotiated peace hammered out in 'posh hotels' in Doha. IS-K considers Taliban militants 'apostates', making their killing lawful under their interpretation of Islamic law.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, there have been near-daily clashes between the Taliban and IS-KP fighters since August 15, 2021 (and, indeed, earlier). The three worst incidents of terrorism recorded in Afghanistan since August 15, 2021, have been claimed by IS-KP:

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75 Catrina Doxsee, Jared Thompson and Grace Hwang, "Examining Extremism: Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)", *CSIS*, August 8, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-khorasan-province-iskp>.

76 Frak Gardner, "Afghanistan: Who are Islamic State Khorasan Province militants?", *BBC*, October 11, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58333533>.

On August 26, 2021, an IS-KP suicide bomber killed at least 200 Afghan nationals and 13 US service members, including 12 Marines and a Navy medic, at Abbey Gate, Kabul Airport. Two of the civilians killed were British dual nationals. Additionally, another 150 people were injured, including 18 US security personnel. It was one of the deadliest attacks recorded in the country, and deadliest in Kabul since 2001.

The 13 US personnel killed were the largest single-day death toll for US forces in Afghanistan since August 2011.

On October 8, 2021, a suicide bombing during Friday prayers inside the Sayed Abad Mosque, a Shi'ite Mosque in the Khan Abad district of Kunduz Province, killed over 46 and wounded over 143. Later, the IS-K claimed the attack, identifying the bomber as Muhammad-al-Uyguri, an Uyghur Muslim.

On October 15, 2021, at least 65 Shi'ite worshippers were killed and over 70 were injured in a suicide bombing inside a mosque in Kandahar City. Two IS-K suicide bombers – Anas al Khurasani and Abu al Balochi – carried out the attack.

On February 17, 2021, highlighting the threat, the Commander of the US Central Command, General Kenneth McKenzie, noted,

ISIS... concerns us in Afghanistan. We know that the Taliban are no friends, particularly of ISIS and in fact over the past couple of years, they have occasionally under-taken operations against ISIS. I think... what we see developing in Afghanistan is ungoverned and under-governed spaces which are areas where ISIS traditionally flourished and... I think there is a risk, we know that ISIS does in fact have... a desire to carry out external attacks – against the United States – the homeland of the United States and attacks against the

homeland of our neighbours in Europe... and other places. So, I am concerned by what is happening in Afghanistan.<sup>77</sup>

Indeed, IS-KP has already claimed 106 attacks in Afghanistan in 2022 till mid-June – 18 in January; 12 in February; 11 in March; 28 in April; 24 in May; and 13 in June (till June 19). The province-wise distributions of attacks has been: Kabul, 28; Kunar, 23; Nangarhar, 16; Kunduz and Balkh, nine each; Takhar, six; Helmand, four; Herat, Logar, Laghman, three each; Parwan and Badakhshan, one each.

Despite an overall and significant reduction in armed violence, between mid-August 2021 and mid-June 2022, UNAMA recorded 2,106 civilian casualties (700 killed, 1,406 wounded). The majority of civilian casualties were attributed to targeted attacks by the armed group self-identified as “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province”, against ethnic and religious minority communities in places where they go to school, worship and go about their daily lives.<sup>78</sup>

**National Resistance Front (NRF):** Defying all expectations, the Taliban took quick control of Bazarak, the capital of Panjshir Province, with its spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid claiming, on September 6, 2021, that all of Panjshir Province was under Taliban control. However, the military resistance of the NRF on the ground continues and is growing. On January 19, 2022, the Head of Foreign Relations for NRF, Ali Maisam Nazary, in an interview during

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77 Business Standard, “Top US General expresses concern on ISIS presence in Afghanistan”, February 18, 2022, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/top-us-general-expresses-concern-on-isis-presence-in-afghanistan-122021800100\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/top-us-general-expresses-concern-on-isis-presence-in-afghanistan-122021800100_1.html).

78 UNAMA, “Human Rights in Afghanistan 15 August 2021 - 15 June 2022”, July 20, 2022, <https://unama.unmissions.org/un-releases-report-human-rights-afghanistan-taliban-takeover>.

his trip to the European Union, stated that NRF forces would start their offensive attacks against Taliban by the end of the winter. Nazary asserted that the Taliban was weakened and unorganized, and that the NRF would take the power again.

Indeed, NRF has been inflicting heavy casualties on the Taliban. Inputs indicate that at least 461 Taliban fighters have been killed by the NRF in 2022 (till June 30). On the other hand, NRF has lost 63 fighters, suggesting that the latter is gaining the upper hand in the North of the country. On July 19, 2022, Former vice president, Amrullah Saleh, claimed that the Taliban had been defeated by resistance forces in Baghlan and Panjshir Provinces. Saleh posted on his Facebook page that the resistance forces had increased both their activities and their territory.

The fighting is likely to intensify and there is a fear that the Taliban may lose more territory.

**Government-in-exile:** On September 29, 2021, the Afghan Embassy in Switzerland issued a statement, reportedly supported by political leaders and officials of the deposed Ashraf Ghani regime, declaring a ‘Government-in-exile’ with former Vice President Amrullah Saleh as the ‘legitimate President’. This development will have certain bearing on the Taliban’s demand for recognition and international legitimacy for its regime in Kabul.

**Recognition of the Taliban regime:** Since returning to power, the Taliban has persistently constantly demanded that the international community lift the ban against the group, and give recognition to the Taliban regime. Failing to secure any support from the Western powers, Prime Minister Mohammad Hassan Akhund sought to harness religious identity to the cause, declaring, on January 19, 2022, “I call on Muslim countries to take the lead and recognise us officially. Then I

hope we will be able to develop quickly... We want it for our public.”<sup>79</sup>

Afghanistan is facing a grave humanitarian crisis. On September 13, 2021, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned that “the people of Afghanistan need a lifeline... they face perhaps their most perilous hour.”<sup>80</sup> According to the World Food Program, 22.8 million people, more than half the country’s population of nearly 39 million, were facing food insecurity, with 3.2 million children and 700,000 mothers of newborns at risk of acute malnutrition. Moreover, according to the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), over 822,000 people were displaced – as a result of violence, economic distress and food insecurity – in 2021.<sup>81</sup>

The Afghan economy is in dire states. On November 15, Da Afghanistan Bank announced that it would auction USD 10 million in order to control the exchange rate of the Afghani, which had depreciated from about 70 per USD to over 95 per USD since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. Further, according to a report released by the UNDP on December 1, 2021, Afghanistan’s nominal GDP is likely to contract by 20 per cent within a year, from USD 20 billion in 2020 to a figure

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79 France 24, “Taliban PM calls for Muslim nations to recognise Afghan government”, January 19, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220119-taliban-pm-calls-for-muslim-nations-to-recognise-afghan-government>.

80 Secretary-General’s remarks to the High-level Ministerial Meeting on the Humanitarian Situation in Afghanistan [as delivered], Secretary-General, *United Nations*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2021-09-13/secretary-generals-remarks-the-high-level-ministerial-meeting-the-humanitarian-situation-afghanistan-delivered>.

81 Afghanistan Conflict Induced Displacements, *Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/idps>.

of USD 16 billion in 2021. The report further warns that this decline may reach 30 per cent in following years. It is pertinent to recall here that Taliban has nearly USD 9.5 billion in frozen Afghan assets outside the country.<sup>82</sup>

In such a dire situation, recognition of their regime becomes a dire necessity for the Taliban. However, there are no signs as of now for any such recognition coming soon. The US Special Representative for Afghanistan, Thomas West, stated, on January 22, 2022, that the US had no specified schedule for the recognition of the interim government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.<sup>83</sup> Earlier, on December 1, 2021, the UN Credentials Committee deferred its decision on who would represent Afghanistan in the Organization. As a result, the Taliban will not be allowed to represent the country, for the time being. More recently, on July 23, 2022, Pakistan, which is expected to be first among those who may recognize the regime, declared that it would recognise the Afghan Taliban government through a regional and consensual approach, rather than taking a solo flight on the matter, as Islamabad did during the first Taliban government in Kabul in the 1990s.<sup>84</sup>

**Growing differences with Islamabad:** The growing differences with Islamabad, the patron of Taliban regime, on the issues, most significantly included the dispute over the

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82 *Business Standard*, “US will not release Afghanistan’s assets for three reasons: White House”, December 15, 2021, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/us-will-not-release-afghanistan-s-assets-for-three-reasons-white-house-121121500079\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/us-will-not-release-afghanistan-s-assets-for-three-reasons-white-house-121121500079_1.html).

83 ANI, “America has no specified schedule for recognition of Taliban: US special envoy to Afghanistan”, January 22, 2022, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/america-has-no-specified-schedule-for-recognition-of-taliban-us-special-envoy-to-afghanistan20220122194907/>.

84 Kamran Yousaf, “Pakistan rules out solo flight on Taliban recognition”, *The Express Tribune*, July 23, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2367408/pakistan-rules-out-solo-flight-on-taliban-recognition>.

British-imposed Durand Line as a permanent border between the two countries. There have been several clashes between Taliban Forces and the Pakistan Army and border guards, over construction of the border fence by Pakistan along the Durand line.<sup>85</sup> Other friction points, including Pakistan's continued support to the Haqqani Network and growing Afghan public pressure against Pakistan's continued interferences in Afghanistan's domestic affairs,<sup>86</sup> as well as the Taliban's failure to reign in TTP, are likely to have major bearing on the Taliban regime's stability and capacity to administer. It is now established that ISI has created strong linkages with the IS-KP as well,<sup>87</sup> and may start using this terrorist formation as a strategic tool if the 'need' arises. However, with the Taliban facilitating talks between Islamabad and a relatively intransigent TTP, equations may change. The outcome of the talks between Islamabad and TTP are likely to decide that the direction of the relationship in the near future.

**Rifts within the Taliban:** Compounding these many challenges is the deepening rift within the Taliban regime itself. While several reports emerged soon after the Taliban taking over, some of these claimed that a violent clashes, between supporters of the Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Khalil-ur-Rahman Haqqani took place at the *Arg* in Kabul,

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85 Tushar Ranjan Mohanty, "Afghanistan-Pakistan: Tense Borders" *SAIR*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.satp.org/south-asia-intelligence-review-Volume-19-No-47>.

86 "Explained: Why Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban might be drifting apart", *Frontline*, October 22, 2021, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/dispatches/explained-why-pakistan-and-the-afghan-taliban-might-be-drifting-apart/article37121374.ece>.

87 Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Pakistan ISI's pivotal role in encouraging rise and spread of ISIS in South Asia", *The Economic Times*, September 30, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/isis-pivotal-role-in-encouraging-rise-spread-of-isis-in-south-asia/articleshow/78398213.cms>.

after an altercation between the two leaders on issues such as the structure of the interim government, divisions over who in the Taliban should take credit for their victory in Afghanistan, etc.<sup>88</sup> The rift grows day by day, even as a number of ethnic minority leaders, finding little space in the Pashtun dominated regime structure, and, indeed, seeing their populations marginalized and excluded from both governance and various benefits, have deserted the Taliban to join the resistance Forces.

### **TROUBLED FUTURES**

The population segment most terrified by current developments is the women and girls of Afghanistan, who had secured a measure of freedom and education, and many of whom had attained prominent positions in society. Early indications suggest that there is little possibility of such freedoms and roles remaining accessible to women in a Talibanized Afghanistan.

It is much too early to assess what the regional and global outcome of the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan will be, but one thing is certain, the 'great game' is once again afoot. The 'victory of Islam' against another superpower will surely provoke significant radicalization and may catalyze terrorism in theatres across the world. But uncertainties persist. Those who are celebrating the Taliban victory in Afghanistan have their own fears and insecurities; those who are on the losing side will seek opportunities for recovery and revenge. Afghanistan's trials and tribulations are far from over. The world has changed, of course; but it remains much the same.

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88 Khudai Noor Nasar, "Afghanistan: Taliban leaders in bust-up at presidential palace, sources say", September 15, 2021, *BBC*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58560923>.



# India in the Chagos Dispute: Mediation as Security Provision♦

Chirayu Thakkar\*

During his 2017 visit to India as British Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson failed to achieve a key diplomatic goal.<sup>1</sup> Johnson was unable to convince Indian government to restrain its ally, Mauritius, from launching a diplomatic offensive against Britain over the sovereignty of the Chagos Archipelago. Among its islands, Johnson and the UK government were most concerned about Diego Garcia, which is leased to the United States as a base for significant military and intelligence capabilities.<sup>2</sup>

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♦ This is an extended and modified version of an article originally published with War on the Rocks as “Overcoming the Diego Garcia Stalemate,” July 12, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/07/overcoming-the-diego-garcia-stalemate/>.

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1 Prasun Sonwalkar, “Britain and US seek India’s assistance on Diego Garcia,” *Hindustan Times*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/britain-and-us-seek-india-s-assistance-on-diego-garcia/story-thHY7JObIZETj2zIQ73DwL.html>.

2 For military significance of the base to the US and the UK, Samuel Matthews Bashfield, “Mauritian Sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago? Strategic implications for Diego Garcia from a UK-US perspective,” *Journal of Indian Ocean Region*, Volume 16, Number 2, 2019, pp. 166-181.

India stood with Mauritius during all the diplomatic episodes that followed, including at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and the International Court of Justice. The international Court's opinion on the matter was unfavourable to the United Kingdom, and the UNGA followed up by calling for a swift end to the UK's control of the islands.<sup>3</sup>

Some believe Mauritius' diplomatic successes were a 'pyrrhic victory'<sup>4</sup> because, if the transfer of sovereignty leads to a reduction in American forces on Diego Garcia, it would upset the military balance that those forces uphold in the western Indian Ocean. Even when India voted in favour of Mauritius, it raised "security concerns relating to the Indian Ocean" and urged all parties "to reach a mutually agreeable understanding as soon as possible."<sup>5</sup> Although Mauritius wishes to gain sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago, its government, and that of its diplomatic supporter India, favour an American military presence there. The British, American, and Indian governments are actively aligning elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific region to uphold a rules-based order against

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3 The UN General Assembly (UNGA) first sought the International Court of Justice' (ICJ) opinion vide UNGA Resolution A/RES/71/292. The resolution was passed by 94 against 15 with 65 abstentions. India voted with Mauritius. After an unfavourable ICJ verdict, the matter was again brought to the UNGA in form of a resolution requesting the UK to unconditionally withdraw from the Chagos archipelago. The UK lost that resolution (A/RES/73/295) by 116 in favour against 6 with 56 abstentions. India voted favourably with Mauritius for this vote as well.

4 Robert Thorpe, "Mauritius Scores A Pyrrhic Victory in the Indian Ocean Region," *War on The Rocks*, July 12, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/07/mauritius-scores-a-pyrrhic-victory-in-the-indian-ocean/>.

5 Press Trust of India, "India votes in favour of UNGA resolution demanding UK withdraw from Chagos Archipelago," *The Hindu*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/india-votes-in-favour-of-unga-resolution-demanding-uk-withdraw-from-chagos-archipelago/article27215087.ece>.

China.<sup>6</sup> In the case of the Chagos Archipelago, they, along with Mauritius, compete due to mutually irreconcilable interests, which has led to a stalemate over the question of sovereignty that seemingly militates against international law and normative concerns.

Breaking that stalemate requires finding a proposal that can satisfy the interests of both Britain and Mauritius, as well as the interests of the other parties — the United States and India. A solution to the sovereignty dispute that leaves everyone better off could be devised: one possibility is the joint management of the Chagos Archipelago by Britain and Mauritius, without prejudicing their sovereignty claims. Such an arrangement would ensure American access to military facilities on Diego Garcia without imposing additional international law constraints, while the UK and Mauritian governments can jointly administer non-military issues, such as fishing licenses, and create a revenue-sharing arrangement.

The US military's lease of Diego Garcia from the United Kingdom runs until 2036. Rather than wait for the sovereignty dispute to intensify during negotiations at that time, the United Kingdom and Mauritius should consider implementing co-management as a stopgap solution, and the American and Indian governments should encourage them to do so. India –

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6 Although the UK is not the part of the Quad, in its most recent Integrated Review of security, defence, development and foreign policy, the British government has laid unique emphasis on the Indo-Pacific theatre. In his speech at the inauguration of the Integrated Review in the House of Commons, PM Boris Johnson made this vision clear. As a mark of its manifest commitment, Johnson also announced that HMS Queen Elizabeth, along with a career strike group, would embark on a voyage to the Indo-Pacific. See, “PM statement to the House of Commons on the Integrated Review,” *House of Commons*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-to-the-house-of-commons-on-the-integrated-review-16-march-2021>.

whose role is conceived by major powers as the “net security provider” in the Indian Ocean Region<sup>7</sup> – should work towards mediation, considering this an act of security provision.

This article is divided into three sections. The first section outlines the dispute’s provenance and stakes between two original disputants – Mauritius and the United Kingdom. The second section highlights the role of two other parties – the United States, which operates one of the most critical bases on the Diego Garcia Island, and India, which enjoys a long-standing friendship with Mauritius as well as an emerging strategic proximity with the US and the UK. The final section provides the contours of this stopgap solution and India’s potential role in it. The concluding section argues that India should not limit its image of ‘net security provider’ to strategic issues alone. Resolving a political conflict in the Indian Ocean Region between two like-minded nations, which leads to a stable balance in a highly volatile region, while shielding them from international embarrassment, is also an act of security provision.

### **THE DISPUTANTS: MAURITIUS AND THE UNITED KINGDOM**

Britain and Mauritius have been locked in a dispute over the Chagos Archipelago for decades.<sup>8</sup> In 1965, the UK government excised the islands from Mauritius while granting the latter its independence. For the archipelago, Britain paid three million

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7 Anit Mukherjee, “India as a Net Security Provider: Concepts and Impediments,” *RSIS Policy Brief*, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, August 2014, [https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/PB\\_140903\\_India-Net-Security.pdf](https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/PB_140903_India-Net-Security.pdf).

8 For the history of the island, David Vine, *Island of Shame: The Secret History of the U.S. Military Base on Diego Garcia*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2011; also, Peter H. Sand, *United States and Britain in Diego Garcia: The Future of a Controversial Base*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2009.

pounds to Mauritius and formed the British Indian Ocean Territory, from which it leased Diego Garcia to the United States.<sup>9</sup> Governments in London repeatedly promised to “revert” possession of the islands to Mauritius when the United Kingdom no longer required them for defence purposes,<sup>10</sup> which not only sowed seeds of hope in Mauritius, but also tacitly recognised the country’s sovereignty over the islands. However, the occasion for returning the islands to Mauritius never arose.

For Mauritian leaders, the benefits of sovereignty would include political glory and fiscal bounty. While Mauritian political leaders frequently raise the Chagossians’ right to domicile, Mauritius’ envoy to the United Nations has stated that, as and when Mauritius regains sovereignty, Chagossians would be rehabilitated to three nearby islands,<sup>11</sup> at least 100 miles away from Diego Garcia. That would be contrary to most Chagossians’ wishes of returning to Diego Garcia itself.<sup>12</sup>

The Chagos dispute is a political hot potato in Mauritius, especially between the Ramgoolam and Jugnauth families,

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9 “Advisory Opinion: Legal Consequences of the Separation of the Chagos Archipelago From Mauritius in 1965,” *International Court of Justice*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/169/169-20190225-01-00-EN.pdf>.

10 Geoffrey Robertson, “Who Owns Diego Garcia? Decolonization and Indigenous rights in the Indian Ocean,” *University of Western Australia Law Review*, Volume 36, Number 1, 2012, pp. 9-38.

11 Mauritian Ambassador to the US Jagdish Koonjul in “Diego Garcia: U.S. and Allied Basing Rights in the Era of Great Power Competition,” Event by CAN, *Vimeo*, June 24, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/432245768>.

12 KPMG, “Consultation Comments for Feasibility Study on Resettlement of the British Indian Ocean Territory: Volume 1,” *House of Commons*, January 31, 2015, <https://qna.files.parliament.uk/ws-attachments/178757%5Coriginal%5CFeasibility%20study%20for%20the%20resettlement%20of%20the%20British%20Indian%20Ocean%20Territory%20Volume%201.pdf>.

two political dynasties that have alternated in power since 1968. Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, who oversaw Mauritius' independence from the United Kingdom, has been accused of betrayal and venality.<sup>13</sup> For his son Navin, a former Prime Minister, trying to resolve the Chagos dispute was about redressing his father's legacy of incomplete decolonisation. For their political rivals – the late Anerood Jugnauth, another former Prime Minister, and his son Pravind, who has been Prime Minister since 2017 – the Chagos dispute is a way to engage in one-upmanship over the Ramgoolams.

For Mauritian political leaders, attempting to regain control of the archipelago is also about cashing in on Mauritius' coveted strategic position. Compared to the Red Sea littorals and countries on the East African coastline<sup>14</sup> – some of which earn millions of dollars by leasing strategic real estate – Mauritius is at a notional loss. For instance, military bases provide a significant revenue stream for Djibouti: The country annually receives USD 70 million from the United States, USD 36 million from France, USD 20 million from China, USD 2.6 million from Italy, and undisclosed amounts from Japan and Saudi Arabia.<sup>15</sup> On top of that, Djibouti gains economic benefits in ancillary sectors that support thousands

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13 Par Touria Prayag, "Jean Claude de l'Estrac: "We all became propagandists and journalists started carrying Anerood Jugnauth on their shoulders like a hero";" *L'Express Maurice*, September 29, 2018, <https://www.lexpress.mu/article/340127/jean-claude-lestrac-we-all-became-propagandists-and-journalists-started-carrying>.

14 Zach Vertin, "Red Sea Rivalries: The Gulf, the Horn, and the New Geopolitics of the Red Sea," Brookings Doha Center, August 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Red-Sea-rivalries-The-Gulf-the-Horn-and-the-new-geopolitics-of-the-Red-Sea.pdf>.

15 Neil Melvin, "The Foreign Military Presence in the Horn of Africa Region," *SIPRI Background Paper*, April 2019, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/sipribp1904\\_1.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/sipribp1904_1.pdf).

of troops.<sup>16</sup> By comparison, the military outpost of Diego Garcia generates zero revenue for Mauritius. In addition to receiving no rent for it, Mauritius also loses anticipated revenue of up to 1 million pounds per annum because its fishing rights remain curtailed after London proclaimed the Chagos Archipelago and its surrounding area to be a “marine protected area.”<sup>17</sup>

The United Kingdom has strategic reasons for maintaining control of the archipelago, despite the unfavourable advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice, losing the UNGA vote over the opinion, and failing to prove its sovereignty over the islands in an International Tribunal for the Law of the Seas (ITLOS) hearing between Mauritius and the Maldives. By the British government’s own admission, the presence of British forces is “a visible demonstration of United Kingdom sovereignty of the archipelago.”<sup>18</sup> However, while Diego Garcia is technically a joint facility, British troops are not stationed there permanently.<sup>19</sup>

As a former shadow of its colonial self, the UK government can point to Diego Garcia as one important way that it contributes

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16 Bruno Mações, “The Most Valuable Military Real Estate in the World,” *Politico*, January 15, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/blogs/the-coming-wars/2018/01/the-most-valuable-military-real-estate-in-the-world/>.

17 Section 4.61, “Memorial of the Republic of Mauritius”, submitted to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in *Republic of Mauritius v. United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1 August 2012, <https://pcacases.com/web/sendAttach/1796>.

18 “Guidance: Directorate of Overseas Bases,” *Ministry of Defence*, 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/permanent-joint-operating-bases-pjobs/fd>.

19 James Rogers and Luis Simón, “The Status and Location of the Military Installations of the Member States of the European Union and Their Potential Role for the European Security and Defence Policy,” Briefing Paper, *European Parliament*, February 2019, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004\\_2009/documents/dv/sede300309studype407004\\_/SEDE300309StudyPE407004\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/dv/sede300309studype407004_/SEDE300309StudyPE407004_en.pdf).

to American military and intelligence capabilities, as well as, more broadly, to those of the “Five Eyes” intelligence alliance. With the changing geopolitical context, and London’s clear tilt toward the Indo-Pacific region in its recent strategic review, Indian Ocean territories give Britain more “skin in the game” than a waning naval power otherwise would have.<sup>20</sup> Motivated by these interests and aware of America’s unwavering support, the British government remains steadfast in the face of Mauritius’ incessant diplomatic campaign. Hence, in all diplomatic parleys, the British pass the buck by informing Mauritians that it is “up to the Americans.”<sup>21</sup>

#### **OTHER INTERESTED PARTIES: THE UNITED STATES AND INDIA**

Both the United States and India also have interests at stake in the sovereignty dispute between Mauritius and the United Kingdom. The American government has overlooked reputational costs and Mauritius’ repeated offers, both in public and private, to lease the base back to the United States for 99 years in exchange for supporting its case for sovereignty.<sup>22</sup> Like British policymakers, American officials see strategic reasons for maintaining the *status quo*. If Mauritius had sovereignty over the islands, the African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty – also known as the Pelindaba Treaty – would

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20 For a brief overview of the British Navy’s relative decline, see David Axe, “Commentary: What the U.S. Should Learn from Britain’s Dying Navy,” *Reuters*, October 15, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uk-military-navy-commentary-idUSKCN10L1AD>.

21 Port Louis, Mauritius, “Mauritius: General Ward/U.S. Africa Command Visit 17-18 August Strengthens Ties,” *Wikileaks*, Cable: 09PORTLOUIS265\_a, September 4, 2009, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09PORTLOUIS265\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09PORTLOUIS265_a.html).

22 For instance, Mauritian PM Shri Pravind Kumar Jugnauth’s public assurance to the UNGA in 2019, see proceedings, <https://undocs.org/en/A/73/PV.83>.

apply to Diego Garcia as a Mauritian territory.<sup>23</sup> As a party to the treaty, Mauritius cannot ‘station’ nuclear explosives on its territory, including those carried by foreign ships or aircraft. This could present an obstacle to deployments of US bombers and visits by American submarines as well, due to the US policy of neither confirming nor denying the presence of nuclear weapons aboard aircraft, surface ships, and attack submarines.<sup>24</sup>

Some claim that Mauritius can avoid such restrictions through a contrived interpretation of the treaty, due to ambiguity in its text about port-call timing.<sup>25</sup> However, Mauritian leaders’ past behaviour, including calling for International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection of Diego Garcia<sup>26</sup> and lodging diplomatic protests against the passage of nuclear-powered submarine tender USS Emory S. Land,<sup>27</sup> does not square with such optimism. The Obama administration signed the Pelindaba Treaty’s additional protocols for the five Nuclear Weapons States, which would require them to comply with

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23 Treaty text accessible at <https://www.nti.org/education-center/treaties-and-regimes/african-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-anwfp-treaty-pelindaba-treaty/>.

24 For U.S. policy of neither confirming nor denying the presence of nuclear weapons, see “Instruction Number 5230.16,” *Department of Defense*, October 6, 2015, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/523016p.pdf>.

25 Samuel Bashfield, “Mauritius, Diego Garcia, and the Small Matter of Nukes,” *Interpreter*, The Lowy Institute, May 26, 2020, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/mauritius-diego-garcia-and-small-matter-nukes>.

26 Par La Redaction, “Chagos : Une inspection nucléaire sera réclamée sous le traité de Pelindaba, annonce Boolell,” *L’Express Maurice*, November 2, 2010, <https://www.lexpress.mu/article/chagos-une-inspection-nucl%C3%A9aire-sera-r%C3%A9clam%C3%A9e-sous-le-trait%C3%A9-de-pelindaba-annonce-boolell>.

27 Port Louis, Mauritius, “Mauritius Objects to Visit of Emory S. Land to Diego Garcia,” *Wikileaks*, Cable: 10PORTLOUIS21\_a, January 20, 2010, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09PORTLOUIS265\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09PORTLOUIS265_a.html).

treaty obligations such as not hosting nuclear weapons on a signatory state's territory.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the US Senate never ratified those additional protocols.

The United Kingdom did sign those same protocols, but it made an explicit exception for the Chagos Archipelago, as it has done for at least eight other environmental and human rights treaties.<sup>29</sup> Britain's decision to make those exceptions relieves the United States from numerous international law obligations in relation to Diego Garcia. Under Mauritian sovereignty, the US military base would become subject to many international conventions and treaties, imposing additional legal constraints on US military and intelligence activities.<sup>30</sup> Hence, Mauritian officials' public offer that, in the event of Mauritius' sovereignty over Diego Garcia, they "would permit the unhindered operation of the defence facility, *in accordance with international law*," seems unlikely to persuade American policymakers.<sup>31</sup>

Mauritian sovereignty over Diego Garcia would also leave the United States facing increases in rental costs. The United States leases Diego Garcia from the United Kingdom for free and derives considerable strategic benefits from the island, using it as a logistical hub, as a launchpad for air operations in surrounding theatres, and as a reconnaissance station.<sup>32</sup> Host

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28 Alfred Nurja, "Obama Submits NWFZ Protocols to Senate," *Arms Control Today*, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2011-06/obama-submits-nwfz-protocols-senate>.

29 Peter Sand, "The shadow of Pelindaba: Chagos and the African Nuclear-weapon-free Zone," *South African Journal of International Affairs*, Volume 26, Number 3, pp. 323-347.

30 Peter Sand, "Diego Garcia: British-American Legal Black Hole in the Indian Ocean?," *Journal of Environmental Law*, Volume 21, Issue 1, 2009, pp. 113-137.

31 Mauritian PM Pravind Jugnauth's address, UNGA Proceedings, 22 May 2019, <https://undocs.org/en/A/73/PV.83>.

32 Bashfield, *Mauritian Sovereignty*.

nations know that they can charge more in rental costs for bases with greater strategic relevance. Djibouti was able to more than double its ask of the United States for use of Camp Lemonnier, from USD 30 million to USD 70 million annually.<sup>33</sup> American negotiators fear that host nations can increase their demands from time to time. However, the cost factor would remain secondary, considering the vast American defence budget, usually upwards of USD 750 billion, and compared to the significant utility of the base. Finally, as US and UK interests coincide, American policymakers have no reason to snub a vital ally like the United Kingdom by not supporting it.

For India, during the Cold War, taking a position on Chagos meant choosing between the benefits of the US presence in the Indian Ocean – to check China – and its principled stance on decolonisation.<sup>34</sup> Presently, the Indian government seems to approach the issue more instrumentally, despite continuing to clutch to Cold War-era tropes of decolonisation publicly.

As officials of a rising power, Indian policymakers see certain countries, including Mauritius, as falling within its regional sphere of influence. New Delhi lends those countries moral and material support and Indian officials disapprove of major powers' intrusion in the region. In the Maldives, for example, Indian policymakers neither welcome a US military presence nor a Chinese one. Hence, Indian officials only begrudgingly accepted the American military toehold in the Maldives, despite the balance it provides against

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33 Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Signs New Lease to Keep Strategic Military Installation in the Horn of Africa," *New York Times*, May 5, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/06/world/africa/us-signs-new-lease-to-keep-strategic-military-installation-in-the-horn-of-africa.html>.

34 Darshana Baruah and Yogesh Joshi, "India's policy on Diego Garcia and its quest for security in the Indian Ocean," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Volume 75, Number 1, pp.36-59.

China's intended militarisation of the Hambantota Port, a few hundred miles away in Sri Lanka.<sup>35</sup> Some claim that New Delhi actively scuttled direct defence cooperation between the United States and the Maldives in 2014,<sup>36</sup> indicating Indian policymakers' reluctance to allow major powers to engage states that fall within what they see as India's sphere of influence. Although the official line is that India does not want to micromanage the Chagos affair, a section of Indian officials believes that, in relation to Diego Garcia, the United States should seek Indian assistance in encouraging a long-term solution to the dispute.<sup>37</sup>

For its part, Mauritius has always looked to India for support for its international endeavours, including its recent efforts to exit the global financial watchdog's grey list.<sup>38</sup> UN insiders believe that Mauritius would never have been able to pull off its diplomatic victories against the United Kingdom in the General Assembly without India drumming up support.<sup>39</sup> For Indian policymakers, not supporting Mauritius risks leaving it

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35 Tara Kartha, "Allowing US in Maldives to keep China out is a heavy price to pay. So why is India doing it?" *The Print*, October 30, 2020, <https://theprint.in/opinion/allowing-us-in-maldives-to-keep-china-out-is-a-heavy-price-to-pay-so-why-is-india-doing-it/533874/>.

36 Sripathi Narayanan, "Big Picture: India and the US-Maldives Defence Agreement," Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, September 23, 2020, [http://www.ipcs.org/comm\\_select.php?articleNo=5726](http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=5726).

37 Chirayu Thakkar, "India and the United States: Friends Elsewhere, Foes at the UN," *Stimson Center Policy Memo*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.stimson.org/2021/india-and-the-united-states-friends-elsewhere-foes-at-the-un/>.

38 Press Trust of India, "Mauritius seeks India's help for early exit from FATF grey list," *Business Standard*, February 22, 2021, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/mauritius-seeks-india-s-help-for-early-exit-from-fatf-grey-list-121022201235\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/mauritius-seeks-india-s-help-for-early-exit-from-fatf-grey-list-121022201235_1.html).

39 Devirupa Mitra, "The Chagos Island Quandary: Will India Fight for Mauritius at the ICJ?," *The Wire*, January 16, 2018, <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/chagos-island-imbroglio-will-india-fight-mauritius-icj>.

in search of another patron (i.e., China), but it would also mean losing a crucial African ally that is strategically positioned in the Indian Ocean. Hence, Indian officials treaded cautiously. Although India voted with Mauritius at the General Assembly over the Chagos dispute, it refrained from co-sponsoring the resolution.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, India submitted a response to the International Court of Justice in favour of Mauritius after much deliberation, but some in Mauritius believed India's reaction to be tepid.<sup>41</sup>

As interested parties to the dispute, India and the United States could, in theory, help Mauritius and the United Kingdom try to resolve their deadlock. They have, as yet, been unable to do so, even if their long-term interests to hedge against China align. The United States wants India's help to silence Mauritius until 2036, when the lease for the Diego Garcia base opens for negotiations. India eyes the potential to deepen its political footprint in Mauritius, and to create leverage with the United States, by resolving the issue permanently.

American policymakers might have questions about the true degree of influence Indian policymakers exercise over their counterparts in Mauritius. Such doubts were likely fuelled by the fact that China made inroads into Mauritius with a trade agreement before India achieved one, while India's development of infrastructure on Mauritius' Agalega Island precipitated protests in the country. However, any American fears in that regard are misplaced. Mauritius, which fancies itself as the 'Singapore of Africa,' wants to follow Singapore's de-hyphenation of economic and security policy

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40 Devirupa Mitra, "Ahead of UNGA Resolution on Chagos, India Faces US-UK Pressure to Lean on Mauritius," *The Wire*, May 18, 2019, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/unga-chagos-india-mauritius>.

41 Par Touria Prayag, "We all became propogandists".

– openly embracing China for trade, while maintaining close-knit security collaboration with the United States and India. Similarly, New Delhi’s partnership is valued across party lines in Mauritius, and officials repeatedly underscore that they would not do anything that hurts Indian interests.<sup>42</sup> Secondly, despite America’s readiness to invest in India’s rise in the Indian Ocean Region, it seems the United States falls short in allowing India to build its own geostrategic orbit on which America might have to rely for its needs. This deficit upsets Indian diplomats and strategic thinkers, but at a time when US heft is needed the most against China, expressing a grudge is not a choice.

#### **TOWARD A NEW EQUILIBRIUM: JOINT MANAGEMENT OF THE ARCHIPELAGO**

The lack of convergence in the interests of Mauritius, the United Kingdom, the United States, and India has produced a stalemate over the status of the Chagos Archipelago. If Mauritius wants to resolve the issue, it would need to forge a new equilibrium that is a win-win for all. To start with, Mauritian policymakers need to reiterate their assurance that they remain committed to the American presence. Any signals of a pro-China tilt will hurt, not help, their cause. Further, quiet diplomacy might also yield better results than public acrimony. So far, such an approach has not been adopted because, in public, Mauritius and the United Kingdom have tended to adopt maximalist positions. With a more quiescent approach, Mauritius is more likely to get the US government to engage on this issue at a senior level. An ideal solution would be decolonisation, but that would not resolve

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42 Mauritian Ambassador to the US Jagdish Koonjul in “Diego Garcia: U.S. and Allied Basing Rights in the Era of Great Power Competition,” Event by CAN, *Vimeo*, June 24, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/432245768>.

the strategic challenges.<sup>43</sup> Even Mauritius would like to enjoy the benefits of a US security umbrella, which is apparent from repeated assurances from Port Louis that the US base would be maintained even after the sovereignty dispute is resolved.

Until the Diego Garcia base is up for renegotiation in the year 2036, Mauritius can ask for joint Mauritian-UK management of the archipelago – without giving up on the ultimate sovereignty issue – while placing a reasonable price tag on the base. Mauritius was more than happy with a similar arrangement with the French government for the disputed Tromelin Island in 2010, a deal which the French Parliament never ratified.<sup>44</sup> In return, the United Kingdom can reduce the size of the marine protection area, ending it for northern parts of the archipelago, while allowing fishing rights to Mauritians. As part of joint management, the UK-appointed administrator could share authority with a Mauritian representative on issues that do not impact military matters. For instance, fishing licenses in newly permitted waters could be jointly issued with a revenue sharing arrangement established.

Such a deal would leave everyone better off. Mauritian leaders can claim diplomatic victory and their country would get compensated. The United Kingdom could continue force projection and the US government would neither need to worry about additional international legal constraints nor upset an ally. If Mauritius proposes joint management of the

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43 Peter Harris, “Decolonising the Special Relationship: Diego Garcia, the Chagossians and Anglo-American Relations.” *Review of International Studies*, Volume 39, Number 3, 2013, pp. 707-727.

44 “Government has requested that the Chagos Archipelago be returned by the United Kingdom, says PM,” Government Information Services, Government of Mauritius, May 18, 2016, <http://www.govmu.org/English/News/Pages/Government-has-requested-that-the-Chagos-Archipelago-be-returned-by-the-United-Kingdom,-says-PM.aspx>.

archipelago, and is able to gain the support of the British and Indian governments, then American policymakers should respond constructively. If they do not, they would miss an opportunity to prove to the world that the US government is as serious about international rules as it preaches to Beijing. Additionally, to achieve success, Mauritian officials would likely benefit from Indian support during these negotiations.

If such a process ensues, India would cement its status in the region, without this entire issue becoming an international embarrassment for the parties involved. Moreover, by ensuring a stable American forward presence in the Indian Ocean Region without the reputational cost that US is facing, India can indirectly contribute to the net security of the Indian Ocean. Both in its stated policies and the works of analysts, the functions of security provision remain limited to maritime diplomacy, military assistance, capacity building, force posture, patrolling and maritime domain awareness.<sup>45</sup> These critical functions are direct contributions to the Indian Ocean's security. Nevertheless, forging alliances and helping resolve political crises between partners remains key in meeting future maritime threats. India should consequently shed its inhibitions towards mediation and actively reach out to partners to forge a dialogue, with a long-term strategic view.

## CONCLUSION

Overcoming the Diego Garcia stalemate is possible if enough political will is shown by both the UK and Mauritius, with further support extended by the United States and India. Either through co-management or exploring other creative

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45 "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy," Indian Navy, *Naval Strategic Publication*, 1.2, October 2015, [https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian\\_Maritime\\_Security\\_Strategy\\_Document\\_25Jan16.pdf](https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf); also, Anit Mukherjee, op. cit.

## India in the Chagos Dispute: Mediation as Security Provision

ways that meet each party's position in the dispute could yield a more long-lasting solution. Until such a solution is devised, parties should eschew maximalist positions and find a middle ground that meets their key requirements.

This issue should not be allowed to fester until 2036, when the base is again up for negotiations. A propitious aspect of this case is that all four parties involved are geopolitically aligned. Hence, a stopgap solution is possible. In line with its potential, India should seek this opportunity to cement its position as a responsible Indo-Pacific power and a net security provider.