



# India's options and the Pashtun factor

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## **In fashioning its Afghan policy, India has to take into account a resurgent Taliban**

- India has to be prepared for the potential consequences of the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan.
- While New Delhi is weighing its options it must take into account that for all its antipathy toward the Afghan Taliban, the latter does represent, in a distorted form, a facet of Pashtun nationalism.

## **Invasion shifts power**

- It is the combination of ultra-orthodox Islam, a product of Saudi involvement in the so-called Afghan "jihad", with Pashtunwali, the traditional Pashtun social code, and opposition to foreign presence that provides strength to the Taliban.
- Most Pashtuns, who comprise over 40% of the population of Afghanistan, believe that they are the rightful rulers of the country.
- This situation changed with the American invasion in 2001 aided by the largely Tajik Northern Alliance that shifted the locus of power out of Pashtun hands.
- The emergence of the Pashtun Taliban from Kandahar in 1994 was in reaction partly to the fear of Tajik domination and partly to the mayhem and anarchy caused by the "mujahideen" factions fighting each other for control of the country.
- With Pakistan's military help the predominantly Pashtun Taliban imposed a degree of order and ruled approximately three-quarters of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.
- Pashtun resentment against foreign intervention, which drove their opposition to the Soviet invasion and now fuels antipathy towards American military presence, also has a long history going back to their resistance to British intrusion during the 19th century.
- Opposition to the Durand Line was the principal reason why Afghanistan voted against Pakistan's admission to the UN in 1947.

- Traditionally, Pashtun nationalism in Afghanistan was based on ethnicity and tribal loyalties and not connected to religion, which explains their hostility toward predominantly Muslim Pakistan during the first three decades of its existence. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 fundamentally changed the nature of Pashtun nationalism.

### **Pakistan and the Pashtuns**

- Simultaneously, the Soviet invasion altered the nature of Pakistan's relationship with Pashtun nationalism, turning it from hostility to support.
- The resurgent Taliban is driven not so much by Islam as the quest for Pashtun dignity and revenge.
- The withdrawal of American forces will provide Taliban greater opportunity to expand its area of operation.

### **Indian policy**

- India's refusal to publicly criticise, let alone denounce, the Soviet invasion of 1979, while understandable in that particular geopolitical context and a consequence of India's gratitude for Soviet support during the Bangladesh war, ended up doing India great harm in the eyes of its traditional friends in Afghanistan, the Pashtuns.
- It also provided Pakistan greater scope to curry favour with Afghanistan's largest and traditionally dominant ethnic group.
- It will take a great deal of creative thinking and imaginative refashioning of New Delhi's policy towards Afghanistan for India to recover lost ground vis-à-vis the Pashtuns.
- Depending on the U.S., itself on the verge of cutting its losses in Afghanistan, or on other powers such as Russia and Iran to protect Indian interests in that country will be foolhardy and counter-productive.