

India's Interest in Afghanistan

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[GS Paper 2 - Bilateral, Regional and Global Groupings and Agreements involving in India]

Context - It is good that India has extended humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan at this time through international agencies and not let its unhappiness with the Taliban's policies come in the way.

India's recent engagement with Afghanistan

- Recently, the Ministry of External Affairs announced that a team led by J P Singh, Joint Secretary (PAI) "is currently on a visit to Kabul to oversee the delivery operations of our humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan".
- The MEA clearly implied that this engagement should be seen only in the limited context of assistance to the Afghan people.
- The continuance of humanitarian assistance can be only one, though an important, segment of interaction; other aspects, especially security issues and later, connectivity and investments, as Afghanistan stabilises, have to be part of the dialogue with the Taliban.

Importance of Afghanistan for India

- Afghanistan impacts India's security. It has, in the past, provided space to al Qaeda with which the Taliban had a special relationship.
- Afghanistan has an ISIS presence too. Of special concern to India are the Taliban's ties with the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed.
- A recent United Nations report has emphasised that the Taliban's connections with these groups have not been severed.

Involved Challenges

- India is concerned about the Taliban's links with Pakistan's ISI and efforts by the latter to use the Haqqani network to target India's interests in Afghanistan.
- India's Afghanistan policy continues to be assessed vis-a-vis Pakistan, which opposes any security role for India in Afghanistan and sees India's presence there as detrimental to its interests.
- Taliban also has link with Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) who are behind various terrorist activities against India.
- India still does not recognise the Taliban. However, if it considers the option of entering into direct talks with the Taliban, it would constitute a major departure from its consistent policy of dealing only with recognised governments.

India's Approach towards Taliban

- It is argued that both "principle and pragmatism" demand that India should not do business with the Taliban. However, Pakistan has continued to sponsor terror and yet India has continued to engage it and has maintained a diplomatic presence in Islamabad.
- India cannot argue that the diplomatic door must be kept open for Pakistan because it's a neighbour while it can be shut on the Taliban because Afghanistan directly impacts Indian security.
- Engagement with Taliban: An engagement with the Taliban would at least give an opportunity to convey Indian concerns directly and encourage those elements within the group who wish to open up its diplomatic choices.

- Exploit contradiction: Far from being a monolith, the Taliban has significant tribal and regional contradictions.
- Therefore, India should not leave the Afghan arena entirely to Pakistan and China because of the social manifestation of Taliban theology.
- The Taliban is here to stay and for India, there is no alternative but to deal with it even while repeating, if it wishes, the mantra of inclusive government.
- India should also maintain contacts with the leaders of the ousted Republic, especially as the Taliban itself wants them to return to the country.

Way Forward

India needs to re-evaluate its decisions and be more omnidirectional in its approach to deal with all forces that are central to the future of Afghanistan. The changing political and security situation requires India to be more open to adapting its maximalist position and starting a dialogue with the Taliban.

Conclusion

All in all, the sooner India establishes a permanent presence in Kabul the better for the pursuit of national interests in the external sphere. This is not an exercise in evangelism but the cold and undeterred pursuit of interests.