

Editor's Note

The Gathering Storm

Dark clouds that have been gathering on the Indian security horizon since China's unprovoked aggression in Ladakh last year, have deepened in the past months with the armed overthrow of the elected, internationally recognised Afghan government. The Taliban -- which ironically, seized power with the connivance of the war-weary US, and was actively backed by America's nemesis China and Russia -- is a conglomerate of the most conservative, Islamic extremists, with many that are sitting in the new cabinet internationally designated as terrorists. The leading powers responsible for maintaining global law, order and security, handed over power and the fate of the hapless Afghan citizens, especially the women and the minorities, to this illegitimate and repressive force. The withdrawal plan was scripted at Doha by the Trump Administration and received the stamp of approval by the liberal Biden Administration in February this year. The US was desperate to leave the country that had trapped it in a long insurgency. It had very good domestic and international reasons to do so. American withdrawal was desirable even for the Afghan people who needed to shape their own fate and end the two-decade long civil war. But the US withdrew its forces with little thought for a post-withdrawal transition plan or the immediate politico-security consequences of a sudden and chaotic departure for the Afghan people and neighbouring countries such as India.

The Afghan Crisis

The security challenges for India and the region have as a result grown manifold with the entire Pakistan-Afghanistan belt opened-up for jihadi and Islamabad-backed terror operations. The spurt in terrorist attacks on civilians and minorities in Jammu and Kashmir by Pakistan based and trained Islamic terrorists in recent days, and the appeal of religious extremism among some sections in the State are testament to what is portended. The politico-ideological extremism of a victorious Taliban feeds into the conservative Sunni Islamists and terrorist groups everywhere, breathing fresh life into the Haqqani network, Al Qaida, ISIS and such other kindred armed extremist groups. It raises hopes in them that it is possible to succeed if a secure haven is available. For the

Taliban, the Haqqani network, the Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, the Hizbul Mujahideen, the Al Qaida and a host of other outfits, the principal benefactor has been Pakistan, which enjoys the backing of China and its diplomatic cover.

The US has always been inordinately indulgent towards its one-time close military ally despite knowing that the Taliban and its partners had a safe sanctuary in Pakistan. In fact, the Taliban had been nurtured, armed and protected by it. It is not a secret that Pakistan has been waging a covert hybrid war against Afghanistan and India, and undermining the US war effort, by using the armed extremist groups. Yet, astonishingly, it continued to receive US largesse and diplomatic silence ... silence because America needed to secure the overt 'cooperation' of Islamabad for providing access to American supplies for its forces in land-locked Afghanistan.

India's former Ambassador in Kabul, - Gautam Mukhopadhaya, in his incisive overview of the strategic implications of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan for the region -- carried in this issue of the journal -- foresees a period of conflict and power struggle within the regime, and a robust return of international terrorism. He holds American soft policy towards Pakistan's hybrid war spanning over two decades as a major reason for the debacle in Kabul. Scholar Umberto Sulpasso, on the contrary, perceives the gains in his commentary. He argues that Joe Biden's rapid withdrawal, notwithstanding the immediate problems, is a winning strategic move that releases the US from a war bereft of idealism or 'utopia' and therefore unwinnable. In a related study, analyst Abhinav Pandya, based on several years of fieldwork, explores terror financing in Jammu and Kashmir—bulk of it coming through Pakistan to the Islamic extremists and separatists in India's unfortunate border State.

If peace, security and stability are to be achieved and a regional and humanitarian crisis contained, Afghanistan would need an inclusive government, with the representation of all major segments of its society and politics, constitutional safeguards for the equal rights of women and minorities, and a break on all ties with terror and extremism. India is working for such an outcome in close consultations with the United States and its other Quad partners, Russia and the Central Asian states, and multilaterally at the UN, G-20, SCO, etc. It has simultaneously backed urgent humanitarian aid to reach the Afghan people. The Afghan crisis will clearly continue to fester and engage India and the world in the months ahead.

The China Threat

While the Afghan developments pose a serious threat to the security and stability of the region, and both complicate and serve as a strategic wild card, they do not detract from the wider strategic challenge flowing from the ongoing shift in the global balance of power. The rise of an expansionist and aggressive China is posing a growing threat to India and the leading Indo-Pacific democracies --the US, Japan and Australia, as also Taiwan. Its aggressive behaviour also challenges a rule-based global order that most nations desire. The Indian Foreign Minister, S Jaishankar--articulating the rising concern about the continued military build-up and provocations across the Line of Actual Control by the PLA and its refusal to either abide by the existing military and diplomatic agreements with India or peacefully resolve disputes—recently described China as ‘a clear and present danger.’ In the East, across the Taiwan Straits, East and South China Seas, China’s military actions are similarly spreading insecurity and creating grave global uncertainty. As Gen. Gautam Banerjee in his essay on China’s current strategic thinking argues, the Chinese Communist regime’s formally declared objective of capturing large tracts along India’s Northern and North-Eastern borders poses a serious threat to the very spirit of India and Indian nationhood.

China’s hostile military build-up and aggressive stance necessitates concerted and unified global opposition and deterrence. The Quad summit in Washington DC in September was a significant milestone in enhancing the strategic cooperation among the four Indo-Pacific powers to deal with 21st century challenges. They need to find appropriate ways to deal with this rising security threat—as China initiated conflicts loom over Taiwan, the Indo-Tibetan border, the Senkaku and the South China Sea.

The weakened Western alliance led by the United States is clearly not in a position to thwart the twin challenges emerging from China’s aggressive imperial advances and the fresh lease of life to Islamic extremism, on its own. Moreover, a shared perspective on the nature of threats, a unified strategy, and an agreement on burden sharing are missing. After 30 years of futile and haemorrhaging wars – in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria -- there is war weariness among the American people. It needs major strategic partners, especially in the world’s new strategic pivot -- the Indo-Pacific, to secure the liberal international order and ultimately itself. American hopes for a stable Indo-Pacific significantly rest on the support of its principal allies and strategic partners in the region—Japan, Australia and India. India’s rapid growth, expanding consumer markets,

technological advancement and rising military power are crucial for crafting a new global balance of power that would sustain a rules-based cooperative world order as well as thwart China's hegemonic ambitions. India too needs to deepen its strategic partnerships with the US, Japan, France, Australia—among others, to effectively deal with the rising security challenges posed by China, Pakistan and Islamic extremism. For the first time since Independence the interests of India and the US appear to have coalesced.

The Left-Liberal 'Spoiler' Network

Yet even as the strategic communities clearly see the need for building a strong Indo-US partnership as the bedrock of a global democratic alliance with the Quad as its central pillar, a segment of the Western liberal-left forces has made it its mission to undertake a sustained political campaign against the strong, popular and reformist Modi government in India. This is reflected in the negative coverage of India by the leading legacy media, reports of think tanks, human rights and media freedom reports, and writings by a network of Western academics. The latest is a superficial and inaccurate World Hunger Report. All these reports are based on inadequate information, poor understanding, absence of proper field studies and pronounced ideological prejudice. Their synchronised global campaign to show India and its majority Hindu population in an extremely negative light is being undertaken in parallel with anti-Modi groups in India, as well as anti-India forces sympathetic to Islamic extremism, Pakistan and China. Together they feed on each other's prejudices and propaganda to mount a hostile and persistent political campaign against Prime Minister Narendra Modi and India. While the complex interplay between Indian democracy, nationalism and Hindu cultural assertion under the Modi government can be studied and debated, it is essential that the media and academia undertake an objective assessment of developments in the world's second largest country. India is undergoing huge multi-dimensional socio-economic-technological transformations that have enormous global strategic implications. This is a story they have, unfortunately, largely missed. Ironically, the Western liberals engaged in the vilification of the Indian government undermine the very strategic partnership that the US, Australia, UK, France and Europe are trying to forge with the world's largest democracy to safeguard the liberal world order from China and Islamic extremist forces!

Leading experts on the media and on Indian democracy, A. Surya Prakash and Abhijit Iyer-Mitra in their searing critique of the Western liberal-left campaign against

the Indian Government, expose the deep intellectual rot, socio-political disruptions and ideological biases that followed the decline of Enlightenment in the West. They highlight the ideological stance of the left-liberals in the West and the many prejudices and even falsehoods on which their campaign is based. Their work is complemented by Devsena Mishra's critique of US Big-Tech's global operations. She points to their roots in the intelligence and defence department's funding of Silicon Valley Start-ups that continue to shape their information gathering. The unbridled and unregulated 'freedom' claimed by these giant private tech companies to pursue their commercial interest and their invisible ties to the security establishment of their home countries, she argues, seriously undermines India's national security and must be addressed.

Exploring Diverse Themes

On the maritime and industrial domain, former naval officers Bhaskar Sengupta and Shantanu Bose contribute a valuable new policy brief laying out the roadmap for India to become a leading global Shipbuilding power—naval and commercial—leveraging its noteworthy naval shipbuilding capabilities. B.M. Suri, in his essay, underlines that India's national security challenges will continue to place critical demands on indigenous high technologies and manufacturing based on them.

Finally, in a detailed review of an excellent new book on the making of the Indus Water Treaty, former Deputy National Security Advisor, Ambassador Satish Chandra analyses the historical, political, diplomatic and international factors that led to the World Bank mediated Agreement between India and Pakistan on the sharing of the Punjab rivers, despite being deeply flawed and against India's interests. The segment ends with a review by scholar Hirak Das of a new study on Saudi Arabia's educational reforms

This issue of *National Security* lays out the multiple challenges that are gathering on the Indian security front and the need for India to craft appropriate and urgent strategic responses to secure itself.

Prof. Sujit Dutta
Editor, *National Security*