



# Video Event | After the Taliban: Implications for India-Afghanistan Relations

## TRANSCRIPT SUMMARY

Discussion.....2

- Ambassador Adela Raz, *Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the United Nations*
- Ambassador Gautam Mukhopadhaya, *Former Ambassador of India to Afghanistan and Senior Visiting Fellow at Center for Policy Research*
- Dr. Omar Sharifi, *Assistant Professor, American University of Afghanistan and Kabul Director of American Institute of Afghanistan Studies*
- Prakhar Sharma, *Senior Researcher, International Republican Institute*

*Disclaimer: This summary features transcribed excerpts from the event. It has been lightly edited for clarity and length.*

A video of the event is available: <https://www.hudson.org/events/1906-video-event-after-the-taliban-implications-for-india-afghanistan-relations122020>

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**Aparna Pande:**

We're 5 weeks away from when the incoming administration of Joe Biden will take over in Washington, capitals all around the world are looking forwards to policies and programs of the administration. India and Afghanistan share deep cultural historical ties. Their bilateral ties relations are forged by a shared commitment to build a democratic, secular and economically integrated Afghan state. Since the fall of the Taliban regime, India has provided over 3 billion dollars in reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan. And has maintained cautious optimism about the Taliban in the Afghan political order. New Delhi and Kabul are closely watching the American military draw down from Afghanistan and the ongoing talks taking place. These developments are likely to not only affect the political order inside Afghanistan but also pose concerns for regional stability. To understand the stakes for the political leadership in both Kabul and Delhi and for others around the world.

**Prakhar Sharma:**

The recent progress on peace talks with the Taliban, peace talks referred broadly and loosely as a series of dialogues between US government, Taliban, Taliban and the Afghan government, and the recently started intra Afghan dialogue for reconciliation. These series of talks provide us an opportunity to test a number of propositions that have been part of this conversation around the peace talks.

For instance, it allows us to assess the degree of leverage the Pakistani military establishment actually exercises over the Taliban.

Second, it gives us a perspective between the Taliban's political leadership and its field commanders.

And third, it presents an opportunity for us to witness whether the Taliban can actually enforce the terms of a deal uniformly across the country as they often claim to be able to do.

Beyond these dynamics, and strictly from an India-Pakistan relation perspective, the talks represent both challenges and opportunities for Indian policy in Afghan and Afghans relations with India, the Indians have publicly endorsed the peace talks, but their skepticism in New Delhi about the wisdom of talking to the Taliban and a rushed hasty US withdrawal from the region, Indians maintained that an unfair bargain for the Afghan government would exacerbate the conflict in Afghanistan and undermine the foundations of the political order. Their skepticisms and concerns are not unwarranted. The Afghan state has a number of serious, fundamental challenges; challenges such as political challenge, building a viable political order which is constitutional, legitimate and democratic. An economic challenge on how to build a sustainable economy, and then the law-and-order challenge.

But the Taliban challenge is more fundamental in a sense as it seeks to or promises to undo all the gains that have been made in the last 19 years. If the Taliban challenge did not exist, the other challenges that the Afghan government faces could perhaps have been more manageable.

*Q: To Ambassador Raz, most discussions in Afghanistan continue to focus on the presence of US troops in Afghanistan and the peace talks with the Taliban, but very little discussion on what end state do we desire in Afghanistan. From an Afghan perspective, what is that ideal nation state in Afghanistan and how do these talks enable or hinder these aspirations?*

**Adela Raz:**

If you ask any Afghan, and that includes government officials as well, the end state is very clear; it is the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan; a republic which is a democracy.

It is the state that we have built in the last two decades together with our strategic partners, allies, friends and international community. We have to find a way how the Taliban will be part of this structure, and India is an excellent example of how democracies grow and how inclusive they can be, and we're willing to have that conversation with the Taliban in terms of a power sharing structure that they could be part of.

The Afghan public: young and women who are now majority; whose wishes, desires we as the Afghan government can't ignore. The Islamic republic of Afghanistan with constitutional rights for women, minorities, and different ethnic groups. Our constitution does not differentiate Afghans between any identity. That is where our stand is.

For Taliban, this is not what they hope to see or be part of, but this is the reality. We have built a new Afghanistan that is flourishing with freedom of media and expression. Our women are at the forefront of our society and private sector; an area that was unknown to women for quite a few decades.

Our younger generation broke many barriers that existed in our society - which usually is very hierarchical and arrives a lot with age - but since the younger generation are the majority of the country and at the forefront of decision making.

Afghanistan today, at the UN is even strongly committed and obliged to certain international human rights obligations and is responsible to deliver at that. It is the new reality the Taliban must accept. We are an independent sovereign state that have a mutual, bilateral and multilateral relation with countries in the region and outside the region, that's what defined the new foreign policy of Afghanistan.

*Q: There's been so much discussion about withdrawal of US troops, about peace talks, not much about how those talks relate to an end state. From an Indian perspective, what exactly is an ideal end state in Afghanistan and what can India do to enable this end state*

**Gautam Mukhopadhyaya:**

End state of an Islamic Republic and the role and presence of youth and women in Afghanistan today. It would be presumptuous to suggest an end state for Afghans, but to deconstruct an end state further; I would add the following:

At this moment, the first and foremost requirement is peace. An End state is a peaceful Afghanistan. An Afghanistan at peace with itself, its neighbors, and in cooperation with the rest of the world. That is not right now being addressed by the current state of the US Taliban deal that actually postpones the ceasefire to the end of the process to a political settlement, that means that the entire negotiations can continue theoretically under a situation of violence, and we are reduced to talking about the reduction of violence or a humanitarian ceasefire but not a just ceasefire in which two parties can negotiate as equals.

Another important element that Afghans want, and India shares is a sovereign, united, and independent Afghanistan, free from tutelage from the outside.

A democratic Afghanistan and an Islamic Afghanistan, underpinned by Islamic values, by the Sharia, by the Hadith and etc. This is already negotiated and represented in the 2004 Afghan constitution, and its

remarkable that in this entire fractious process, the post born Islamic republic has held absolutely intact. This is what the majority of afghans want. The Taliban's brought an alternative which was an Islamic emirate and may claim that they had a lot of support, but we know that that has come about violence, terrorism and through safe heavens in a third country, not Afghanistan.

A very important consideration for most Afghans is a fair society that allows for rights, minorities and women, a much greater place for youth. Just a few years ago, it was difficult to see young people speak when elders spoke. But in the last 7 years, one has seen profound transformation. Today we have ambassadors like Ambassador Raz and Ambassador Roya Rahmani – young women representatives in positions of authority who would make their counterparts in other countries look ashamed – this is a tremendous tribute to the leadership.

Corruption is a very important state that people would like to see the end of.

Afghans would like to choose their own friends and own relations, do not and would not like to be dictated by anyone. These issues would be addressed in the desired end state.

*Q: We are all aware between the longstanding ties between India and Afghanistan, and the contributions that India has made in the political and economic development of Afghan state, and the enormous goodwill India enjoys among other Afghans. But there is also a perception among a number of Afghans that India can and should do more in Afghanistan. Whether that India should adopt a more assertive posture, or it should exercise its diplomatic outreach more skillfully is up for debate. But there is prevailing perception that India enjoys more goodwill than influence in Afghanistan. Dr. Sharifi, what in your view should India do in Afghanistan to realize the shared aspirations of Indians and Afghanistan in light of the promise made on the peace talks?*

**Omar Sharifi:**

I'm not sure I will say that India has less influence and more goodwill, I believe that like a majority of our ministries, businesses etc. are all run by the people who did their studies in India.

Some of our brilliant scholars and managers are a product of the Indian education system.

On the specific issue of peace, it is difficult from the afghan side to say what India has to do in terms of taking a more assertive posture or continue a soft or diplomatic initiative. But in light of the current peace talks, I believe that peace talks are a very uncertain thing given the history of Afghanistan.

The whole idea of peace talks took people by surprise, people even in the US were very surprised. They're not even peace talks but negotiations. The way it was structured definitely means that we're not going to have peace. Everyone is trying to figure out what is next.

A ceasefire will be a very important step to give meaning to the peace talks, but we don't see that happening. No indication from the Taliban, from the Doha group, from the Pakistan authorities who are managing the peace talks and from the Taliban commanders who actually want peace. There is a fear among Taliban's on ground about transition, when they will go from being militants to being a political force, they practically can lose cohesion as a group, and this a movement made of different elements.

I believe that Quetta or Rawalpindi may not have direct control or complete control over all these elements who are fighting in different parts of the country under different banners. For the Taliban themselves, they are scared that their movements might collapse.

We have seen this in the Mujahideen groups who tried to move from militant group to political parties. Taliban, despite their monolithic identity are not much different from the mujahideen. What can India do? The recent change in US admin and the possibility for talks gave us an opportunity to think what is happening first. I believe in Afghanistan, people who are directly involved are also wondering what is going on. It is an opportunity for India and Afghanistan to see how much content is in this peace talk.

Is it, as Taliban and certain elements in Pakistan imagine, a face-saving withdrawal for the US or a more cohesive peace talk?

For now, Afghanistan is coming slowly out of the isolation, with people figuring out the peace talks. E.U and US has taken more serious look into Afghanistan.

India must also take a more active role in to seeing what is happening. Everyone in Afghanistan agrees with negotiations, but doesn't know how to shape the talks, how to think of it as a regional issue. Here is the time when a more robust and meaningful conversation is necessary between government in Afghanistan and policymakers in New Delhi.

Despite conversations, we don't see much change.

Developing a shared view is absolutely possible between Afghanistan and India. It has happened before.

*Q: There is one thing that stands out between the three responses which is the realization that this is a new Afghanistan; a pluralistic, inclusive, democratic Afghanistan which practically integrates its minorities into politics. We are not sure how the current imperative towards peace talks goes with the imperative of building this new Afghanistan but what also stands out that maybe at the regional level, there needs to be a separate conversation on what type of viable end state we can help enable Afghans to build. Do you think that the US policy in the region is not very well aligned with Indian interests in Afghanistan?*

**Omar Sharifi:**

I'm not sure U.S policy is aligned with anything in the region or the world.

The idea of having a conversation was a good idea, but anything, be it Afghan government or India, except maybe Pakistan, is aligned with anything.

Once we clear the chaotic first stage, people are coming back to see what is going on.

From our perspective, I am not seeing any coordinated peace talk between the US on one side or other regions.

**Adela Raz:**

Difficult to say that US policy is aligned with Indian interests but in regard to Afghanistan, I think it's a difficult answer.

Yes: if we look at the entire peace process, there is better understanding between US and the current US admin. Very well defined between us and has been put into formal terms; that is the sovereign independent and democratic Afghanistan that is in peace with itself, its region, and beyond. This is the end state vision that we have crafted together.

We have different views and approaches on how to get there. We know it requires time, patience and greater consultation. It must have a buy-in by the public, buy-in by the region and then the international publicly. It is useless if it is not supported by the public in Afghanistan, or the region that does not support it. It is a complex region with complex geopolitics and requires consensus.

Afghanistan has been trying to build its relationship with its neighbors, especially India and beyond. We have a strong view of multilateralism, regional connectivity and regional cooperation. We have a shared future, and our instability will lead to instability in the region.

Support from E.U and U.S is crucial. 19 years ago, when it was a country under the emirate, it was under the help of coalition forces that we had to beat the Taliban at the time.

Coalition forces came together with different support from their constituents. For E.U, it was to free women from Taliban, for U.S, it was to defeat the Al-Qaeda. The end goal was to create a republic, have a democracy and today, this is where we are.

The American forces on ground know the actual reality is far more challenging. That has helped a lot to balance it out.

One element which is extremely important is that it is a future that will be made by Afghans.

It's very much important is what is our vision and what we view, and the adjustment for US vision towards that.

Must build consensus in public to end violence, and where we can compromise and can't compromise. We are not in vagueness of what the vision in view is, it is clearly outlined and well defined. To a greater extent, there is alacrity with our American colleagues as well. While approach is different, there is great cohesion that is arriving more and more.

**Gautam Mukhopadhyaya:**

Question of U.S interest and whether it would be in alignment with India and Afghanistan. U.S interest have been guided by a self-professed principle of "America First", American interests and nobody else's interests. The alignment with Indian and Afghan interests does not matter. Is this principle suitable for international relations? It would be this Hobbesian state of international relations.

Whether there is a window of opportunity or occasion here for us to take a new proactive role with the new admin coming in. I do believe there should be a more proactive role that India takes in Afghanistan, but also understand that India could not be part of the process before the intra afghan talks started. Even though the circumstances are highly skewed and disadvantaged for the Afghan government, we always maintained that it should be an Afghan led, Afghan controlled process. The U.S Taliban deal leading up to the intra Afghan talks was anything but that. Notwithstanding the skewed nature of those talks which weighted in favor of the Taliban and absolutely against the government, Given the yearning for peace, Taliban had been trying to impose victory, not a peace process. Peace process requires a

mutual desire for peace from both sides. While the Afghan government want peace, the Taliban see this as a victory in which they have the support of major powers, including Pakistan and the United States. There are a lot of people in the US, Afghanistan, and India who have misgivings on how Trump admin has dealt with this situation. And that decisions are taken through discussions within the establishment and not unilaterally through tweets.

We expect a democratic government to be much more politically engaged. Even if it's difficult to reverse the troop withdrawal, the new admin will hopefully be more concerned about democracy and human rights. During the Taliban period, American women's groups played a major role in preventing US at that time in recognizing the Taliban.

Regarding the regional approach, we must be very careful. Regional approach should not be an excuse for international disengagement and leaving it to the region, which is effectively leaving it to Pakistan. There is only one country which is interested in instability and interference in Afghanistan today. While every other neighbor may have their nuances and interests, they're still interested in peace and want some sort of democratic dispensation in one form or the other. Pakistan even with the Taliban fear them. They fear that once allowed to be on their own, many sections will turn against them. So, it has to keep the pot boiling and keep the Taliban tight together. It has to create B and C teams just in case the A team deviates. There is vested interest from the Pakistan side. International community has to focus its attention on Pakistan. Obama's campaign, "Iraq is a war of discretion, Afghanistan is a war of necessity but while the theatre of war is Afghanistan, the locus of the war is across the border in Pakistan." To address this problem, we have to begin with Pakistan. After Obama came to power, he diluted this principle. America is withdrawing and has diplomatically moved. There is no check on Pakistan, on the contrary, it has been handed over to Pakistan. Right now they are talking about removing troops, but soon they could talk about decreasing funds and delegating it to the regional powers, which is very dangerous. Thus, the international community must be involved.

Peace talks should be determined by Afghan priorities and the international community should rally behind these Afghan priorities. And these Afghan priorities have to be based on internationalist and acceptable values.

*Q: You mentioned that the Afghan aspiration should be a guiding force behind structuring how the conversation should involve, and even when we think of broad abstract questions such as "what type of political order we need in Afghanistan". How much in your view is the local buy-in in the intra-afghan talk in Afghanistan?*

**Gautam Mukhopadhyaya:**

People are skeptical. One of the things I see in Afghanistan is a sense of powerlessness. People feel decisions regarding Afghanistan are made by outsiders or by their politicians; that people are taken very little into account.

In terms of buy-in, there are no other peace talks in the game, so in the end, while it may be defective and flawed, it is the only process in the game and thus we are forced to back it.

That is the degree of buy-in not only by Afghans. If we are signaling that we are aligning ourselves behind this peace process, it's because there is no other peace process to align with.

Secondly, history has shown us that Afghans have not been good at getting together. That's the kind of role India, and other international community can help in playing. To bring cohesiveness in Afghanistan and outside.

**Adela Raz:**

In terms of support from the public for the process itself. In terms of the consultation the government has, there is consensus that peace must come to Afghanistan and end the violence.

The current negotiation is the opportunity to create that window of opportunity that will hopefully turn into a reality, but how long it lasts is the question. We must be cautious that the increased level of violence is unacceptable and that this process cannot be supported if violence continues. It's a wrong strategy by the Taliban to think that increased violence will give them more power at the negotiating table, but its vice versa and is undermining the buy-in by the public for the process itself.

We must also not forget that every Afghan knew that there was a red line on what this peace could bring and what it should not result to. It is clear that we must not lose what we have achieved in these past 19 years.

**Omar Sharifi:**

Two generations of Afghans have been born and raised through the duration of the war.

The talks were very important, but we had peace without even having the vocabulary for peace. It is important for the process to go on.

I am not sure if the Taliban and its supporters want an end to the violence. We have to live with the fact that it might continue. There is possibility that the Taliban might break into factions.

Violence undermines the Taliban but also pushes us towards an agreement in more urgency but create a danger for the whole prospect of peace in long term for Afghanistan.

And the consequences, if the war continues: according to history, no other Afghan government ever fell to insurgency as long as it had international support.