



## Staying invested

India must retain its traditional and historic interest in Afghanistan and its people

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to ask the MEA to brief all parliamentary parties on the Government's actions in Afghanistan comes as questions grow about the Government's planning for contingencies there, with the Taliban's takeover. Since August 15, when the Taliban militia entered Kabul, the Government, including the MEA and the Defence Ministry, has been understandably occupied with the challenging evacuation of Indian nationals. In addition, the Government's decision to evacuate the entire embassy staff and security personnel first has made it more difficult to facilitate those Indians, as well as long-term visa holding Afghan Sikhs and Hindus needing to return. With most of the Indians based in Afghanistan returning home, or expected to soon, the Government must face the larger strategic questions over whether the Indian Embassy was evacuated too early. India had undertaken evacuations during the 1990s too, but then the presence of Indian nationals was not so large and Indian stakes in Afghanistan were not so deeply rooted. In the past 20 years, India has built considerable interests, including major infrastructure projects and ongoing development projects, helped script the Afghan Constitution and conduct of elections, as well as enabled the training and education of the next generation of officials, soldiers and professionals. It seems unfortunate, therefore, that this bank of goodwill came to naught as the Government decided it was safer to pull up stakes, emulating neither the U.S. and European countries who relocated their diplomatic outposts to the Kabul airport, nor Russia, China and Iran, which decided not to vacate their embassies there.

Going forward, the Government must explain how it expects to approach the new regime in Afghanistan once it is formed. It is still unclear whether this will be merely a repeat of the brutal regime seen from 1996-2001, or whether negotiations are under way for a more inclusive coalition, including several former leaders of Afghanistan, will fructify into a transitional government. The rise of Taliban power and that of the group's Pakistani backers is a particular security concern as groups such as the LeT and the JeM could use Afghanistan as a staging base for terror attacks in India. Finally, the Government must explain how it will approach the Afghan people, especially those whose lives could be in danger, including Embassy staff and associates, those working on Indian projects, minorities, including those Islamic sects such as the Hazaras who have been targeted, as well as women. A more open, liberalised visa policy, and more swift processing of the newly launched special "e-Emergency X-Misc" visas would reassure both Afghans and the international community that India's exit from Afghanistan is not permanent, and it will retain its traditional and historic interests in the country and its people, despite adverse events there.

## Bonding rites

Opposition unity can come only with a more accommodative Congress leadership

A meeting of 19 Opposition parties on August 20 confirmed the sense of urgency that they feel to come together and build a united front against the BJP. It was also a demonstration of the challenges that they face in that task, in terms of programme and architecture. The meeting convened by Congress President Sonia Gandhi was attended by leaders of 18 other parties, including four Chief Ministers. These parties have strategic or ideological reasons to be part of a formation against BJP hegemony, and see no harm in aligning with the Congress in the process. All the 19 parties see the BJP as a threat to their own politics; some of them view it as endangering the constitutional values of the country too. There are other non-BJP parties that do not see it that way. The BJD, TRS and YSRCP, ruling parties in Odisha, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, respectively, see no gain in opposing the BJP or aligning with the Congress. They might also see antagonism with the BJP and affinity with the Congress as detrimental to their politics. Comparable is the situation of the BSP and SP, two influential parties in Uttar Pradesh that elects the largest number of Lok Sabha MPs. Ms. Gandhi has exhorted all parties to rise above compulsions to build a joint front against the BJP, the aim of which is to defeat the BJP in the 2024 general election.

The fact is that the Congress is itself a prisoner of its own compulsions and rigidities such as its institutional antipathy towards the YSRCP and TRS, and the personal fancies of its leader Rahul Gandhi who wields all authority and holds no accountability. Additionally, the Congress of today is vastly diminished compared to its position in the run-up to the 2004 general election when it could bring a host of parties under a coalition. Regional leaders then deferred to Ms. Gandhi, and her command over the Congress was absolute. The disarray in the Congress leadership is a drag on the attempts at Opposition unity. There is also a vast divergence among these parties on identifying the most critical issues in designing the optimal campaign against the BJP. The Congress and Left want to front-load in any Opposition campaign, the use of a spyware by an unknown government entity to snoop on a wide range of individuals. Parties that are more rural think price rise and agricultural distress and unemployment would have more salience among voters. This divergence need not necessarily be disabling for the Opposition. In fact, various parties could appeal to different constituencies and amalgamate their strengths, as it happened in the UPA experiments between 2004 to 2014. That requires significantly more leadership and management skills than available today in the Opposition gallery.

# A pragmatic Afghan behind the religious garb?

All eyes will be on the Taliban's character as and when they consolidate their power in a transformed Afghanistan



KESAVA MENON

Personnel of the institutions responsible for monitoring India's external environment and ensuring the security of the country and its citizens, probably know more about the composition and character of the Taliban than they are letting out. They would do us all a favour if they were to loosen up a little since we need a vigorous national debate to reorient ourselves after the strategic situation was convulsed savagely over the past fortnight.

### Some pointers

The foremost question in the minds of those thinking about Afghanistan is whether there is a Taliban 2.0. Is this avatar that stormed into Kabul on August 15 after capturing most of the country's 34 provinces in a whirlwind campaign, any different from the barbaric entity that ruled the Afghans between 1996 and 2001. Currently, the answer to that question is up in the air since reports seem to support neither conclusion. We will perhaps truly know only if and when this dispensation consolidates its power. Meanwhile, we can consider some pointers.

Between 1996 and 2001, when they were in power previously, the Taliban did almost nothing to improve conditions in what had by then become a devastated, impoverished country. All that the mullahs seemed to be interested in was oppressing women and minorities and providing sanctuary for jihadi terrorists from every part of the world. That crazed enterprise came to an end after the

Arab guests over-played their hand, massacred civilians in the United States on September 11, 2001 and invited retaliation that drove the Talibs back to their old sanctuaries in Pakistan. Their return to power has raised the strong possibility that Afghanistan will revert to primordial mode. Apart from the memory of the consequences of 9/11, are there other factors that could inhibit the Taliban from reverting to their old ways?

### The departure and after

No indication of a change in character of the movement or acceptability to the people is provided by the rapid disintegration of the previous government's defence apparatus. The melting away of an army raised, trained, equipped and paid by the U.S. that was tasked with the mission of propping up the democratic order has occasioned much surprise. In retrospect, perhaps the only surprising element is that the event caused so much surprise.

Amidst the current bewilderment at the ease with which the Taliban advanced, it is easy to forget that much the same pattern unfolded on the first occasion. The Taliban built up their presence and hence their strength steadily from pocket to pocket before moving towards a frenzied denouement. There seems to be a characteristic of Afghan warfare that combat is carried out for so long as it is feasible and given up as soon as it is not.

This was an army raised to defend nebulous concepts such as nation, democracy, citizens' rights, etc. from amongst a populace that has no experience in the operationalisation of these ideals. Traditionally, the Afghan has fought for his tribe, his clan or his family except when inspired by a few mighty war leaders down the ages. The men who joined the



U.S.-created army must have done so overwhelmingly because the superpower was paying their salaries and feeding them.

Once the U.S. decided to pull out unilaterally, it must have been clear to everyone concerned that the flow of funds would stop. With U.S. President Joe Biden setting August 31 as the date of America's final departure, the timeline was clear to all. How could anyone have expected men posted at isolated bases to hold out when they could see that the supply of ammunition, fuel and food would stop in the not too distant future?

### Warlords and strategy

Surprise has also been expressed at the inaction of the old warlords. Two of them, Ismail Khan and Abdul Rashid Dostum, have been in battle mode for 40 years and are well versed in the extreme viciousness of Afghan politics. A fight to the death would have been a last option, though accommodation could have been just as dangerous. For people like them, abject or complete surrender opens up the prospect of humiliation, torture, mutilation and execution. Not only for themselves personally but also for their families and adherents.

Given the scenario, Dostum and Ismail Khan would probably not have stopped their men from fighting – as they both did – unless they had been provided assurances backed by solid guarantees. In Afghanistan's current circumstances, only regional councils of notables (Shuras) can provide such guarantees. According to re-

ports, Taliban commanders in various sectors had asked regional notables to negotiate the surrenders of government forces. It seems reasonable to think that Shuras also offered guarantees to the hold-outs.

The very existence of these regional groupings appears to mark another difference between the Taliban's victory in 1996 and its current success. From 1980, when the Soviets began their programme to pacify the countryside, to 2001 at least, conditions were so precarious that neutrals could do little. Many tribal elders, village heads, religious figures, etc. became collateral damage or fled abroad. There was no reason for the refugees to return either when the mujahideen factions got control of different pockets from 1992 to 1996 or even when the Taliban captured most of the country. There was too much of fighting in the first phase and too many other disincentives in the second.

### The U.S. and change

With the entry of the U.S. into Afghan territory, there might have been no reduction in the physical danger (this pacification programme was just as brutal). However, economic activity and the sheer availability of funds, increased manifold. Electricity production and distribution improved significantly; highways were built up; mobile telephony was introduced and spread with its usual rapidity; and, the U.S., other governments and international agencies pumped in billions of dollars. Over 20 years, Afghans have been given enough reason to return to their farms and restart their businesses or professions. Regional elites, either the offspring of the old grandees or those who had prospered in exile, are bound to have regrouped in these circumstances.

Would such regional elites be

strong enough to hold the Taliban to account? Probably not, ultimately. But would the Taliban want to resort to the ultimate in a hurry? Most of them too have been living in refugee camps or something similar for the past 40 years. Leaders of the group must be in their 60's with families clamouring for the chance to live in peace and prosper. Those wishes can only be fulfilled if combat ends, and it will not if others too are not given their share of the cake.

### The next chapter

If Taliban leaders are so keen on participating in the development of their country and benefiting from the process personally, would not the same consideration have come into play in 1996? Did they not instead go about stifling their own people and antagonising the whole world? One major difference is that in the earlier period, these semi-literates had no ideas for developing their country, and knew it. Today, after the laying down of modern infrastructure and the return of people who can run industry and trade, the means for building the economy are visible and available. Political power will help the mullahs live as parasites, but the economy must function for them to be able to do so.

Many analysts would say that rational thinking of this sort is alien to the Taliban. That they are religious fanatics ready to sacrifice everything on earth for a place in paradise. If they show that they are no different from what they were between 1996 and 2001, they need to be opposed on moral principle and for our national interest. However, there still seems to be time enough to find out if the pragmatic Afghan lurks behind the religious garb.

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# Tauktae, Yaas and planning for the next

With a rise in the frequency of devastating cyclones, India needs to look at long-term mitigation measures

YASHOBANTA PARIDA,  
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PRAKASH KUMAR SAHOO

The severe cyclones, Tauktae and Yaas, which battered India earlier this year, made landfalls on the country's western coast, Gujarat, and the eastern coast, Odisha, on May 17 and May 26, 2021, respectively. Both storms caused massive damage to infrastructure, the agricultural sector, and houses. Government of India reports are that, put together, an estimated 199 people died, 37 million people were affected, and economic losses stood at ₹320 billion (U.S.\$4.3 billion). In addition, crop area of 0.24 million hectares was affected, and around 0.45 million houses were damaged. Moreover, 2.5 million people were evacuated to cyclone shelters and relief camps in these two States. The large-scale uprooting of trees in the urban areas affected already depleting green cover. Thus, during the COVID-19 pandemic, these cyclones caused additional financial responsibility for State governments. The health costs need to be measured too.

### More frequent

Increasing sea surface temperatures in the northern Indian Ocean and the geo-climatic conditions in India have led to a rise in the frequency of devastating cyclones in the coastal States accounting for 7% of the global tropical cyclones, according to India Meteorological Department (IMD), 2013 data. Every year, around five

to six tropical cyclones are formed in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea; of these, two to three turn severe. The Indian coastline is around 7,500 km; there are 96 coastal districts (which touch the coast or are close to it), with 262 million people exposed to cyclones and tsunamis. The World Bank and the United Nations (2010) estimate that around 200 million city residents would be exposed to storms and earthquakes by 2050 in India. Between 1891 and 2020, out of the 313 cyclones crossing India's eastern and western coasts, 130 were classified as severe cyclonic storms. The west coast experienced 31 cyclones, while 282 cyclones crossed the east coast. The Odisha coast witnessed 97 cyclones, followed by Andhra Pradesh (79), Tamil Nadu (58), West Bengal (48), Gujarat (22), Maharashtra/Goa (7), and Kerala (2).

### The economic costs

Among the natural disasters, cyclones constituted the second most frequent phenomena that occurred in 15% of India's total natural disasters over 1999-2020. During the same period, 12,388 people were killed, and the damage was estimated at \$32,615 million. Cyclones are the second most expensive in terms of the costs incurred in damage, accounting for 29% of the total disaster-related damages after floods (62%).

In addition, they are the third most lethal disaster in India after earthquakes (42%) and floods (33%). However, fatalities due to



cyclones declined from 10,378 in 1999 to 110 in 2020; the significant drop was on account of improved early warning systems, cyclone forecasting, and better disaster management activities such as timely evacuation, rehabilitation and relief distributions. But these measures are not adequate to achieve a zero-fatality approach and minimise economic losses from cyclones.

Between 1999 and 2020, cyclones inflicted substantial damage to public and private properties, amounting to an increase in losses from \$2,990 million to \$14,920 million in the absence of long-term mitigation measures. In addition, damages caused due to cyclones increased nine times during the same period.

As stated earlier, cyclones also led to an increase in the fiscal burden of governments through increased spending to implement effective cyclone preparation measures.

As a result, direct government expenditure on natural calamities increased 13 times. The Asian Development Bank's report in 2014 estimated that India would suffer a loss of around 1.8% of GDP annual-

ly by 2050 from climate-related events.

India lost around 2% of GDP and 15% of total revenue over 1999-2020. According to the Global Climate Risk Index report 2021, India ranks the seventh worst-hit country globally in 2019 due to the frequent occurrence of extreme weather-related events. Moreover, the report showed that India lost around 2,267 human lives, while damages stood at \$68,812 million in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms in 2019. In the same year, India ranked first concerning human deaths and economic losses due to extreme weather-related events (Eckstein et al., 2021).

### Measures in Odisha

In the aftermath of the 1999 super cyclone, the Government of Odisha took up various cyclone mitigation measures which included installing a disaster warning system in the coastal districts, and construction of evacuation shelters in cyclone-prone districts. Other steps were the setting up of the Odisha State Disaster Management Authority (OSDMA), conducting regular cabinet meetings for disaster preparedness, and building the Odisha Disaster Rapid Action Force (ODRAF).

All these activities have helped to minimise the toll from cyclonic storms such as Hudhud, Fani, Amphan, and Yaas. Still, Odisha's disaster management model is inadequate to minimise the economic losses that result from cyclones. Therefore, the Government of India should adopt a few

measures to minimise disaster damage and fatalities.

### Essential steps

First, it is imperative to improve the cyclone warning system and revamp disaster preparedness measures. Second, the Government must widen the cover under shelterbelt plantations and help regenerate mangroves in coastal regions to lessen the impact of cyclones. In addition, adopting cost-effective, long-term mitigation measures, including building cyclone-resilient infrastructure such as constructing storm surge-resilient embankments, canals and improving river connectivity to prevent waterlogging in low-lying areas are important. Third, installing disaster-resilient power infrastructure in the coastal districts, providing concrete houses to poor and vulnerable households, and creating massive community awareness campaigns are essential. Finally, healthy coordination between the Centre and the States concerned is essential to collectively design disaster mitigation measures. It is only such a collective mitigation effort by the Centre and States that can help reduce the fiscal burden of States and also be effective in minimising disaster deaths.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

### I-T portal

It is puzzling that the new income-tax portal, claimed to be a game changer, is experiencing glitches (Page 1, "FinMin. summons Infosys.CEO over I-T portal glitch", August 24). It is apparent that the portal went live without undergoing the mandatory preliminary trials required for its smooth operation. Or else the Government might have accepted the redesigned portal on an 'as is where is' basis, by just going by the reputation of the contracted agency.

Such an anomaly happening in a country producing the best technocrats is unacceptable. Though the

issues are technical, if problems persist, the Centre should explore the possibility of involving the Institute of Chartered Accountants, to work in tandem with the agency so that the issues are resolved expeditiously. The Government should also consider extending the deadline for tax filings, as there is every likelihood of mismatches in the forms filed and the data available in the portal.

V. SUBRAMANIAN,  
Chennai

### A remembrance day

The selection of August 14 as "Partition Horrors Remembrance Day" is itself indicative of the true intent

behind the decision. Partition horrors neither started nor ended on August 14, 1947, the date on which Pakistan came into being. That being so, the real motive seems to be to put the entire blame for Partition-related violence on one entity, the Muslim League.

The truth is that lumpen elements from both communities were involved in the killings and other atrocities that followed. To sum up, Partition was and is a nuanced story in which both communities had their share of heroes and villains. Distorting that story for political ends will not only be doing a great disservice to the nation but is also an

insult to the memory of all those who perished or suffered during that dark phase in the subcontinent's history.

G.G. MENON,  
Tripunithura, Kerala

### Wildlife SOS

The report, "Wild tusker electrocuted" (Andhra Pradesh, August 20), with the additional detail that this is the tenth casualty due to electrocution in two years in the Chittoor area, is distressing for environmentalists. A fine animal in its prime has been lost. Farmers in the area have been highlighting the issue of dangling power lines, yet inaction prevails. How long are we to

continue to count lost wildlife?

Reports of wild animal deaths are rising, as can be seen in the media. This could even be a form of organised crime to ensure wild habitats are made free for human use. Habitats are being lost and magnificent wildlife is dwindling. The subject needs to be in focus.

NALLA JOGI NAIDU,  
Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh

### Future Olympians

The Tokyo Olympics witnessed India's best-ever performance, with a historic gold and a tally of seven medals. Though India's funding for sports has grown, we still have a

long way to go to achieve enough capital. In a country where the arena of sports is dominated by cricket, dabbling in other sports can be challenging, especially without adequate financial capital and governmental support. Felicitating champions after their Olympic quest is inefficacious. It is imperative that we recognise and create a space to explore our immense potential in the Olympics. If these measures are undertaken, our athletes can undoubtedly achieve greater heights.

JANE CARYN THOMAS,  
Bengaluru