

## The Indian challenge in Afghanistan

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### Why in news?

- Recently, just 24 hours after a massive earthquake hit Afghanistan, the Indian Air Force moved in with tonnes of relief. It was badly needed, given that the worst earthquake in 20 years hit a region that has been at war for decades.
- The massive earthquake was centred around Khost along the Afghanistan- Pakistan border, and measured 5.9 on the Richter Scale.

### Reopening of Indian embassy:

- The recent reopening of the Indian embassy in Afghanistan marks the formal return of India nearly ten months after it was evacuated the chancery soon after the Taliban walked into the Afghan capital without firing a shot.
- Surprisingly, the Indian diplomats found all the embassy property in Kabul—the ambassador's residence, the new Indian chancery next door as well as the residential accommodation inside the complex—in good shape.
- The Taliban had made sure that all the properties had been properly guarded these last ten months, sending a powerful signal that it wants to re-engage with India.
- In contrast, Taliban fighters had pillaged other embassy properties, including the United States and Norway.



### Attack on Gurudwara:

- Moreover, the fact that Taliban security guards fought off an attack by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) on the Kabul gurudwara a few days before—the ISKP is widely believed to be a proxy for Pakistani intelligence.
- This move is not just another sign that the Taliban wants India back in Kabul, but shows that it is determined to re-establish normality in Afghanistan after 20 years of war.

### India's calculated response:

- In return, India sent all the right signals to the Taliban since it shut down its embassy in Kabul a few days after the Taliban walked in on 15 August 2021. It refused to allow any Afghans to enter India, including those with valid Indian visas, although now there seems to be some let up on that hardline.

- In fact, as it sat on the United Nations Security Council, **India chose to abstain from a UNSC resolution** pleading that the Taliban reopen girls' schools.
- The Taliban sees no problem with Afghan soldiers being trained in India.
- But nothing else signifies the change as much, perhaps, as an Indian Air Force plane landing on the runway in Kabul carrying the Indian diplomats to their new diplomatic posting.

#### **Strong need for Indian Mission:**

- Certainly, the Indian decision to reopen its mission in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan will upset several people, especially those who believe that India, which has suffered long and hard at the hands of terrorists, would never break bread with another terror group like the Taliban.
- But this is a new world order and the world is beginning to recognise the need to engage with the new rulers of Afghanistan.
- That is why, 14 nations have opened their missions in Kabul and not just those which had engaged with the Taliban even when the Ashraf Ghani government was in power.
- These include Pakistan, Russia, China, Iran, Turkey and Central Asian republics, but also the European Union and, separately, Germany, which had been at the forefront of criticising the Taliban and its diktats.
- For India to have a presence inside Afghanistan, therefore, is essential. A mission gives it eyes and ears, it allows diplomats to meet all kinds of Afghans as well as fellow foreign diplomats stationed there.
- In its attempt to establish itself as a normal state, the Taliban, too, has sent its diplomats to four countries—Pakistan, Russia, China and Turkmenistan.

#### **The security issue:**

##### **Terrorist Groups:**

- Then there exists the ever-present issue of security, which was apparent from the recent attack on a gurdwara in Kabul, apparently by the **Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K)**.
- The IS-K is a group of many parts, with a presence in the north, along the Pakistan border, and in Kabul. In the north, the Russians accuse the Americans of assisting the group, while in Kabul, the IS-K's worst attack was against withdrawing U.S. troops in August 2021.
- In recent times, IS-K has become strongly anti-India, along with al-Qaeda, which put out a video where chief Ayman Al Zawahari was seen praising a Karnataka girl for defending the hijab.
- Even more vicious language was used in the threat made against Nupur Sharma, for her controversial remarks against the Prophet. A recent UN report notes that both groups are operational, and may see increased recruitment of young men with no alternatives.

#### **Way Forward:**

- India has around 400 projects in all the 34 provinces of Afghanistan. With the Taliban offering protection to foreign embassies, and acting quickly in the recent gurdwara bombing, it is possible that the Indian effort will continue unimpeded.
- Also the Taliban leaders assured him that they would not allow Afghan soil to be used by Pakistan-based terror groups to attack India and would be happy to act on specific intelligence.
- It is also important to remember that the Taliban have never actively been anti-India. Difficulties in implementation are more likely to arise from intra-Afghan tensions rather than any hostility to India.