

The Impact of Afghanistan's Changed Situation on India's Geo-environment

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Abstract

Afghanistan's changed situation was one of the biggest international changes in 2021, causing violent shocks to the world. As an important neighboring country of Afghanistan, India has significant economic and security interests in Afghanistan. The change in Afghanistan has not only directly affected the bilateral relations between India and Afghanistan, but also has triggered a new round of regional power games involving India, Pakistan, Russia, Iraq and other countries. At the same time, the change in Afghanistan is also related to the adjustment of United States' global strategy. As a result, the situation in Afghanistan has had a profound and extensive impact on India's geo-environment.

Keywords: Afghanistan, India, geo-environment

1. Introduction

On July 12, 2021, Miller, the top general of the United States in Afghanistan, announced his resignation, marking the end of the nearly 20-year war in Afghanistan. On August 19, Zabihullah Mujahid, the Afghan Taliban spokesman issued a statement on the Internet, announcing the establishment of the "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan". The drastic changes of Afghanistan have attracted attention of the whole world. As an important neighboring country of Afghanistan, India is evaluated as the "biggest loser" in this change. Ghani government, which India has always supported, collapsed rapidly. Furthermore, the change of political power in Afghanistan has stirred up the whole regional and global situation, thus making a strong impact on India's geographical environment.

The term, geo-environment, belongs to the concept of geopolitics. Its core lies in the study of interactive relationship between geo-environment and political behaviors of a country. In general, the geo-environment directly relates to a country's national interests, security threats and strategic resources, thus affecting the formation and changes of a country's geo-strategy, and further affecting the size of the spatial scope of a country's geo-strategic space. Therefore, regardless of the size or comprehensive strength, all countries attach great importance to their geo-environment and geo-strategy.

India is a neighboring country of Afghanistan. Although the two countries have no direct border, Afghanistan has extremely important geographical significance to India. Afghanistan is adjacent to Pakistan, so India always hopes to use Afghanistan to pin down Pakistan. In addition, Afghanistan is also an important springboard for India to enter Central Asia. Therefore, the political situation of Afghanistan has a great impact on India's geographical environment. The change in Afghanistan in 2021 has caused a severe impact on India, and has changed India's geographical environment from micro, meso and macro levels.

2. Micro Level: India's Strategic Space in Afghanistan Shrinks

The direct impact of the change in Afghanistan on India is the setback of the two countries' bilateral relations. India's long-term operation in Afghanistan ends up with nothing, and India's strategic space in Afghanistan shrinks.

In the past, India has always supported the democratic regime of Afghanistan, which was supported by the United States, but held a hostile attitude towards the Taliban and refused to have any positive contact or exchange with it. From Karzai government to Ghani government, India had been providing assistance to Afghanistan, covering infrastructure construction, social security and military assistance. According to statistics,

since 2001, India's investment in Afghanistan has exceeded 3 billion dollars, making it the fifth largest country in aid to Afghanistan. Through the huge aid system, India's influence in Afghanistan's democratic government also unprecedentedly enhanced. However, with the return of the Taliban to power, India's influence established in Afghanistan through years of painstaking efforts collapsed together with the Afghan democratic regime.

Although the Taliban has invited India to continue to invest in Afghanistan, in view of the current overall situation, the goodwill of the Taliban to India is not fully clear, so India can only take a "wait-and-see" attitude in various affairs. Without the democratic government as a channel to intervene in Afghanistan's affairs, and without the US military as a dependent force, India can only participate in Afghanistan's affairs in very limited ways, such as providing humanitarian assistance. Even this way is often obstructed by Pakistan due to the need to transit through Pakistan. It is reported that in November 2021, India's wheat aid to Afghanistan was not allowed to transit by Pakistan. India can only appeal through relevant meetings to ensure that the only way for all countries to implement humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan is "unimpeded". India has become very passive concerning Afghan affairs.

3. Meso Level: India Falls Into a New Round of Regional Game

The impact on the meso level is as follows: the withdrawal of the US military has led to a temporary power vacuum in Afghanistan, the influence of US will decline in the region, but some countries may get new opportunities, like Pakistan, Iran, Russia and China. India has fallen into a new round of regional game, and its geo-environmental pressure in the northeast and northwest is increasing.

3.1 Northeast: Russia Stages a Comeback, the Opportunities for Cooperation Between China and Afghanistan Rise

The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan is undoubtedly good news for Russia, because Russia's core concern in the region is that there are no military bases of US or NATO to pose threats to Russia. As early as the peace talks between US and Taliban, Russia has changed its attitude towards the Taliban and expanded contacts with it. In the past few years, Russia has played a constructive role in various peace talks concerning Afghanistan. This series of measures has won more voice and initiative for Russia to intervene in Afghan affairs after the Taliban regained power. However, India has always rejected contact with the Taliban. It is obvious that Russia intends to strive for part of the strategic space left by the United States after its withdrawal from Afghanistan, which will inevitably pose a certain challenge to India. On the other hand, the different attitudes of India and Russia towards the Taliban have also widened the rift between the two countries. Raja Mohan, a famous strategist in India, predicted that with the development of Afghanistan and Russia's search for a greater balance between India and Pakistan, the support of the Russian people and elites for the India-Russia partnership may be reduced, and Russia will not form a close cooperative relationship with India. This is even worse for India, because Russia has always supported India in the India-Pakistan dispute in the past. The change of Russia's attitude towards India and Pakistan and the cooling of India-Russia relations will make India lose an important support force from the northeast.

What makes India even more uneasy is that opportunities for cooperation between China and Afghanistan may also rise after the withdrawal of the United States. The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan has eased the pressure of China in the west, which will create favorable conditions for China's "Silk Road Economic Belt" to extend to Afghanistan, and increase cooperation opportunities between China and Afghanistan. At the same time, India may need to deploy some troops to combat transnational terrorism from Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the US military, which will disperse India's military deployment on the Sino Indian border. Therefore, India has also encountered a certain geopolitical security strategic dilemma.

3.2 Northwest: Pakistan's Threat to India Intensifies and Iran's Influence Increases

In India's view, Pakistan is undoubtedly the biggest beneficiary of Afghanistan's sudden change. India and Pakistan have been fighting fiercely over issues related to Afghanistan, and both hope to establish their own influence in Afghanistan as much as possible. The return of Taliban to power has obviously turned the situation to Pakistan's advantage. Pakistan has always maintained close ties with Taliban. In the future, Taliban will also need Pakistan's help in regime consolidation, national construction and other aspects. Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan will predictably continue to increase. It is even possible for Taliban and Pakistan to cooperate to pose a greatest threat to India in the northwest. In addition, India has also had to face the increasing threat of terrorism. India has suffered from terrorism for many years, especially in Kashmir in the northwest. In India's eyes, Afghanistan is the source of terrorism to India, and the Taliban is a radical terrorist organization. India believes that the Taliban will work with Pakistan to create cross-border terrorism in the northwest region in the future, threatening India's domestic security and stability, then seriously affecting India's geographical

environment.

In addition to Pakistan, Iran, another important country in the northwest, has increased its influence in Afghanistan, making India's geographical environment even worse. Iran is Afghanistan's western neighbor and a direct stakeholder in Afghanistan's transformation. Due to religious and ethnic ties, Iran has always had some influence in Afghanistan. After the withdrawal of US troops, the security situation in Eastern Iran has improved, creating favorable conditions for Iran to exert more influence on the Afghan issue. What worries India is that the relationship between Iran and India has undergone some subtle changes with the situation in Afghanistan. Due to the choice to join the US camp, there is a gap between Iran and India. At the end of October 2021, India was not invited to the conference on Afghanistan hosted by Iran. In India's view, this is a deliberate distance between Iran and India. The cold relations between India and Iran have made India worried about the continued development and operation of the Chabahar port and the international North-South transport corridor.

4. Macro Level: India's Strategic Position in the "Indo Pacific" Region Rises

The great change in Afghanistan in 2021 is the result of the adjustment of global strategic priorities of the United States. The US believes that maintaining its military presence in Afghanistan is no longer of great significance. Therefore, the US has carried out a planned strategic contraction in the Middle East. Instead, the United States will focus on meeting the challenges brought about by the rise of China in the "Indo Pacific" region. The "Indo Pacific strategy" of the United States aims to consolidate the partnership between the United States and its allies in the Indo Pacific region, establish a containment system dominated by the United States and containing China from the East and the west, so as to continue to maintain the global hegemony of the United States. India is becoming more and more important in this strategy. In recent years, India-US relations have been comprehensively upgraded. The strategic cooperation between India and the United States under the "QUAD" mechanism between the United States, Japan, India and Australia has been expanding. India's strategic position in the "India Pacific" region has risen significantly.

The shift of the global strategic focus of the United States coincided with India's "Eastward action policy" and "Indian Ocean priority" strategies. The core objective of India's "Eastward action policy" is to help India jump out of the traditional South Asian region, integrate into the core region of the Asia Pacific region, move from the political edge of Asia to the center, and thus play a key role in the construction of regional order. Under this policy, Southeast Asia, the Western Pacific and other regions have more strategic significance to India. "Indian Ocean priority" strategy means that India will still choose to invest strategic resources in South Asia and the Indian Ocean to ensure its dominant position in the region. It is foreseeable that after the US withdraws from Afghanistan, more strategic resources will be deployed to the "Indo Pacific" region. With the support and help of the US, India may also improve its power delivery capacity in the Indian Ocean region and gain more opportunities to expand its strategic space in the Western Pacific. From this perspective, the change in Afghanistan has worsened the geographical environment around India, but at the macro level, it may enable India to gain more favor and attention in the future competition among major powers, thus gaining more strategic space in the "India Pacific" region.

5. Conclusion

In general, the changes in Afghanistan in 2021 have a great impact on India's geographical environment. At the micro level, it has changed India-Afghanistan relations and reduced India's strategic space in Afghanistan. At the meso level, it has caused a new round of regional game. Russia has staged a comeback, and the opportunities for cooperation between China and Afghanistan have increased. Pakistan has gained more advantages in the competition between India and Pakistan, therefore, the threat to India has intensified. Iran's influence in the region has also increased, which puts more pressure on India's geographical environment. At the macro level, the change in Afghanistan has been followed by a further decline in the strategic position of the Middle East and a further rise in the strategic position of the "Indo Pacific" region. Under this international strategic pattern, India's strategic space in the "Indo Pacific" region may be expanded, and the geographical environment of the "Indo Pacific" region may develop in a direction beneficial to India in some aspects.

In the face of the changes in the geographical environment after the change in Afghanistan, India is also actively taking various measures to improve its own situation. For example, India has been trying to contact with Afghan Taliban to promote India-Afghanistan relations, and seeking cooperation with Tajikistan to change its isolated status in the region. Although the implementation effect of these measures is limited at present, due to the lack of stability of the situation in Afghanistan itself, India's future geographical environment is likely to change with the development of these situations. However, as a neighbor of China, India's geo-environment and geo strategic changes have an important impact on China, and it is worth further tracking and research for a long time in the

future.

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