

# The Resurgence Of Taliban In Afghanistan: Foreign Policy Options Of Major Powers With Special Focus On India.

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## Abstract

*For the United States of America, their failure in Afghanistan was a foregone conclusion. But the speed with which the Taliban surged in was beyond their expectations. American intelligence agencies seemed to have estimated that Kabul will fall within ninety days after the withdrawal of U.S. forces. The Washington Post reported this on August 10.<sup>7</sup> But, without any resistance and even a fight, the city fell in a single day, on August 15. It is beyond any doubt that it was the Pakistan Army's logistics and advice that helped and eased Taliban's march to Kabul. Pakistan nurtured the Taliban and designed their effortless way to power in Afghanistan. Afghanistan holds a very important position in India's network of trade and diplomatic relationships. But the strong ties between the two countries have been abruptly derailed by the establishment of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The failure of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, and the simultaneous resurgence of the Taliban after twenty years is expected to bring a lot of consequences in the relation among nations in general and in the region in particular. The Taliban's outreach to Pakistan, China, Russia, and to an extent even Iran, is likely to set in a series of developments that could alter the geopolitics of the region.*

**KEY WORDS:** Taliban, Militants, Geopolitical, Geo-economic, Foreign policy

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## I. Introduction

Afghanistan's association with terrorism is an acknowledged fact. Terrorism is not simply a western concept, for, many of the Islamic militants who committed acts of terror in Algeria, Egypt, and other Middle Eastern nations received their training in Afghanistan and were often referred to in these countries as "Afghanis".<sup>1</sup> Between April 1978, when the government of Nur Muhammad Taraki took office, and December 1979, when Soviet Military took control of Afghanistan, a bold attempt was made to transform the Afghan nation into a different kind of social and political entity. The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) leaders like Taraki and Hafizullah Amin saw April 27, 1978, as the dawning of a new era, but the era that began was one of violence and discord rather than a socialist society that would include the previously marginalized sections of people. Opponents of communist regime argued that the people saw through the regime's propaganda and raised the banner of jihad (struggle in the path of Allah) to preserve Islam and dislodge the infidel usurpers from power. For the last three decades, Afghanistan has been politically vulnerable to destructive forces. Terrorist groups of different nomenclature destroy peaceful life continually.

Amidst the confusion that has created the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, sound and fury in the international community and the ear-splitting cries of Afghans who wanted to escape from the barbarous Talibans, major players in the international power game have to take strategic decisions towards the second coming of the monstrous regime. "What is most disconcerting is the regional power vacuum in the Eurasian heartland created by the haphazard manner in which the United States withdrew from Afghanistan and its potential knock-on effects".<sup>2</sup> Major regional powers such as China, Pakistan, Russia, and the Taliban have already started filling this power vacuum. But, in his speech justifying his Afghanistan policy, U.S. President Joe Biden has purposefully avoided acknowledgement of his responsibility for the disastrous political drama. When Michael Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party of Soviet Union in March 1985, he had met Pakistani dictator General Zia and warned him that Pakistan's policy of backing the mujahideen would be met with drastic consequences. The Soviet troops had failed to successfully combat the mujahideen groups. Most of these groups had their base in Pakistan. "Secure with the U.S. fully behind it, Pakistan knew that the Soviet Union would not risk crossing the Durand Line to take armed action on Pakistan

territory”.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, after 16 years of fierce battle against Taliban, the United States failed to contain the Taliban insurgency, mainly because of Pakistan’s backing to Taliban and the United States’ limitations to carry the war into the territory of Pakistan. However, it should not be left unnoticed that the United States’ strategic objectives in Afghanistan were limited-killing Osama bin Laden and disrupting al-Qaeda networks.

## **II. Political History of Modern Afghanistan**

With the exception of a brief civil war in 1929, Afghanistan remained peacefully neutral in the first and second world wars. “But then in the mid-twentieth century Afghanistan was transformed into a cockpit for the cold war struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union that reached its climax with the Soviet invasion and its withdrawal ten years later. In the subsequent civil war that erupted in the 1990s, Afghanistan became a failed state, ignored by the world”.<sup>4</sup> More than any other events, it was the Soviet invasion that opened the question of political legitimacy in Afghanistan. The issue was not resolved even after the Soviet Union withdrew in 1989 and its puppet regime collapsed in 1992. In the absence of political unity among various mujahideen resistance factions, Afghanistan was drawn into civil war. This anarchy prepared the ground for the rise of the Taliban. “Unfortunately, the successful resistance strategy of making the country ungovernable for the Soviet occupier also ended up making Afghanistan ungovernable for the Afghans themselves. While the Afghans had recovered from many earlier periods of state collapse, the body politic was now afflicted with an autoimmune disorder in which the antibodies of resistance threatened to destroy any state structure, regardless of who controlled it or its ideology”.<sup>5</sup> The state apparatus was caught up in a structural weakness which led to the accretion of dependency of all Afghan governments on outside aid. During the fag end of their stay in Afghanistan, from 1986 to 1988, the Soviets had attempted to establish an inclusive government in the country. A Pashtun by decent, and a brutal Afghan leader, Najibullah became the President in 1986. He substituted the communist ideology of Afghan nationalism with the country’s Islamic heritage and reached out to all sections Afghan society. By the disintegration of Soviet Union, Afghanistan lost its powerful patron and the country was unable to cut out its own way out of the crisis, unlike in the past. At the forefront of the foreign Islamist groups which tried to exploit the weakness of Afghanistan was the Afghan Taliban, which with the support of Pakistan and foreign jihadists, took power in Kabul in 1996. The Taliban was a Pashtun movement which appeared in the early 1990s following the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989.

## **III. Pakistan is the Real Villain**

Notwithstanding Pakistan’s continuous repudiation that it provides any military support to the Taliban, it is a well-known fact that Taliban regimes in Afghanistan are protégé of Pakistan. “Of all the foreign powers involved in efforts to sustain and manipulate the ongoing fighting, Pakistan is distinguished both by the sweep of its objectives and the scale of its efforts which involves soliciting funding for the Taliban, bankrolling Taliban operations, providing diplomatic support as the Taliban’s virtual emissaries abroad, arranging training for Taliban fighters, recruiting skilled and unskilled manpower to serve in Taliban armies, planning and directing offensives, providing and facilitating shipments of ammunitions and fuel, and on several occasions apparently directly providing combat support”.<sup>6</sup> In April and May, 2001 Human Rights Watch sources reported that as many as thirty trucks a day were crossing the Pakistan border. Sources inside Afghanistan reported that some of these convoys were carrying artillery shells, tank rounds, and rocket-propelled grenades.

For the United States of America their failure in Afghanistan was a foregone conclusion. But the speed with which the Taliban surged in was beyond their expectations. American intelligence agencies seemed to have estimated that Kabul will fall within ninety days after the withdrawal of U.S. forces. The Washington Post reported this on August 10.<sup>7</sup> But, without any resistance and even a fight, the city fell in a single day, on August 15. It is beyond any doubt that it was the Pakistan Army’s logistics and advice that helped and eased Taliban’s march to Kabul. Pakistan nurtured the Taliban and designed their effortless way to power in Afghanistan. “Pakistan’s special forces, attack helicopters, and drones were crucial in tipping the balance against the National Resistance Front in Panjshir. The head of the Pakistan Army’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed, visited Kabul in the full glare of publicity to underline Pakistan’s ownership of the Taliban’s ascent in Afghanistan, inviting spontaneous protests across Afghanistan”.<sup>8</sup> The visit of General Hameed ensured for Pakistan that the newly formed Taliban government include Pakistan proxies, including four members of the Haqqani Network that is close to ISI, and that Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar was politically marginalized.<sup>c</sup> Pakistan has a huge interest in ensuring the new government in Kabul cracks down on groups like Al Qaeda and the local Islamic State offshoot-ISIS-K. When the Taliban seized Kabul in August 2021, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan declared the groups were “breaking the chains of slavery”.<sup>10</sup>

#### **IV. India's Dilemma**

India is especially worried about the developments in Afghanistan because the last time the Taliban were in power, they sheltered Pakistani militants. New Delhi is concerned that an emboldened Pakistan will use this as an opportunity to hit India. This may lead to a broader India-Pakistan conflict. Historically, India has been enjoying good relations with Afghanistan, which go back to the 1950 Treaty of Friendship. Therefore, India has been concerned about peace in Afghanistan. When the Soviet Union established an inclusive government in Afghanistan under President Najibullah in 1986, India too advocated a broad-based government and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was in the forefront in advocating it.

India even contacted former King Sahir Shah, who was living in exile in Rome, to lead the government. But Pakistan and America wanted to marginalise India and tried to ensure India only a non-operational position on Afghanistan developments. "Once it became clear Pakistan wanted a mujahideen government without Najibullah's participation or Zahir Shah's leadership, India decided to fully support the Najibullah government. This even before the last Soviet soldier left Afghanistan in February 1989".<sup>11</sup> As part of its outreach to all Afghan parties India was also in contact with the mujahideen.<sup>a</sup> But now with the Taliban's swift entry into power in Afghanistan and the ignominious capitulation of Afghan institutions, politicians and militias, all hopes and grandiloquent talks of creating a stable, democratic and peaceful Afghanistan have vanished into thin air in the same way as the Afghan Army, which was trained and equipped by the U.S.

#### **V. Economic Ties with Afghanistan is Crucial for India**

Afghanistan holds a very important position in India's network of trade and diplomatic relationships. But the strong ties between the two countries have been abruptly derailed by the establishment of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. India has a significant volume of investment in Afghanistan and has been building a flourishing trade relationship with the country. India's bilateral trade with Afghanistan amounts to around \$5 billion. Besides, a large volume of trade from India intended for Commonwealth of Independent States nations in Central Asia is transited through Afghanistan. India's trade relations with Afghanistan have been a long standing one. In March 2003, India and Afghanistan entered into a preferential trade agreement. This has been crucial for Afghanistan too. The agreement opened a vast Indian market for Afghan products, mainly dry fruits. These exports of Afghanistan enjoyed substantial duty concessions. In addition, as a member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, Afghanistan enjoys duty-free access to Indian market under the regulations of the South Asian Free Trade Area. Afghanistan, in turn, serves as an important market for Indian products, especially pharmaceutical products, tea, cement, and other construction materials. Apart from the economic considerations, there are other realms of cooperation, such as education and health. For instance, large number Afghan students study in India. Similarly, patients from Afghanistan are treated for life-threatening diseases in Indian hospitals.<sup>12</sup>

#### **VI. Strategic Location of Afghanistan**

But more than any other considerations, it is the strategic location of Afghanistan and its regional connectivity that make India disgusting in the present situation. Afghanistan is crucial in the New Silk Road initiative of India, which is designed to connect trade, transit, and energy in the Central Asian region to South Asia.

This is why India has invested so much money in Afghanistan, and also why so much of money has been spent on infrastructure projects.<sup>b</sup> "Given the current situation it is difficult to imagine how India can maintain the economic ties it built up with post-2001 Afghanistan, although the Taliban has announced its plan to continue its ties with India. Changes in foreign policy and trade relations are highly correlated. In the trade perspective, India needs to set up and make its stance on the Taliban government clear to introduce some certainty for Indian companies and investments. But even as the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan was in process, New Delhi has decided to curtail its civilian presence in Afghanistan, heading towards a full-blown civil war. India has closed, though 'temporarily', its consulate in Kandahar and evacuated its diplomats and Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) personnel stationed there. "These developments indicate two things: New Delhi's decision to partially "withdraw" from Afghanistan shows that betting only on the government in Kabul was a big mistake, and that New Delhi realises the threat Taliban poses to Indian assets and presence in Afghanistan. Either way, India's Afghan policy is at a major cross roads; to safeguard its civilian assets there as well as to stay relevant in the unfolding 'great game' in and around Afghanistan, New Delhi must fundamentally reset its Afghanistan policy".<sup>13</sup>

#### **VII. Policy Reformulation is an Imperative**

As a matter of fact, India has been reformulating its policy towards the Taliban over the past few years. For example, when Moscow organised a conference in late 2018, which had the participation of the Taliban, members of the Afghan High Peace Council, and other countries from the region, India sent a 'non-official

delegation' of two retired diplomats to Moscow. As a sequel, in September 2020, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jayashankar joined the inaugural session of the intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha. Again in June 2021, India has started reaching out to the Taliban. This was indirectly confirmed by the Ministry of External Affairs when it said "we are in touch with various stakeholders in pursuance of our long-term commitment towards development and reconstruction in Afghanistan".<sup>14</sup> This approach is seemingly half-hearted and ideologically hesitant. However, India's approach is not completely wrong. India has to consider the possibility of Pakistan acting out against India in Kashmir if India were to establish deeper links with the Taliban. But more than these Fabian excuses, there are more compelling reasons why India should engage with the Taliban more proactively and openly. "For one, whether we like it or not, the Taliban, one way or another, is going to be part of the political scheme of things in Afghanistan, and unlike in 1996, a large number of players in the international community are going to recognise/negotiate/do business with the Taliban.

The Taliban are likely to continue as an unavoidable villain in the future geopolitical power game. So, basic statecraft requires that we follow that route as well. Making peace with the *fait accompli* is not always a bad thing especially in the absence of better alternatives".<sup>15</sup> In short, the less proactive the Indian engagement with the Taliban, the stronger Pakistan-Taliban relations would become. Letting Pakistan in its way to exclusively deal with the Taliban is inherently a weak idea. Similarly, it would be erroneous to think that the Taliban will continue to be Pakistan's blind follower, not to forget that the Taliban is now propped up by Pakistan, once they acquire momentum in administration. More importantly, recent machinations of major powers have led India as if it were strategically boxed in the region, with the exception of its participation in the Indo-Pacific. India must break this box somehow. New Delhi must ensure that it is not a pawn on the south-western Asian geopolitical chessboard. Afghanistan might be a way out, though not in the immediate future.

#### Chinese Conundrum

The return of the Taliban in Afghanistan is seemingly a victory of Chinese diplomacy and a failure of the Americans. America's withdrawal from Afghanistan seems to open a vacuum for China to exploit. China is engaging with the Taliban to benefit from Afghanistan's rich mineral deposits and incorporate Afghanistan into its Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing is patiently waiting to reap returns from its huge investment in the Mes Aynak copper mine. Similarly, Afghanistan is vital for the Belt and Road Initiative. The huge investment it has made in the Chinese-Pakistan corridor will be at risk in the absence of Afghanistan's cooperation. However, Beijing is likely to give more weightage to its security concerns before it attempts to advance its affirmative interests in Afghanistan. Chinese presence in Afghanistan with its mischievous ally, Pakistan, may sound ominous for India.

The Chinese narrative of American decline may be the principal means by which Beijing seek to profit from America's withdrawal from Afghanistan. "Chinese propaganda officials likely will seek to exploit tragic images of America's abandonment of Afghan partners as proof points of American unreliability and incompetence".<sup>16</sup> This propaganda may gain for Beijing a message meant for inculcating among international audience that America's best days are gone and that Afghanistan is but another way station on America's path of decline. But sleepless nights are awaiting China.

### VIII. Pro-American Perspective

The decision of the United States to leave Afghanistan was a wise one. The cost of Afghan occupation was much more than what was getting in return. According to an estimate of Brown University, U.S., since 2001, the U.S. has spent \$2.26 trillion was spent on defence. The Afghan economy did not flourish, with 90% of its population still living below poverty line, with less than \$2 a day.<sup>18</sup> Washington's counter action to undercut Beijing's narrative would be to work to restore confidence in the competence of the United States to do big things. It was not a mere coincidence that the United States withdrew from Afghanistan at a time when it began to focus its foreign policy in East Asia. "There is growing consensus in Washington DC that the U.S., instead of staying engaged in the lost wars, which adds little value to American power, should now urgently prepare itself for the unfolding geopolitical contest with China. America's strategic response to China's rise is its Indo-Pacific strategy, which seeks to build a bloc of Indian and Pacific Ocean democracies aimed at containing China's rise and challenging its high-functioning single party dictatorship".<sup>17</sup> It might be with this aim in mind that the United States took initiatives to create new groupings, namely the Quadrilateral Dialogue, otherwise called the Quad, and AUKUS, a grouping of Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. The U.S. wants India to play a key role in the new partnership, which along with Australia, Japan and the U.S. make up the Quad. So, it might be inferred that the United States retreated from Afghanistan as part of a grand strategy to take on China in maritime Asia, in which it needs India's involvement. To repeat, as U.S. President Joe Biden pointed out, America's strategic objectives in Afghanistan were limited-killing Osama bin Laden and disrupting al-Qaeda networks. Having met its realist objectives, the United States can now leave Afghanistan and its people to meet the fate or to cut out their way. This perspective becomes more clear when one observe the way in which and the speed with which the United States involved in the maritime competition in the Indo-Pacific and the nature

and objectives of two international partnerships it got involved. For argument's sake it might be argued that the Quad was only a non-military partnership. But, in the case of AUKUS no argument can successfully convince an independent observer that there was no security concern behind its establishment. The United States, along with the United Kingdom, was hell bent on getting Australia in the strategic alliance against China. To materialise this objective, the United States was not reluctant even to incur the diplomatic costs of putting France at bay, by instigating Australia to cancel its contract with France for submarines.

### **IX. Anti-Chinese Perspective**

There are good reasons to spell fear, gloom and doom for China in the Taliban-led Afghanistan. The Taliban is all bent to engage in a selective treatment towards terror outfits present there or they have relations with. However, factional feud within the Taliban pose serious threat to the regime. There is lack of consensus and intense factionalism in the rank and file of the Taliban. "The Taliban spokesperson, Zbihullah Mujahid, describes the Taliban government as an interim one, perhaps to signal hope for more accommodative regime in the future. This is unlikely, as indeed are any concessions for the participation of women in governance or the restitution of human rights.....The intense partisan rivalries and manoeuvring for the division of spoils were visible from the manner that the forces different Taliban factions raced to occupy important vantage points in Kabul".<sup>19</sup> This makes impossible for the Taliban to make any reliable domestic and international policy predictions. Besides, Afghanistan's notoriety as an opium exporter makes the country vulnerable to world mafias and corruption. Most probably, only very less to a prediction, Embargoes, rebellions, factional wars and the like will be the likely events in Taliban- controlled Afghanistan. To add fuel to the fears of China, these issues will spread to Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Turkey and other essential rings in the BRI chain, thereby seriously affect China's ambitious project.

### **X. The Russian Aberration**

Russia, though much weaker than what it was once below a time, is currently seeking to enlarge its influence in Eurasia. The Afghan crisis gives it an opportunity. Between 2003 when Russia labelled the Taliban as a terrorist organisation and 2021 August when the Taliban took power in Kabul there has been much change in the Afghanistan policy of Russia. Though Russia has maintained longstanding informal diplomatic relations with the Taliban, Kremlin opened its airspace for U.S. military operations against the Taliban in 2009 and collaborated with the U.S. in anti-narcotics raids in 2010. However, Russia's engagement with the Taliban revived in 2015, as the threat of ISIS-K grew. Justifying this policy of cooperation with the Taliban, in December 2015, Russia stated that the Taliban's desire to combat ISIS-K objectively coincided with Moscow's interests. Afghanistan sharply responded against this move with a warning that Russia's action in elevating the stature of the Taliban could create long-term threats to regional and international security. Afghan lawmaker Shinkai Karokhail criticised that Russia provided assistance to the Taliban with the mischievous plan to prolong the U.S. war in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> In March 2018, John Nicholson, the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, alleged that Russian weapons were smuggled across the Tajik border to the Taliban. Nicholson asserted that Russia inflated the ISIS-K threat to provide a justification for military assistance to the Taliban. Notwithstanding the fact that Russia has ruled out any tie up with the Taliban in the past, Kremlin now hopes to translate this diplomatic experience into security and economic cooperation, especially at a time when the Taliban are the ruling authority in Afghanistan. Besides, Moscow could still view the Taliban-led Islamic Emirate as a partner against ISIS-K. Russian Ambassador to Afghanistan Dmitry Zhirnov claimed that Russia could invest in Afghanistan's vast untapped mineral reserves and believes that the Taliban could partake in transport and energy projects with Central Asian states.

### **XI. The Russian Mayhem**

Russia's problems in the future relations with the Taliban are no different from the Chinese conundrum. Although the second turn of the Taliban in Afghanistan is comparatively better to manage than its first stint during 1996-2001, in the Russian perspective, Moscow still has reasons to be concerned about Taliban rule. "Russian experts fear that the Taliban's hold on power might be more tenuous than it appears, and that Afghanistan could potentially succumb to a new civil war. Andrei Kortunov, the director general of the Russian International Affairs Council, expressed concerns that the Taliban will struggle to exert control over northern Afghanistan and this vulnerability, combined with the sharp deterioration of the Afghan economy, could result in the emergence of Al-Qaida and Islamic State cells".<sup>21</sup> In view of this perhaps, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that an Afghan government should include non-Pashtun ethnic groups, such as Hazaras, Uzbeks and Tajiks. He also emphasised on the need of a diplomatic settlement between the Taliban and the Ahmad Massoud-led National Resistance Front in Panjshir Valley.<sup>d</sup>

## **XII. Conclusion**

The failure of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, and the simultaneous resurgence of the Taliban after twenty years is expected to bring a lot of consequences in the relation among nations in general and in the region in particular. The Taliban's outreach to Pakistan, China, Russia, and to an extent even Iran, is likely to set in a series of developments that could alter the geopolitics of the region. The Afghan imbroglio may give Russia an opportunity to enlarge its influence in Eurasia, which is its national interest in the area. China, which seeks world domination, sees Afghanistan as a golden opportunity, both from geo-economic and geopolitical standpoint. Many West Asian countries are also trying to make as much hay out of the available sunlight. The United Arab Emirates and Qatar have already revealed their intentions. The interest of Saudi Arabia lies in the prevention of Iran from extending its influence in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are prepared to maintain peace with the Taliban-led Afghanistan. The United States build up maritime partnership to contain China in the Indo-Pacific. In this background, India has much to do with geopolitical stances. India's silence is in sharp contrast to the past, particularly the last 20 years. India was the first country that Afghanistan signed a strategic partnership with, the only country that undertook ambitious projects, and the one country that polled consistently highly among countries that Afghan people trusted. The Indian government must consider all its options in remaining relevant and engaged with Afghanistan for its future.<sup>22</sup>

### **Notes**

- a) Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar was the Taliban's most benign face and former front-runner for the job of head of government. Amid rumours on social media of his death, he has released an audio statement saying that he is alive.
- b) In February 1988, Rajiv Gandhi met Peter Galbraith, a staffer with the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and whom he had known from his youth. To Galbraith's surprise, Rajiv said that India had reached out to all sections, including the mujahideen inside Pakistan and Afghanistan and was now assessing the entire formula for a broad-based government in Kabul.
- c) These infrastructure projects include the 218 kilometre long Zaranj-Delaram Highway, the laying of electricity transmission lines from the Uzbek boarder to Kabul over the Hindu Kush mountains as part of the multi-country, multi-agency Northeast Power System, the Afghan-India Friendship Dam, and even the construction of the Afghan Parliament building. India also funded several community level projects, such as by contributing to power infrastructure, health care, telecommunications, and transportation projects in Afghanistan.
- d) To mitigate against instability in a Taliban-led Afghanistan, Russia is pursuing three policies. First, Russia is strengthening its engagement with Pakistan on Afghan security. Second, Russia has expanded its security cooperation with India against shared threats emanating from Afghanistan. Russia's Ambassador to India, Nikolay Kudashev, acknowledged that Moscow and New Delhi are both concerned by a spillover of terrorism from Afghanistan, as it poses a threat to Central Asia and Kashmir. Third, Russia is deepening its coordination with its Central Asian partners on Afghan security.

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