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## Rabbani's Assassination: A Wake-Up Call for India

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The assassination on September 20, 2011, of Burhanuddin Rabbani , a Tajik leader of Afghanistan, is of strategic significance to India.

**2.** Rabbani was the President of Afghanistan in the 1990s when Benazir Bhutto was the Prime Minister (1993-96) of Pakistan. After the Taliban captured power in Kabul in September, 1996, he became a prominent leader of the Tajik-dominant Northern Alliance motivated by the late Ahmed Shah Masood which played an active role in assisting the US post-9/11 in the defeat of the Taliban. It was Rabbani who, with Benazir's concurrence, allowed Osama bin Laden to shift from Khartoum in the Sudan to Jalalabad in Afghanistan when the Sudan came under pressure from the US to act against bin Laden. When the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996 it took bin Laden under its protection and shifted him to Kandahar where Mulla Mohammad Omar, the Amir of the Taliban, and its Shura were also based.

**3.** In the subsequent fighting between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, Al Qaeda and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) helped the Taliban while a triumvirate consisting of India, Russia and Iran supported the Northern Alliance. The success of Al Qaeda in having Masood assassinated through an Arab suicide bomber a day before the 9/11 terrorist strikes in the US Homeland could not dent the fighting capability of the Northern Alliance, which paved the way for the victory of the US forces, which defeated the Taliban and captured power in Afghanistan after freeing the country from the control of the Taliban.

4. Subsequently under pressure from Gen. Pervez Musharraf, who viewed the Northern Alliance as a pro-India and anti-Pakistan group, the Alliance and its leaders found themselves marginalised in the new dispensation in Kabul---with the blessings of the US.
5. The political rehabilitation of Rabbani by President Hamid Karzai and his appointment as the head of the High Peace Council to hold talks with the Taliban and wean it away from the military conflict which it had been waging from its sanctuaries in the Quetta area of Balochistan, set alarm bells ringing in Pakistan's GHQ.
6. Gen. Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, Pakistan's Chief of the Army Staff (COAS), and Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shuja Pasha, the Director-General of the ISI, saw in it a possible prelude to the re-emergence of the Northern Alliance as a strong force on the ground with the blessings of India in order to counter once again the Taliban and the ISI should they stage a come-back in Kabul after the US-led NATO forces thin out from Afghanistan as planned by President Barack Obama. The concern in the GHQ was enhanced when Rabbani visited New Delhi in July last to seek India's support for the peace process. The GHQ saw in his visit a hidden objective---- to discuss with Indian leaders and officials the possible future scenarios should the Taliban stage a come-back in Kabul.
7. The assassination of Rabbani was a pre-emptive strike by unidentified elements----which could be the Taliban or the Haqqani network or Gulbuddin Heckmatyar's Hizbe Islami or Ayman al-Zawahiri's Al Qaeda--- to prevent the re-emergence of the Northern Alliance as a strong force capable of standing up to the Taliban and its affiliates. It was a warning to Karzai against any future alliance with the Tajiks. It was meant to drive a wedge between the Pashtuns and the Tajiks. There is no other way of explaining the assassination.
8. The explanation advanced by some analysts that the assassination was meant to derail the peace process and indicated the presence of elements in the Taliban which are opposed to the peace talks, does not sound convincing. If the Taliban wanted to derail the peace process, all it had to do was to withdraw from the talks with Rabbani and his Council. It did not have to kill Rabbani. He was killed not because he posed a danger immediately, but because he was viewed by the Taliban and its affiliates as likely to pose a danger in the future should the Taliban stage a come-back in Kabul. His assassination could weaken the support of the Tajiks for Karzai and make Karzai even more vulnerable to pressure from the Taliban than he has been till now.
9. The assassination has strategic implications for India. It could weaken the Tajik leadership, which has been an objective ally of India. It could weaken Karzai with whom India has built up an excellent working relationship. In the uncertain period after the thinning out of the US presence starts, India would need strong allies in Afghanistan--- in all the communities. It is likely that in the months to come more of the leaders who are perceived by the Taliban and the ISI as well disposed to India might be eliminated one by one.
10. What options would be available to India? This is a question that needs to be discussed by New Delhi with those in Afghanistan with whom it has a close relationship as well as with the US. Russia and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) have been cultivating Pakistan and

vice versa. It is doubtful whether Russia would be amenable to the kind of co-operation that India and Russia had developed after the Taliban captured power in Kabul in 1996. Iran is out of question now in view of the hostility of the US to the present Iranian regime.

**11.** Co-operation with the US is the only strategic option we have. The US is now as concerned as we are over Pakistani machinations in Afghanistan. It could be more amenable to feelers from India for joint moves by India and the US to prevent a return to power of the Taliban with the ISI's backing. Till now, the US has been hesitant to let India play any major role in training and equipping the Afghan security forces due to a fear over its adverse fall-out in Pakistan. We should persuade the US to get rid of its hesitation and let India play a more important role in this regard. This is the first step that would be called for. Others have to be identified. India and the US should not hum and haw and wait till the events overtake them.

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