



View Point

India's Geopolitical Interests in Afghanistan

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India has deep-rooted civilizational ties with Afghanistan since times immemorial. Moreover, owing to Afghanistan's location on traditional invasion route to India from the north-west, the accepted wisdom in this country places India's security parameters at the Oxus i.e. the northern boundary of Afghanistan. Therefore, India cannot become indifferent to the developments in Afghanistan as they may have direct bearing on Indian security, stability and well-being.

The partition of India in 1947 and the illegal occupation of parts of J&K state by Pakistan --called Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), have denied India direct access to Afghanistan and provided Pakistan a critical geopolitical location vis-a-vis Afghanistan. Nevertheless, New Delhi and Kabul have maintained extremely friendly multi-faceted cooperation from the very beginning except during the brief period from 1996 to 2001 when Pakistan-backed Taliban (meaning the students of Islamic seminaries or *Madrassas*) ruled over Kabul.

Afghanistan can become the hub of trade and commerce in the region. It links South Asia with Central Asian states of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. It has common borders with Iran in West Asia and a small border with China across the narrow Wakhan corridor. In 2007, Afghanistan joined SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and thus formally became a member of the South Asian grouping. Afghanistan is also invited to the summit meetings of

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a Eurasian regional cooperation organization where India along with Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia have the observer status. Afghanistan is also a member of Asian Development Bank's CAREC (Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation) programme.

Afghanistan remains a highly fractious state with strong local ethnic and tribal loyalties. The total Afghan population is around 31 million of which around 42 % are the Pashtuns, Tajiks are 27 %. Hazaras and Uzbeks constitute around 9 % each of the total population. There are other smaller ethnic groups like the Turkmen, Aimak, Baloch and several others. Pashto and Dari are the two official languages of the land. Pushtuns are largely concentrated in the southern, south eastern and western parts of the country. Pashtun dynasties have ruled Afghanistan since the foundation of modern Afghan state in mid-18th century. The situation changed after October 2001 military action by US-led coalition forces against the largely Pushtun Taliban. Northern Alliance comprising northern ethnic communities helped the coalition forces in defeating the Taliban. Although President Hamid Karzai is a Pushtun, still the Pushtun-dominated southern and eastern regions are the stronghold of resurgent Taliban insurgents. The northern regions inhabited by various minority nationalities have witnessed greater peace and development as compared to continued turmoil and instability in the southern and eastern parts of the country adjoining Pakistan.

Afghanistan always had a rather weak central government with the tribal chiefs across the country enjoying considerable autonomy. The traditional grand assembly of tribal chiefs called *Loya Jirga* is the unique Afghan institution wherein national consensus may be reached on important issues. Indian model of "unity in diversity" and respect for pluralism can be especially relevant for multi-ethnic and multi-lingual Afghanistan. Significantly, it is India that is building the new Parliament building of Afghanistan scheduled to be completed by June 2013.

For the last four decades, Afghanistan has witnessed incessant bloodshed owing to external intervention and civil wars. The decision by the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to withdraw by the end of 2014 has again put a big question mark regarding the future course of developments in and around Afghanistan. Hard-line Islamic extremist Taliban are waiting for the opportune

moment to strike and again wrest control over Kabul. The world remembers with horror the abominable and cruel domestic policy of the Taliban during 1996-2001 period directed against the basic human rights of women and minorities, its medieval justice system and lack of tolerance for any sign of non-compliance. Under the Taliban Afghanistan became a haven of terrorists and militants from various parts of the globe. India was the biggest victim of cross-border terrorism. Indian state of J&K witnessed the worst period of terrorist violence during this period. Armed groups like LeT found support and sanctuary in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

Following the overthrow of the Taliban in the end of 2001 by the US-led coalition forces, India has provided sizeable assistance to Afghanistan for economic development, training and capacity building amounting to more than \$ 2.3 billion. No doubt, India enjoys immense popularity in Afghanistan because of the cultural pull and the size and quality of its aid. India believes in an inclusive and cooperative approach to Afghanistan on the part of the world community that may help the latter stand on its feet and contribute to regional peace, stability and co-prosperity. Therefore, India favours a regional cooperation approach to the stabilization of Afghanistan.

India wants a generally friendly but not an exclusively pro-India dispensation in Afghanistan. India is prepared to cooperate with other powers for the stabilization and progress of Afghanistan. India is basically interested in a stable and peaceful Afghanistan where terrorists and militants do not find a safe haven. Secondly, in view of peculiar geographical position of Afghanistan on the cross-roads of trade and transit routes, India would like free flow of trade and energy corridors in the region via Afghanistan and unhindered access to the same.

On the other hand, Pakistan is known to be working for denying any presence to India in Afghanistan. As a consequence of Pakistan's insistence, the Western powers did not encourage India to have any overt role in providing security to Afghanistan during the first decade of the new millennium. India is firmly committed to the principle that any decisions regarding a future dispensation in, and agreement regarding, Afghanistan should be Afghan-driven taken by the government and people

of Afghanistan and not dictated by other interested players to serve the latter's selfish interests.

Indian interests coincide with the objectives set by the December 2001 Bonn Conference on Afghanistan aimed at re-building a viable Afghan state that can hold its own and become a stable and responsible member of the comity of nations. India is in conformity with the inclusive and broad-based Bonn approach whereby the larger international community is expected to join hands for helping the Afghan state re-build. The prospects of one or more neighbouring states appropriating to themselves the right of shaping the future of the Afghan state to further their own narrow interests have led to disastrous consequences in the past and may do the same again.

The Taliban militia was able to control a large part of Afghan territory only with the help of Pakistani Army and its intelligence wing the ISI (Inter Services Intelligence) . This has been well documented.¹ India would abhor to have the repeat of the same scenario. At that time India had no option but to support the Northern Alliance fighting against the Taliban. The Northern Alliance was also supported by Russia, the Central Asian states and Iran.

The fact that India and Afghanistan signed the Strategic Partnership agreement on October 4, 2011 during President Karzai's visit to India testifies to strong Indian commitment to peace and stability of Afghanistan. Indian side has assured the visiting Afghan President that India will "stand by Afghanistan" when the foreign troops leave the country in 2014. According to the agreement, the Indian side has committed to increase the training of the Afghan security forces and police. The issue being currently debated is whether India should train Afghan security forces in India or in Afghanistan.

Regional Approach Preferred

With the planned withdrawal of ISAF forces led by the USA, regional approach is universally considered as the best bet to contribute to the emergence of a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. It is significant that in view of its impending withdrawal, the USA is also now keen to involve the regional countries in the stabilization of

Afghanistan.ⁱⁱ Several moves have been made in this direction in recent period. For instance, November 2, 2011 Istanbul Conference on Afghanistan has been described as a 'regional endeavour' to solve the problem. The Istanbul Protocol adopted at the Conference commits the regional countries to cooperate in countering terrorism, drug trafficking and insurgency in Afghanistan and in the neighbouring areas. Afghanistan's traditionally divisive neighbours pledged to support its efforts to reconcile with insurgent groups and to work together on joint security and economic initiatives to build long-term Afghan stability. Efforts were made at Istanbul to improve Afghanistan-Pakistan relations that had taken a nosedive following the assassination of Burhanuddin Rabbani, the head of Afghan high peace council by the insurgents based in Pakistan. The two sides agreed to joint investigation of the incident. However, it remains to be seen to what extent the efforts at Istanbul lead to foster cooperation among the regional powers.ⁱⁱⁱ India's participation in the Istanbul conference of November 2011 was significant as it was kept out at the behest of Pakistan from the Istanbul conference in 2010.

There remain many impediments on the way. The fact remains that no regional state would like another regional state to acquire preponderant influence in Afghanistan. Among the countries bordering on Afghanistan, policies of Iran and Pakistan are of special significance. While Iran enjoys considerable influence over the western part of Afghanistan and Shia people of Afghanistan, Pakistan is persistently wanting to turn Afghanistan into a satellite state in the hope of acquiring 'strategic depth' against India.

The commitment by international community that it will continue to help Afghanistan in its nation building, security and development at Bonn conference in December 2011 is a hopeful sign. However, Pakistan --from where most of the insurgent groups are operating in Afghanistan—refused to participate in Bonn Conference in December 2011 owing to recent deterioration in its relations with the USA.

There have been persistent reports in the past that the US is seeking permanent military bases in Afghanistan that might provide it a presence in the strategically important region close to the borders of major powers. However, Taliban have

expressed a strong opposition to permanent military presence of the USA in Afghanistan. Iran does not want permanent US presence. Major powers like Russia and China would also not welcome the US military bases for their own reasons. Russia, on its part, is mainly opposed to drug-trafficking from Afghanistan to Russia via Central Asia. It is also concerned that Islamist militancy emanating from there may adversely affect Central Asia and southern territories of Russia. China wishes to basically advance its economic interests, but does not want to get involved in politics in Afghanistan. China is known to be relying on its all-weather friend Pakistan to protect its interests in Af-Pak region.

With the declared intention of the US-NATO forces to leave Afghanistan the fear of the Taliban forces again wresting control of Kabul looms large over the horizon. There is a need to closely examine in what ways the things have fundamentally changed since the time of mid-nineties when the Taliban was able to establish control over most of Afghanistan with the help of Pakistan, financial support of Saudi Arabia and covert blessing of the US at least in the initial phase. At that time the USA had initially hoped that the Central Asian hydro-carbon resources could be accessed and directed towards the south if the Taliban was able to pacify and unite Afghanistan. Subsequently owing to human rights violations by the Taliban and the shelter that it gave to the Al Qaeda, the US turned against the Taliban. The bombing of the world trade towers by Al Qaeda on September 11, 2001, invoked sharp US response and the military action in Afghanistan, which led to the ouster of the Taliban regime.

Since then much water has flown down the Amu Darya and the Indus. Under strong US pressure Pakistan had made a policy about turn, it withdrew support from the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and joined US-led war on terror. Pakistan also provided bases to the USA and overland supply route to the US/NATO troops across its territory. In March 2004, Pakistan was accorded the status of USA's major non-NATO ally. However, Pakistan military and intelligence establishment continued to play a double game of openly siding with the international community's war on terror but at the same time maintaining links with, and clandestinely giving aid to various insurgent groups fighting against the Afghan and ISAF forces. The double game of Pakistan has been exposed by scholars and experts around the world. Vladimir Plastun, a noted Russian expert of Oriental Studies, for instance, remarked, "Pakistan

cannot decide whether it wants to fight terrorism or encourage it as state policy.” Former advisor to the US President on Middle East and South Asia, Bruce Riedel (Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institute), for instance, writes, “Pakistan has become the most dangerous country in the world...It is the epicentre of the global jihadist movement that attacked New York in 2001 and Mumbai in 2008. Its weak civilian government may have good intentions but seems powerless to address the country’s multiple crises. The army remains the patron of parts of the jihadist Frankenstein even as it fights other parts of the monster. The ongoing revelations of David Hedley on the ISI’s role in Mumbai 26/11 only underscore how dangerous Pakistan is today.”^{iv}

No wonder, the chief of Al Qaeda –the world’s most dreaded terrorist organization-- Osama bin Laden, was found living in Abbotabad in Pakistan, which is a garrison town of Pakistan army. Laden was killed in a covert operation by the USA. Recently, Admiral Mike Mullen of the USA has openly accused Pakistani spy agency ISI of having links with the militants.^v

Likely Scenarios

Best Case Scenario

The best case scenario in Afghanistan would be a realization by the government and diverse peoples of Afghanistan as well as all the interested regional powers that it is in everyone’s interest to have a strong, united and peaceful Afghanistan that takes control of its destiny. All the regional powers should agree in words and deeds to respect Afghanistan’s sovereignty and cooperate with one another for maintaining stability and co-prosperity in the entire region.

While drawing a hopeful scenario wherein the repeat of 1990s situation for the Taliban may not be possible, it may be argued that today there is Afghan National Security Force, whose capacities are increasing. The commitment by international community that it will continue to help Afghanistan in nation-building, security and development at Bonn conference in December 2011 is yet another hopeful sign.^{vi}

It has recently come to light that Afghanistan has immense natural wealth estimated at a trillion dollars, including huge reserves of copper, iron ore, cobalt, gold and critical industrial materials like lithium.^{vii} Afghanistan can become a well-off country. Its position on the cross-roads of regional trade routes between Central Asia and South Asia and towards the Persian Gulf can also earn the country sizeable money as a regional trade hub and transit country for energy pipelines. In fact, Afghanistan can emerge as a regional stabilizer. Of late India has shown interest in Hajigak iron ore deposits in Bamyan province in Afghanistan.

In accordance with the optimistic scenario, it is hoped that the traditionally moderate Islam of Afghanistan will make extremist and hardliner Islam propagated by the Taliban redundant.

As a hedge against the return of religious extremism and fundamentalism in its most rabid form, the government of Afghanistan has clearly emphasized that reconciliation will be possible only with those elements of Taliban, who would express faith in the country's constitution. Moreover, there has been definite improvement in the security situation in the southern and eastern parts of the country during recent period.

Worst Case Scenario

The worst case scenario would be sharp deterioration in the security situation following the withdrawal of the NATO-led Western troops from Afghanistan. If the perception gains ground that the withdrawal of the Western troops from Afghanistan would lead to serious deterioration in the security situation, it may result in further intensification of rivalries among the regional powers with a view to furthering their respective interests in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan today accounts for the production of 90% of the illicit opium of the world. It is a source of funding for the Taliban militants. The worst case scenario will imply that Afghanistan remains a source of illegal drugs and arms trafficking and safe haven for forces indulging in cross-border terrorism and promoting religious extremism that may threaten the stability of the neighbouring countries.

Groups like Haqqani network have been attacking Western and Indian targets inside Afghanistan with the help or connivance of Pakistan's military and intelligence services. Pakistan is not ready to stop such attacks. It regards these groups as its 'strategic assets' with the help of whom it hopes to establish a compliant pro-Pakistan regime in Kabul following the withdrawal of the Western troops from the country. It would be the worst scenario if Pakistan succeeds in its nefarious game plan. In such a case the things will not stop with the 'AfPak' region. It may create a strategic nightmare for Indian security planners. Threats of cross-border terrorism in the Indian state of J&K and other parts of the country may increase manifold. Peace, stability and secular political order of Central Asia, Caucasus and the southern regions of Russia may also be seriously threatened. What is more, serious danger exists of the Talibanization of Pakistani society itself. It may create extremely dangerous security implications for neighbouring countries, especially India.

Mixed Scenario

Mixed case scenario would imply that while there may not be greater cooperation among major powers and main regional players for maintaining peace and stability in and around Afghanistan, their rivalries may remain within limits. Violence and bloodshed may continue, but within limits. The mixed case scenario is closer to reality and, therefore, more likely to actually unfold.

Indeed, the worst case scenario may not materialize because the elements within Pakistan's military and intelligence establishment that are hobnobbing with the Taliban, Haqqani network and other insurgent groups in Afghanistan do not have unlimited resources. Pakistan is facing acute domestic political and economic crisis. It is also by and large internationally isolated. Even China, the all-weather friend of Pakistan, would not favour Islamic extremist elements to gain upper hand in Afghanistan and Pakistan and surrounding region for fear of its adverse fall-out on its own restive Uighur population in Xinjiang.

Fluid Situation

There is no doubt that the situation in Afghanistan is extremely fluid and uncertain. It is very difficult to predict future course of events. The USA, which is the

main external actor currently present in Afghanistan with around 90,000 troops on the ground, does not clearly spell out its future moves so as not to provide an opportunity to the adversary to precisely work out its counter moves. The exigencies of US Presidential election campaign are also determining some of the policy pronouncements. Although it is widely believed that the Afghan security forces that are being trained and equipped by the West shall not be in a position to take the responsibility of providing security to the country by that time, still it was declared that the USA would start withdrawing troops beginning July 2011 largely keeping in mind the Presidential elections due in November 2012. The troops are scheduled to be withdrawn from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Twenty two thousand troops are to be withdrawn by the fall of 2012. No schedule has been set up for the withdrawal of the rest of the troops except that they are to be out by the end of 2014. In a bid to appeal to the war-weary US electorate, Defense Secretary [Leon E. Panetta](#) said on Feb. 1, 2012, that [American forces would step back from a combat role in Afghanistan as early as mid-2013](#), more than a year before all American troops [are scheduled to come home](#). It would mean that the US troops would move into an “advise-and-assist” role to Afghanistan’s security forces. Owing to their current economic woes, the Western countries are also keen to reduce their financial commitments to Afghanistan including to the upkeep of the Afghan National Security Force.^{viii}

One key concern is that the Taliban insurgents may infiltrate in the Afghan National Security Force and indulge in subversive activities and defeat the very purpose for which it is being formed.

Broadly speaking, the US does not expect to make greater gains by trying to remain in Afghanistan beyond a certain date. According to this line of thinking, Afghanistan is no longer crucial for US objectives. The US attention is already being diverted to the Pacific and Iran. It is widely recognized in the US circles that Pakistan is not a reliable ally. It is believed that US had better abandon both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Promoting ‘New Silk Road’ is regarded as an honourable exit strategy for the USA. The idea was initially propounded in 2007 by Frederick Starr, the Chairman of Central Asia Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Programme of the Johns Hopkins University. Since then it has been officially embraced by the US

State Department. There is a stalemate in the battlefield in Afghanistan as no side is a clear winner. The US considers it more prudent to withdraw at this stage and leave the onus on the regional powers to maintain stability. US is holding back channel talks with the representatives of the Taliban in order to reach a deal. The Taliban have opened an office in Qatar for this purpose. The US is also already working with the Russians and other countries on the NDN (Northern Distribution Network) to work out the details of an orderly exit. Statements are also being made to the effect that the USA is not seeking permanent bases in Afghanistan.^{ix} It is the Karzai regime which wants long-term commitment from the international community in political, economic and security aid.

India need not step into the Western shoes, but it should take all possible measures to protect its vital interests. India has signed the strategic partnership agreement with the Afghan government on October 4, 2011. It may help in a massive way in the training of Afghan security forces including the armed forces and police. If the Afghan nation has to hold its own as an independent and self-respecting nation, it must resist becoming a satellite state of Pakistan.

Despite the strong clout that the Pakistan army and ISI have over the Taliban forces of Afghanistan, it has yet to be seen to what extent the Taliban would submit to the dictates of the former. The Taliban forces also know about the various flip-flops in Pakistani policy and that the latter is not a reliable friend of anyone. The insurgent groups are also divided. Besides, there is a clear danger of the Talibanization of the adjoining Pakistani areas themselves. However, the whole of Pakistan army may not become Talibanized. Within Pakistan itself a tussle is going on among various institutions for supremacy.

It is in India's interest if democratic and liberal and tolerant forces become stronger in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. It would be in the larger interest of Pakistan itself if it concentrates on making use of its important geopolitical location for emerging as a trade and transit hub for energy pipelines and transport corridors and takes full financial benefit of it rather than slip into the chaos of fundamentalism, militancy and religious extremism.

India should try to improve ties with Pakistan and encourage democratic forces there. However, if Pakistan persists with rabid anti-Indian policy of denying any space to India in Afghanistan, India should encircle and bypass the former by cultivating very friendly, multi-faceted ties with the saner elements in Afghanistan and also with the neighbouring Central Asian countries, Iran and Russia.

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Notes

ⁱ Ahmed Rashid: *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London; I.B. Tauris Publishers), 2001 edition, *passim*.

ⁱⁱ Harsh V. Pant, "A grand chessboard: Afghanistan and the regional powers," at www.rediffmail.com, November 4, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} *Times of India*, October 30, 2010.

^v <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13153538>, April 21, 2011.

^{vi} Faryal Leghari, "Afghanistan on Track," *Khaleej Times*, December 1, 2011.

^{vii} *New York Times*, June 13, 2010.

^{viii} NYT, February 1, 2012.

^{ix} <http://news.antiwar.com/2011/06/14/state-dept-official-denies-us-seeking-permanent-bases-in-afghanistan/>.