



View Point

Potential Role of Afghanistan in Enhancing South Asian-Central Asian Cooperation

*Jyotsna Bakshi

For over three decades, Afghanistan has witnessed political turmoil, warlordism and terrorism resulting in incessant bloodshed. The economic situation is dismal and current development initiatives may not solve the economic woes of the country. However, Afghanistan is located in the midst of rapidly developing regions. There is an opportunity for Afghanistan to benefit from the fast growing economies of India and China in its immediate neighbourhood. Demands and influences generated by economic growth may play the decisive role in reshaping the geopolitical balance in Eurasia in coming decades. There is growing need for increased connectivity between the sources of energy in Central Asia and West Asia and areas of energy consumption in South and East Asia. Afghanistan is physically located in the centre of the expected changes.

The shortest routes from South Asia to Central Asia lay across Pakistan and Afghanistan. No wonder, Afghanistan is destined to play the role of a crucial link for enhancing energy and economic cooperation between Central Asia and South Asia. In April 2007, Afghanistan joined South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as its eighth member. It is also seeking to reach out to its northern neighbours. President Karzai attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in

January 2009. Afghanistan has also joined the Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) programme, which is the flagship programme of the Asian Development Bank to promote regional cooperation, transport connectivity and poverty alleviation schemes.

There exists a wider international support for promoting South Asian-Central Asian cooperation. The US wants to promote South-Central Asian cooperation in its own interest of reducing Central Asia's dependence on Russia. In early 2006, the Bureau of South Asian Affairs in the US State Department was expanded to include Central Asian states. Richard Boucher, former US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, was reported to have favoured trade and investment connectivity between Afghanistan and Central Asia, especially the export of electricity from Central Asia to Afghanistan so that the Central Asian states view Afghanistan not only as a problem, but also as an opportunity.

Despite intense competition between Moscow and Washington for influence over the Eurasian space, they share common concerns over religious extremism and militancy in the region, against which they are both battling. Russia and other former Soviet states in Eurasia have offered northern routes for supplying US/NATO troops in Afghanistan.

Russia is keen to expand trade and economic ties with the Central Asian states, Afghanistan and other South Asian countries inter alia for economic reasons. While Russia exports mainly hydrocarbons and raw materials to Europe and China, it can export industrial products to the countries towards its south and, thus, revive its dilapidated industrial base.

Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are hydrocarbon rich states in Central Asia. If the much talked about Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline reaches fruition at some future date, it can bring not only Turkmen, but also Uzbek and Kazakh gas to South Asia. The mountainous republics of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have immense hydroelectricity generation potential and can export electricity to Afghanistan and across Afghanistan to Pakistan and to northern regions of India.

As a pointer to the future course of development, India has built electricity transmission lines across the 4000-metre high Salang Range in northern Afghanistan that bring electricity from Termez in Uzbekistan to Kabul. India is deeply interested in peace, stability and development in its immediate and strategic neighbourhood. While protecting its territorial integrity and sovereignty, India would welcome that the barriers in the way of increased trade and travel between the countries of the region are reduced.

Indian Built Zaranj-Delaram road connects India with Afghanistan and Central Asia through Chabahar port in Iran. The road provides land-locked Afghanistan and the Central Asian States an alternative outlet to southern seas via Iran.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh favours growing trade and travel ties between India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is his belief that a day would come when it would be possible to take breakfast in the Indian city of Amritsar, lunch in Lahore in Pakistan and dinner in the Afghan capital Kabul. The next destination may be the Central Asian states located across the Oxus River/Amu Darya.

If Pak-Af region emerges as a hub of growing trade, economic and cultural transactions between South Asia and Central Asia, Pakistan itself could gain immensely from peace dividends as the major transit country along with Afghanistan. On the other hand, Pakistani military and ISI aspire to have exclusive control over Afghanistan in order to gain so-called 'strategic depth' against India by imposing regressive minority Taliban government on the country. People of Afghanistan do not wish to be a mere pawn to serve a neighbour's nefarious designs. Recent interaction with Afghan parliamentarians, civil society activists and media representatives revealed early shoots of democracy and civil society in Afghanistan that need careful nurturing and protection. People and government of Afghanistan with the help of wider international community wish to take their destiny in their own hands, rebuild their country and emerge as a land bridge between South Asia and Central Asia, and East Asia and West Asia, a role that both history and geography have bestowed upon Afghanistan.

Within Pakistan also -- despite the traditional domination of the military establishment, a peace constituency is slowly emerging that wishes to benefit from enhanced trade with India. Addressing Indo-Pak CEOs Business Forum in New Delhi on May 18, 2010, India's Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee called for liberal trade regime between the two countries and transit trade to Afghanistan and Central Asia across Pakistan. "Let us together step out of the old and into the new," he added.

** Dr. Jyotsna Bakshi is ICSSR Visiting Senior Fellow at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*

May 27, 2010.