

**India's Role in Afghanistan Post 2014: Strategy, Policy and Implementation\***

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**Introduction**

Afghanistan due to its location, culture and with mere existence in this region, affects not only the continent but the whole world in various dimensions. In the past, Afghanistan had a tumultuous history replete with internal strife and political instability. For centuries the great powers of the world have tried to tame this Region but succeeded only in pushing that Nation into gradual descent towards fragility and chaos. Matters have been worse due to various ethnic, sectarian and tribal faultlines that reside within the Country. Terror groups like Al-Qaeda prospered during Taliban ruled environment and invited the wrath of the USA by 9/11 incident. It prompted the latter to launch a large scale Military Operation in Afghanistan, better known by the Acronym Global War on Terror (GWOT). GWOT is the longest and costliest war of this age and finally it is drawing to a closure in Afghanistan. The USA managed to eliminate the Al-Qaeda Chief and dismantled his network to a certain extent and announced the withdrawal of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) by the end of 2014. How this shapes Afghanistan's future will have a significant impact on this region, particularly on India. This article attempts to analyse the evolving situation in Afghanistan and suggest possible policy options for India.

**Part I - Geo-Political Imperatives and Present Situation in Afghanistan**

**Geo-Political Imperatives**

'Islamic Republic of Afghanistan' has a population of around 31 million people which consists of, 42 per cent of Pashtuns, 27 per cent of Tajiks, nine per cent of Hazaras and Uzbek groups.<sup>1</sup> There are other smaller ethnic groups like the Turkmen, Ajmak, Baloch and several others. The population of the country is divided into various ethno-linguistic groups. Sweep of the history reveals that the notion of tribal cohesion has always been far more important than the 'Idea of single nationhood'.

**Geostrategic Location.** Afghanistan has a strategically important location in Asia. It is a landlocked country and bordered by six countries namely; Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and China. This land served as a pivotal location on the ancient Silk Road, which carried trade from the Mediterranean to China. Sitting on many trade and migration routes, Afghanistan may be called as the 'Central Asian Roundabout' or 'Land Bridge' since routes converge from the Central, West and South Asia. It is also an important and most viable outlet for energy and mineral resources of the Central Asian Republics (CARs).

**Political History.** The political history of the modern state of Afghanistan began with the Pashtun-Hotaki and Durrani Dynasties in the 18th Century. In the 19th Century, it became a buffer state in the 'Great Game' between British India and the Russian Empire.<sup>2</sup> A series of conflicts viz Anglo-Afghan War and coups, Soviet invasion and civil Wars devastated much of the country.<sup>3</sup> Post

9/11, 'Operation Enduring Freedom' was launched as a new phase of war in Afghanistan by the USA led coalition. The United Front (Northern Alliance) had also joined hands to remove the Taliban from power and dispel Al Qaeda.

**Present Situation**

During the last four decades, Afghanistan has witnessed incessant bloodshed owing to external intervention and civil wars. Present situation in Afghanistan is far from stabilised. Process of establishing a successful 'democratic system' is still in an embryonic stage.<sup>4</sup> Most of the developmental projects of the donor nations are yet to be completed and have now entered in a sort of pause mode. Between reconstruction and military operations the latter gains priority and statistics also suggest that ten times more has been spent on military operations than on rebuilding Afghanistan, with corruption and inefficiency further eroding the value of the reconstruction process. Major investors are in the process of shifting their businesses abroad due to instability and existing security situation. Basic amenities and educational facilities are yet to reach the rural areas of Afghanistan. Literacy level is lingering on 39 per cent and primary education to all is still a mirage.<sup>5</sup> Lack of steady income and employment opportunities for the youth, makes them vulnerable targets for 'Jihadists'. 'Agri-culture' in Afghanistan has been turned into 'poppy-culture' due to the monetary benefits in opium trade.

Militarily, in the North and the West, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) should be able to control the insurgency after the withdrawal of ISAF. By contrast, in the South and East; serious fighting is likely to continue without any prospect of ANSF gaining the upper hand within the reasonable time frame. Initially, the ISAF had aimed at pacifying Afghans by delivering a debilitating blow to the Taliban and driving them out of key areas. Simultaneously, the ANSF was to be trained and equipped to safeguard stability and peace in the State. However, ISAF could not accomplish its goals completely. Moreover, training such large security forces from scratch in a short time would not be feasible and this trained force is yet to show concrete results. The young ANSF would have to carry out major operations instead of mopping up the remnants of the insurgency. It is unlikely that they would be able to defeat the Taliban completely. The present Government is not able to contain growing 'Kalashnikov culture'. Till date, bomb blasts or suicide attacks are part of daily affairs to the Afghans. The fact is that the ISAF has failed to subjugate the Taliban led militancy adequately. It is also evident that the Taliban have launched several fresh campaigns in many areas recently.

On 30 Sep 2014, under heavy pressure from the USA and the UN, the two rival candidates, Mr Ashraf Ghani and Mr Abdullah Abdullah, formed 'National Unity Government' under a power sharing agreement and sworn in as the President and Chief Executive respectively. It is also opined that this deal is fragile and likely to be a cause of friction

between these two groups within the Government. On the following day the newly formed Government also signed long delayed 'Security Pacts' with the USA and the NATO to authorise deployment of a portion of ISAF post withdrawal.

## **Part II - Likely Scenarios: Post Withdrawal Afghanistan**

After 25 years of Soviet troop's withdrawal, Afghans are at another historical crossroads. Potential threats and risks associated with the withdrawal of ISAF is a matter of concern for the international community. Analysis of the present situation in Afghanistan leads to three possible scenarios that could play out in the future.

### **Scenario I : Stable and Balanced Transition**

In Scenario I, the National Unity Government may succeed in power sharing and lead the nation into development path. The USA along with regional players may implement a sound transition plan by handing over the responsibility of combat operations to ANSF in a graduated manner. ISAF would leave mandated troops for the purpose of training, mentoring and providing logistics support to the ANSF with a view to strengthening the Afghan security framework to requisite size/level with adequate capability to deny Taliban/Islamic State (IS) takeover. All the ongoing development projects can be expected to be completed in timely manner to enable Afghan political establishment to function smoothly. In this case all the Regional powers should also agree in words and deeds to respect Afghanistan's sovereignty and cooperate with one another for maintaining stability and prosperity in the entire Region.

### **Scenario II : Failed/Divided Afghanistan**

In Scenario II, there could be a sharp deterioration in the security situation following the withdrawal of ISAF. The fragile power sharing agreement may falter and the Afghan Government may fail to maintain peace and security in Afghanistan; and Taliban, backed by Pakistan military and other religious extremist groups, may take over the Government. This Taliban supported weak regime is likely to create a radicalised regime in collaboration with other international terrorist organisations. Such an administration will be an ideal setting for the militants to plan and execute terrorist strikes across the World in furtherance of their perceived aims. Chaos and infighting within various ethnic groups for power sharing in Afghanistan is a likely scene. If this perception gains ground then, it may worsen the present situation, the neighbours and donors may withdraw support and financial aid to the present Government. In such a scenario Afghanistan may fail to survive as a democratic nation.

### **Scenario 3 : Extended/Additional ISAF Presence.**

In this scenario the ANSF may not win the conflict with Taliban and allied groups but it may be able to maintain peace and stability in areas under its control. In such a situation, the regional powers may step in with their Security Forces under the UN or NATO leadership to safeguard their interests and also to maintain peace in this region or the ISAF may have to rethink its drawdown plan and may extend the duration of stay. This scenario assumes importance in light of recent reports about the resurgence of the Taliban and rise of Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria.<sup>6</sup>

## **Part III - Global Stakes in Afghanistan**

### **Global Stakes**

Afghanistan is the new battleground where overlapping interests of multiple regional and global players have come to the fore. Each player has his own interests and is demonstrating a resolve to pursue the same resolutely. Common interest to all is the discovery of nearly a trillion dollars worth of mineral wealth in Afghanistan which has added an altogether new economic dimension to this turbulent region.<sup>7</sup>

### **Pakistan**

Pakistan is sharing 2640 km long porous Durand Line with Afghanistan. It is keen to have Taliban as part of the Government in post withdrawal Afghanistan to achieve its own interests. Its assumption of the role as a key facilitator of the Afghanistan peace process signals a pragmatic shift in its regional security approach. This entails a shift from its previous India-Centric 'Strategic Depth' policy of dominating Afghanistan through 'Pashtun-Taliban proxies' which yielded limited strategic gains. Pakistan's troubled political framework, disturbed Internal Security situation and fear of secession of Balochs and North West Frontier Province are the main factors for this change. These factors are pressing it to seek direct solutions with Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> Also, major changes in economic, political and security situation in Afghanistan compels it to change the strategy towards Afghanistan. Pakistan is also worried about the rising Indian and other powers influence in this region.

A stable Government in Kabul will pave a way for repatriation of nearly 1.9 million registered and one million undocumented Afghan refugees which is a security problem for Pakistan. Afghanistan may play very crucial role to keep Pakistan's declining economy afloat. The failed Afghanistan entails unaffordable consequences for Pak internal security, political stability, sovereignty and economic viability.

At the same time, possibility of Pakistan's double game cannot be discounted. Pakistan's support to Taliban continues to be sanctioned at the highest levels of Government, with Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) even represented on the Quetta-Shura, the Taliban's War Council so as to retain influence over the movement's leadership.<sup>9</sup> Taliban fighters continue to be trained by Pakistan while the ISI not only provides financial, military and logistical support but also retains strong strategic and operational control over the Taliban campaign in Afghanistan. Even though the USA led ISAF is fighting the insurgency; Pakistani military continues to view the Taliban as a strategic asset. In turn it can also be predicted that in a post withdrawal scenario, Pakistan may aid the Taliban to take over Kabul or would export terrorism to India to achieve its perceived aims.<sup>10</sup>

### **The USA**

The USA has largely won its vital national interest ie dismantling the Al-Qaeda structure in turn to avoid another strategic shock like 9/11. Unlike India, the USA overtly may not be interested into deciding who actually governs Afghans so long as the territory is not used as a springboard for attacks on its soil. But it is in look out for a credible partner in this region to play a safe 'Gas Game' and to safeguard its economic interests in this region. The USA intends to use it as an operating base from where it can keep an eye on Iran & Southeast Asian states.

## **Iran**

Iran shares a 736 km long border along plains in western Afghanistan which is closely associated linguistically, culturally and religiously with Afghanistan. Iran is looking for pro-Iran Government in post withdrawal Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> It is concerned about flow of terrorism and narcotics from Afghanistan. Although Iran wants to see the foreign forces leave this region, it also has concerns over the exodus of a large number of refugees. If the security situation deteriorates post withdrawal, it may not serve Iran's interests. Iran wants to develop the existing economic and trade ties with the new Government. It is also concerned about the safety and well-being of Hazaras based in Central Afghanistan where fresh offensives are being launched by Taliban.

## **China**

Prime interest of China is its economic ties with Afghanistan. China intends to explore the market potential of this region for its goods to keep its economy in pace. It is concerned about the continuing US presence as well as the potential threat of Uighur militant groups operating in Xinjiang from bases in Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup> It has avoided any direct involvement in Afghanistan security or politics, fearing this would make it a target for Islamist terrorism. Hence, China dreams of a stable and trouble free post withdrawal Afghanistan.

## **Russia**

Presently, Russia is refocussing on the problem of Islamist extremism inside Afghanistan which may spread to the CARs and neighbouring regions. It is facing drug menace emanating from Afghanistan for the last two decades. It considers that a stable Government in Kabul may be able to control this menace. In sum, stable Afghanistan is the only expectation of Russian Government. It is unlikely that Russia would get involved in Afghanistan politically or militarily.<sup>13</sup>

## **CARs**

CAR States are agonised on the consequences of instability in post withdrawal Afghanistan. They are anxious about the survival of their own political regimes, economic burden associated with the possible influx of refugees, and geopolitical changes that might result from withdrawal of ISAF. Drug production and trafficking and poses another challenge to all the CARs.

In sum, most of the nations yearn for a stabilised and trouble free Afghanistan as mentioned in Scenario I, whereas Scenario III is also acceptable to a certain extent but Scenario II is not acceptable for sustained growth and peace in this region.

## **Part IV - Present Indian Stand and Recommended Strategy, Policy and Implementation**

### **Present Indian Stand**

India and Afghanistan have enjoyed cordial relations since 1950. Since then, India supported whatever Government was in place provided, even if it was opposed by Pakistan. Once the Taliban consolidated power in 1996, chasm between India and Afghanistan widened especially post IC-814 incident. In 2001, India expressed her support to GWOT and Northern Alliance in war against Taliban. Later, India followed a 'soft power approach' aimed at striking a chord with ordinary Afghans through developmental initiatives and stayed away from internal politics. It also wisely refrained from sending troops for engaging in security operations. However, Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) in 2011 and 2013 indicated, training, capacity building of ANSF and security cooperation along with various infrastructure developmental projects. India has pledged United States Dollar (USD) 2 billion on various projects, emerging as the fifth largest bilateral donor to Afghanistan and has already invested approximately USD 1.1 billion in various projects including steel plants and power projects. India is also laying the foundations for sustainable economic development in the Country by various trade agreements. Notwithstanding the above, Indian political establishment was criticised at various forums for the soft power approach which yielded no real strategic gains.

### **Factors Influencing India's Policy**

Indian policy in Afghanistan has been influenced by various tangible and intangible factors. Some of the factors are as follows :-

- (a) Prime factor is Pakistan, its involvement in Afghanistan politics, economic and development projects, and its support to Taliban.
- (b) Bilateral relationship with the USA and its influence on the USA over Indian activities in Afghanistan.
- (c) Nature of Indian political establishment and its external affairs strategy. With the 'Neighbours First' policy of the present Central Government, some fundamental changes can be expected in the regional policy of India.
- (d) Survivability of the newly formed Government and its abilities to negotiate peace with Taliban.
- (e) Long term acceptability and implementation of bilateral security arrangement by both ISAF and Afghanistan.

## Recommended Indian Objectives

India's grand strategy on foreign policy is mostly under performing in its core interests and vital objectives. In the present context, we need to reorient our thinking and realign the policy objectives based on dynamic situation developing in this region. Some of the suggested policy objectives are as follows :-

- (a) Maintain the sovereignty and integrity of Afghanistan by strengthening the institutions, both civilian and military, and by facilitating a smoother political transition.
- (b) Deny this region to the terror groups who may use it as launch pads to export terrorism to India by establishing a stable state.
- (c) Safeguard own economic interests and also explore the market space for Indian goods in this region.
- (d) Required to play safer 'Gas game' in order to fulfill energy requirements in which Afghanistan may play a crucial role in future.
- (e) Actions taken in Afghanistan should not hurt own religious sentiments.
- (f) Need to take steps which would fulfill our aspirations as a major Regional Power.

## Recommended Policy and Strategy

India needs to refine her Afghan policy and formulate a comprehensive strategy that would include dexterous use of all instruments of diplomacy, strategic intelligence operations and a significantly enhanced economic embrace with a calculated risk quotient ie 'intense and multilateral engagement with Afghanistan'. The option postulates a qualitative and quantitative upgrade in our economic, social and political domain. The recommended option comes with a risk quotient - the probability of losing our economic investment in case of Scenario II/III. The inevitable risk of loss of economic investments in the above case in Afghanistan must be endured by an aspiring Regional Power like India.

## Intense and Multilateral Engagement

India must initiate ventures encompassing infrastructure development projects, strengthening of the Government machinery, capacity building of the State, ensuring better local governance and providing financial aid for the growth of Afghanistan. Indian scholarships to Afghan students should be significantly enhanced to reinforce the existing goodwill amongst the Afghan people. A trader to trader interaction especially in industrial sectors of carpets and rugs, marble and food processing will boost the primary industrial sectors of Afghanistan.

India should steer away from a direct military intervention in Afghanistan. However, India must continue assistance in the training, equipping and capacity building programmes for the ANSF, to enable them to resist Taliban-IS attempts to regain power in Kabul. In addition, reduced military engagement below the threshold of direct intervention must be vigorously pursued. Diplomatically, India should engage the regional players ie Iran, Russia, CARs, China and even Pakistan to be able to build a regional consensus on Afghanistan which envisages a stable Afghanistan and consequently a stable region. India must at the same time, attempt to make bridges with the moderate faction of the Taliban apart from the erstwhile Northern Alliance factions.

## Implementation Facets

**Tenets.** It is opined that, India should pursue calibrated enlargement of its political and socio-economic footprints as also military to military engagement while taking care not to get drawn into a military quagmire. The enlarged economic footprint that we seek needs to be secured with an adequate complement of Para Military Forces. The recommended policy and strategy is based on the prevailing situation in Afghanistan. However, India needs to keep a close watch on the outcome of dynamic political and security situations and calibrate its policies for engagement accordingly.

**Political Engagement.** The population of Afghanistan has a very positive perception of Indian activities in the country. This has been endorsed by various surveys and statistics. With such positive credentials about India being a natural friend and ally, India should leverage the goodwill to pursue its interests. Some of the steps that may be taken are as under:-

- (a) **Reviving Northern Alliance Links.** India needs to revive links with the erstwhile Northern Alliance. Major players of Northern Alliance have already integrated with the regime of Afghanistan and are actively participating in governance. Even if the power sharing agreement between Taliban and present Government process bears fruit, Northern alliance members may not be comfortable sharing space in Kabul with Taliban. Thus, India needs to be prepared for such an eventuality, and should keep the time tested past links alive.
- (b) **Engaging 'Good Taliban'.** India must engage with all ethnic groups in Afghanistan, particularly with the Pushtuns. India has generally been opposed to talking to the Taliban on the plea that there is no distinction between 'Good' and 'Bad' Taliban. But it must accept the prevalent reality and find ways and means for political reconciliation with the 'Good' Taliban.
- (c) **Social Engagement.** India could enhance its investment in social sectors like education, health, vocational training, developmental projects in rural sector etc. Such social ties with more people to people contact will be beneficial to the Indo-Afghan relationship. India has a natural advantage in age old cultural ties (Kabuliwala) and that must be further reinforced. India need not be extra sensitive to Pak sensitivities in building its relationship with Afghan people.

**Economic Engagement.** India should enlarge its economic footprint in a calibrated manner. India should pursue both 'low visible high impact' projects as well as projects which will have a strategic impact. Possible focus areas are as follows :-

**(a) Mining and Oil Exploration Rights.** India should bid for additional mining and oil exploration rights in Afghanistan while making concerted efforts to safeguard the existing projects. India should pursue for additional petroleum blocks in Northern Afghanistan.

**(b) Power Projects. Currently,** India is providing technical expertise in development of power projects. We need to exploit the possibility to extend India's footprint in construction of additional power lines and infrastructural developments.

**(c) Develop Additional Inlet / Outlet Corridors.** India should assist Afghanistan emerge as a trade, transportation and energy hub connecting Central and South Asia to provide free and unfettered transport and transit linkages. In this regard, India is already in talks with a dozen countries to build seamless corridors from Iranian ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas to Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Caucasus. Some recommended projects for development of additional corridors are as under:-

(i) Rail links from Iran's ports joining Afghanistan's Garland Highway (Ring Road).

(ii) Seamless road and rail links to Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan which would increase the overall trade by 80 per cent.

(d) Facilitate greater engagement between the Chambers of Commerce of both countries for strengthening trade, economic, scientific and technological cooperation.

(e) India should create a favourable environment for trade by simplifying customs duties, lowering tariff, creation of air cargo facilities and by improving credit and insurance facilities.

(f) India lacks direct road or rail access and transit arrangements with Afghanistan which deprives it of the benefit of India's huge market for its goods and services. Free access to the Indian market would stimulate the Afghan economy and therefore, India must take measures to reach a consensual Afghanistan - Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement.

**Military Engagement.** India is poised to become the largest country outside the US/NATO ambit in terms of commitment to provide military training, equipping and capacity building of the Afghan Security Forces. The strength of Afghan Army is targeted to be built-up to 2,40,000 by 2014. India should intensify its military engagement in the field of training, mentoring, capacity building and logistics. Recommended implementation facets are as follows:-

(a) Increase the capacity of pre-commission training from the present strength of 50 per year to 150 / 200 per year in a phased manner.

(b) Provide expertise on counter terrorism and specialised skills by training Afghan troops in Army Training Institutions/Schools. With the training of a battalion strength per quarter in various Indian Army institutions, India will be able to train upto a brigade plus strength in a year.

(c) Indian Army is planning to send Training Teams to Afghanistan for training of Afghan troops. This training should be 'on the job training' of battalion groups on the lines of Corps Battle Schools (CBS). As part of SPA, India can establish some of these battle schools where these training teams can be effectively employed.

(d) Assist Afghan Army in establishing institutionalised training mechanisms. India may sign a 'Long Term Training Memorandum' with Afghanistan for establishment of training institutes for the Afghan National Army, like Junior Leaders Academy, Command and Staff College etc.

(e) The major part of military inventory of ANSF is of Russian origin. Similarly, India too holds equipment of Russian origin. Thus, India can provide assistance to ANSF in the field of training, overhaul and maintenance.

(f) India should initiate and intensify military to military contacts and exchanges in the form of seminars, discussions and visits.

(g) India may offer to pay, raise, equip and train up to two Afghan infantry divisions. India is capable of training upto 2500 troops simultaneously in various Regimental Centres.

## Regional Approach

India's interests and policies in Afghanistan converge broadly with those other key players like Iran, CAR, USA, China and Russia.<sup>14</sup> Cooperation among these countries could contribute significantly in countering the resurgence of the Taliban and stabilising Afghanistan. These aspects have not been adequately explored on account of political differences, regional instability and the lack of an inclusive forum in which they can be discussed. Table 1 indicates various dyads in the South Asian region in terms of their competition or convergence in interests and reinforces optimism about the Indian role in regional approach. Due to the converging interests of India with other nations, India could be a potential key facilitator of strengthened regional cooperation for peace and security in the region. India needs to contemplate this regional approach in various forums and take other key players onboard. India has to navigate with global and regional players to build a consensus by calibrating their differences and competing interests, yet securing its own. Presently, India is boosting its Government-to-Government relations with the USA, CARs, and in particular with Tajikistan and Iran for a common approach on Afghanistan. The Government should also initiate trilateral relationship with Iran, Russia and CARs Nations to counter any adverse situation in Afghanistan to safeguard

the regional peace, economic interests and stability.

**Table 116 : Intensity of Competition or Convergence (High \*\*\* Moderate \*\* Low \*)**

Competing Interests	Converging Interests
Pakistan - Afghanistan***	USA - India***
Pakistan - India***	Pakistan - China***
Pakistan - Iran**	Pakistan - Saudi Arabia***
Pakistan - USA***	Pakistan - United States*
Iran - Saudi Arabia***	India - Iran***
Iran - USA***	India - CAR**
CARs - Pakistan*	India - Russia*
Russia - Pakistan*	Russia - Iran*
Russia - USA**	
India - China*	
Russia - China*	

## Conclusion

No unilateral solution or formula exists for the Indian policy towards Afghanistan. The fluid, dynamic and unstable situation in this region offers only a multilateral approach as a possible course in future. Lack of Indian efforts to establish a stable Afghanistan will lead to others filling the vacuum which would impinge on our own aspirations. India needs to avert these possibilities and explore the situation to fulfill her own aspirations. The Indian stakes in Afghanistan are high and time is running out. India cannot fritter away all the goodwill that India has built up over the years with the people of Afghanistan and let others dominate this region. Timely intervention and implementation of a well-orchestrated policy may bring both peace and prosperity to India as well as to this region.

## Endnotes

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