

Evolving Scenario in Afghanistan: Implications For India

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Introduction

From the dawn of history Afghanistan has remained at the centre-stage of peace and conflict in the Indian subcontinent. The 'Old Silk Route' formed the crucible of trade, science, spirituality and cross-fertilisation of civilisations, connecting the Indian sub-continent-Central Asia-West Asia and China. On the flip side, many invasions; notably led by Alexander, Tamerlane, Ghauri, Ghaznavi, Babur, staged through Afghanistan into India thus redrawing the sociopolitical landscape of the region. Afghanistan was the fulcrum of the first Great Game of the 19th Century between the British India and the Russian empire. The two great powers realised the futility of subjugating Afghanistan and settled for creating it as a buffer state. The 2nd Great Game in the Eighties (1979-1989) between the US - Saudi Arabia - Pakistan alliance against the Soviet Union legitimised the use of Islamist Jihad as an instrument of state policy. Post the US exit, the Af - Pak region emerged as the epicentre of international terrorism. In the fall of eighties, Pakistan military establishment directed Afghan trained Jihadists to wage a proxy war in Kashmir. The 3rd Great Game began in the wake of 9/11 which saw the ouster of Taliban regime and onset of Democracy in Afghanistan, albeit in the middle of a virulent conflict unleashed by Pakistan sponsored Taliban and hosts of other militant groups, including Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP). Talibanistan of Afghanistan or spread of rabid Wahabi – Salafi ideology does not bode well for regional peace and stability.

Afghanistan is at the crossroads of its strategic destiny. Geostrategically, Afghanistan is a landlocked country with access to the outside world through the North Distribution Network to the North through Central Asia, Bolan and Khyber Passes to the

South in Pakistan and Chabahar – Zaranj – Delaram Axis or International North South Transit Corridor (INSTC) to the west in Iran. At the same time, it enjoys a distinction of being a strategic bridge for inter regional connectivity and energy corridors that, if successful can potentially alter the politico-economic landscape of the region, transforming it into a zone of co-prosperity. But if Afghanistan fails, it will become a major source of regional instability and dampen the prospects of smooth operationalisation of Belt and Road corridors, China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Lapis Lazali transport corridor, Persian Gulf Corridor, Ashgabat agreement, Afghanistan-Pakistan- Tajikistan Trade and Transit Agreement and Pan- energy grids such as Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) pipeline and the Central Asia – South Asia (CASA) - 1000 power grid. The aforesaid trade and energy corridors are extremely important for India's access to Eurasia and to diversify sources of energy imports. India aspires to see transformation of conflict-ridden Afghanistan to a stable and democratic state under an Afghan owned and Afghan led peace process that is duly supported by the regional states and the international community. It would, therefore, be in order to examine the evolving scenario in Afghanistan, analyse its impact on India's strategic interests and dilate on India's strategic engagement with Afghanistan.

Evolving Scenario in Afghanistan

Decades of instability and violence have turned Afghanistan into a very fragile state ranking 9th lowest in fragility and at 169 in HDI out of 188 countries¹. According to the UNFPA, 63.7 per cent of the population is below 25 years with very high unemployment levels². The UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates at least two million Afghans are at risk of starvation³. The economy is in regression, with foreign aid contributing to 90 per cent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP)⁴. Afghanistan's parliamentary and district council elections are scheduled on 20 October 2018 and the Presidential elections are scheduled in 2019. The National Unity Government is facing intense tension within its ranks as is seen from spate of resignations of ministers holding high portfolios.⁵ The political

stability has further deteriorated by the persistent factional politics by warlords.

Afghanistan ranks very high in the terrorism index (2 out of 163)⁶. Out of 98 globally recognised terrorist groups, about 20 such groups are operating in the Af-Pak region. They want to create a Caliphate based on Sharia or Nizam e Mustafa. Taliban have launched operation KHANDAQ to target major communication centres, government installations, foreign nationals and voter registration centres⁷. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report claims that 13.8 per cent of Afghanistan's districts are under insurgent control or influence, whereas, Government controls 58.5 per cent⁸, the remainder being contested. ISKP is active in about 30 districts and it mostly indulges in sectarian killings.

Pakistan's complicity in cross border terrorism remains unabated. Pakistan based terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Haqqani network were categorically named for regional instability at the 'Heart of Asia' conference in December 2016 and in the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) declaration on 04 Sep 2017^{9 10}. In the meanwhile, Pakistan and Afghanistan have renewed Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS) that seek non use and non violation of each others territory, avoid blame games and institutionalise system of joint working groups, joint check posts and exchange of liaison officers at the headquarters for coordination of efforts. Nonetheless, these initiatives have yet to render any tangible results on ground as is evident from Pakistan's direct involvement in recent Taliban attacks in Ghazni province. Taliban has spurned President Ashraf Ghani's ceasefire offers under the Kabul Peace Process. They do not recognise the Afghan constitution or the elected government and harp on the withdrawal of foreign troops as a precondition for talks¹¹. Likewise, Taliban have remained indifferent to appeals made at the Jakarta Trilateral Religious Scholars Conference, or the Fatwa issued by Afghan clerics or urging at Mecca religious conference to shun violence and join the negotiation process. Taliban intransigence, however, persists.

The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) despite serious constraints have resisted Taliban onslaughts in southeastern and northern provinces of Afghanistan. The underlining aim of Operation KHALID 2017 and Operation NASRAT 2018 has been to prevent capture of communication centres, secure roads and developmental projects. ANSF has been fairly successful in defeating Taliban offensives in Kunduz and Ghazni provinces; however, their success against Fedayeen attacks has been lacklustre. On the whole, put in the words of Gen Nicholson, a state of strategic stalemate prevails in Afghanistan.

Zero Sum Geopolitics in Afghanistan

The international community has espoused support to 'Afghan led Afghan owns Peace Process'. However, major players are adopting contradictory approaches to deal with the problem. President Trump in his South Asia policy asserts for renewed effort in combating terrorism, building Afghan National Self Defence Forces (ANSDF), particularly the Afghan Special Forces and Air-Force, putting pressure on Pakistan to dismantle terrorist infrastructure and solicit Indian support in peace building and development in Afghanistan. The US alleges that Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran are scuttling the US endeavours by hobnobbing with Taliban. Moscow has for years opposed the Taliban, calling them terrorists, and supported the anti-Taliban 'Northern Alliance'. However, Zamir Kubalov, Putin's Special Representative for Afghanistan termed ISIS in Afghanistan a bigger threat than the Taliban.¹² China perceives security in the region from the perspective of mitigating East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) threat to Xinjiang, Belt and Road / energy corridors, securing investments in mining in Aynek and oil exploration in North Amu Darya. China is known to play the role of an interlocutor between Afghanistan and Pakistan and hobnobbing with Taliban. Iran had supported Northern Alliance and the US against Taliban but is now in favour of engaging with Taliban.

Strategic Implications for India

Afghanistan assumes the status of a buffer and bridge in India's strategic calculus. Talibanisation of Afghanistan and spread of Jihadi terrorism is a major trans-national threat that has

ramifications for regional peace and stability. India favours Afghanistan to be a rallying point of fight against terrorism. Indian Defence Minister Smt Nirmala Sitharaman addressing the 'VII Moscow Conference on International Security' from 03 to 05 April 2018 raised concerns over instability in Afghanistan and urged the international community to adopt a policy of zero tolerance towards terrorism, She also urged to consolidate capacities of the Afghan Government and security forces in the face of newer provocations and terrorism.¹³ India is gravely concerned at the recent escalation of terrorist violence in Afghanistan, which demonstrates that safe havens and support systems continue to be available to the terrorists from across the border. Recently, unidentified armed men in Baghlan province in Afghanistan abducted six Indians. On 6 June 2017, a Taliban rocket had hit the Kabul home of India's top envoy to Afghanistan, fuelling security concerns. After 2009 attack on Indian Mission in Kabul, then Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao had said that Indo-Afghan relations are impermeable to such attacks and India has "unwavering commitment to pursue our bilateral development partnership and assist the people of Afghanistan in realising a democratic, peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan¹⁴." The Indian Mission, Consulates and about 150 personnel working on various projects are vulnerable to Taliban attacks. Pakistan is wary of India's growing footprint in Afghanistan and is trying to offset with strengthening its strategic depth in Afghanistan through its proxies. Lieutenant General Vincent Stewart, Director, US Defence Intelligence, during a hearing on Afghanistan at the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2017 stated, "They (Pakistan) view all of the challenges through the lens of an Indian threat to the state of Pakistan. So they hold in reserve terrorist organisations, so that if Afghanistan leans towards India, they will no longer be supportive of an idea of a stable and secure Afghanistan that could undermine Pakistan interests.¹⁵"

India's strategic interests in Afghanistan, besides combating terrorism, devolve around gaining access to Central Asia, expansion of economic engagement in Eurasia and energy security. Therefore, a stable Afghanistan is vital for early operationalisation of Chabahar – Zaranj- Delaram axis, INSTC and TAPI gas pipeline.¹⁶ India is facing an inimical geopolitical

alignment in Afghanistan, wherein, the interests of Russia – China – Iran and Pakistan coincide vis a vis India and US. It is worrisome, that the new US sanctions could slow or even bring India's plan to develop berths at Chabahar Port to a halt. The new US National Security Adviser, John Bolton, has a much tougher line on Iran and any further restrictions they place will make India's Chabahar plans more expensive and even unviable.¹⁷ India needs to consider long-term scenarios of its political, diplomatic and military options. India should work diplomatically towards the creation of a "concert of powers" — a regional grouping including the US, Russia, the EU, India, Iran, Central Asia and China¹⁸ for peace building in Afghanistan.

Role of India in Afghanistan

India and Afghanistan share strong historical and cultural ties since ancient times. India's engagement with Afghanistan is guided by Strategic Partnership Agreement 2011, which is steered by a council of foreign ministers. At the multi-lateral level, India actively participates in deliberations at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Contact Group on Afghanistan, Russia – India - China (RIC) , BRICS, Heart of Asia Conference, Moscow format, Indo-Iran-Afghanistan trilateral agreement and India, US, Afghanistan trilateral dialogue and other international forums. At the 2nd meeting of SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group in Beijing held on 28 May 2018, India extended firm support to the Afghan led reconciliation process and role of SCO in peace building.¹⁹ India has agreed to undertake joint projects with Russia²⁰ and China²¹ in Afghanistan. The Pentagon titled 'Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan' underlined that "India is Afghanistan's most reliable regional partner and the largest contributor of development assistance in the region,"²². India can leverage its rich experience in combating terrorism by exchanging data with the SCO and share its counter terrorism exercises.

India has invested US \$2 billion for civil capacity building, such as, construction of Salma dam, roads, power lines, parliament building and telecommunication infrastructure. Assistance is provided by way of developing TV industry, agriculture sector, irrigation, health, transport and grant of gratis

vacancies to Afghan students in academic institutions in India. Liberal medical visas for treatment in Indian hospitals are being issued. India has successfully completed Small Development Projects (SDP) scheme designed for border districts of Afghanistan.²³ The inauguration of the Dedicated Air Cargo Corridor in June 2017 between Kabul-Delhi and Kandahar-Delhi has provided a fresh impetus to bilateral trade.²⁴ Mazar-e-Sharif and Herat were also connected to New Delhi by air in October 2017.²⁵ The Afghan side has appreciated India's timely assistance of 170,000 tonnes of wheat and 2,000 tonnes of pulses when the country was facing drought.²⁶ India has agreed to build a 500-km railroad from Chabahar to Zahedan, close to the Afghan border.²⁷ Under the enhanced India-Afghanistan-US partnership, India organised "Passage to Prosperity", the India-Afghanistan Trade and Investment Show,²⁸ In 2017, the Indo-US-Afghan trade and investment show in Delhi, was attended by 200 Afghan, and 800 Indian businessmen.

India has pledged US \$ 1 billion aid to Kabul for construction of 116 high impact community development projects to be implemented in 31 provinces. In addition, six new projects in low cost housing for returning Afghan refugees in Nangarhar province, road connectivity (to Band e Amir in Bamyan province), national park, economic development, water supply schemes (Shahtoot Dam and water supply for Kabul and Charikar city in Parwan province), establishment of gypsum board manufacturing plant in Kabul, construction of polyclinic in Mazar e Sharif are being undertaken.²⁹ Some of the ongoing projects India has undertaken are development of communication infrastructure (optic fibre) and Surobi 2 hydropower plant with capacity of 180 Megawatt (MW). The inflow of medical tourists from Afghanistan has reached 55,681.³⁰

India has supplied non-lethal military equipment, and four-helicopter gunships. Request from Afghanistan to repair MI 35 helicopters, transport planes and supply of other military hardware is under consideration. About 1000 military personnel and a fair number of civil servants, policemen and other specialists are being trained in India. Beds are earmarked for battle casualties in multi - specialty military hospitals. India will also provide 500

scholarships for graduate studies in India for the next of kin of ANSF martyrs for the academic year 2018- 2019. Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between India and Afghanistan on technical cooperation for police training and development will help in capacity building of Afghanistan National Police.³¹

Conclusion

India seeks a stable, prosperous Afghanistan that is fully integrated with global trading network. Afghan people have strength, wisdom, courage and perseverance to start a new and peaceful life for the sake of future generations. India is against zero sum mentality and does not favour Afghanistan being used as a chessboard for proxy conflicts. India strongly favours that the neighbouring countries and the international community at large should join hands in defeating terrorism and supporting Afghan owned Afghan led peace process for global peace and security. India has live operational experience in combating cross-border terrorism and undertaking civic action programmes with Afghan characteristics. India, therefore, can be a partner of choice in peace building in Afghanistan, be it part of the UN, SCO or any other multilateral mechanism that is based on a win-win paradigm.

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