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REVISITING INDIA'S AFGHANISTAN POLICY

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Introduction

“Afghanistan has been part of India’s political, military and cultural space” since the times of the Mauryan Empire. Indo-Afghan relations are among the few bilateral ties that include elements of civilizational, emotional and strategic imperatives and bonds. India’s engagement with Afghanistan after 2001 has been intense but largely limited to providing assistance in creating infrastructure, health, education and other humanitarian requirements. Despite being the fifth largest non-traditional donor, India has not been able to leverage all the goodwill to achieve its strategic or security interests.

Installation of a ‘National Unity Government’ (NUG) in Afghanistan

after the 2014 presidential elections and the consequent political uncertainty necessitated careful policy correction for India. Change in leadership in Afghanistan also brought in changes in its foreign relations priorities. This paper analyses India’s afghan policy in the context of current geopolitical scenario prevailing in South Asia in order to draw out lessons for improving the same. India has enormous stake in peace and stability in Afghanistan. “India has three key strategic interests in Afghanistan: preventing terrorist attacks in India, supporting peace in Afghanistan, and gaining access to Central Asia”¹. It has to contest the regional dynamics including the ever increasing Chinese involvement in Afghanistan along with Pakistan which leaves little space for India’s maneuvering.

Economically, China is already poised to dominate Central Asia, including strategic energy assets. Pakistan on the other hand continues aiding and abetting terror against India utilizing its Afghanistan based terrorist assets.

Factors Affecting India – Afghanistan Relations

Afghanistan is a land of extreme diversity, fractured along geographic, ethnic, tribal, linguistic, and sectarian fault lines². The country lies at a junction of three large distinct regions: Central Asia, South Asia, and West Asia. Afghanistan is a strategic bridge³ of great geopolitical significance which links Central Asia and South Asia which are intimately connected not only geographically but also strategically. Great powers, therefore, have always strived to control this region.

With the change in the government in Kabul after the US brokered deal in late 2014, geopolitical land scape in this region started changing with Dr Ashraf Ghani, the new President of Afghanistan cozying up to the Pakistanis in a bid to bring in the Taliban for the peace talks. President Ashraf Ghani did not evince a special interest in India's special role in his country, although in his telephonic conversation with Prime Minister Narendra Modi he did describe India as the "foundation of Afghanistan's

diplomacy and economic strategy"⁴. Its foreign policy remained oriented to the West, particularly the United States, with a regional thrust on a 'ten-year action plan to develop closer ties with Pakistan'⁵. "The Afghan President's 310-page election manifesto mentioned India frequently, but in very vague terms with respect to strategies for Afghanistan's education, health, economic and trade sectors"⁶. The New Unity Government of Afghanistan started its foreign policy primarily oriented towards the triad of Pakistan – United States – China.

President Ghani appeared more than eager to address Pakistan's concerns regarding Indian influence in Afghanistan. "The new Afghan President gave preference to Pakistan and China over India and relegated India in the "fourth" and not the 'first' circle of friendship focussing on engaging the Pakistani military first"⁷. 'In a major policy shift, Afghanistan under Ghani started turning towards Pakistan for military training'⁸.

Afghanistan's attempt to improve relations with Pakistan soon ran into problems with a series of terror strikes killing number of people in the latter half of 2015. Ghani remarked that "suicide training camps and the bomb-making facilities used to target and murder our innocent people still operate, as in the

past, in Pakistan"⁹. Had the ISI-NDS deal moved forward, as desired, Pakistan's presence in Afghanistan would have grown exponentially at India's expense'¹⁰. By the end of 2015 Afghanistan had started again tilting towards India.

India's Afghanistan Engagement

Afghanistan holds significant economic, political and strategic importance for India. However, since the Soviet invasion, the dominant Indian narrative in Afghanistan has been related to security concerns. Although there have been no boots on ground, in the long term, India has viewed Afghanistan through the prism of National Security especially after 9/11. Weak afghan economic situation and its enormous requirement for military resources provide maneuver space for India which it lacked in the past. "While the security aspect will continue to remain a very important factor and warrants no dilution, more so in view of frequent attacks on Indian personnel and projects, the new driver of Indo-Afghan relations should be economics and trade"¹¹.

Economically, India needs Afghanistan because the latter is located at the crossroads of Southern Asia and energy-rich Central Asian Republics (CAR) as well as Iran. Since India did not have good relations with Afghanistan

during the Taliban rule, the first imperative for India was to rebuild a positive image which had taken a serious setback during the Taliban regime. Therefore, the Indian government has provided US\$2 billion aid to re-build decapitated infrastructure as well as new facilities through afghan government agencies. India did not employ its private contractors to make profits in the reconstruction projects and transfer them back home.

The Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) 2011, between India and Afghanistan, paved way for "a long term commitment to multifaceted bilateral relations and to actively develop them in political, development, economic, trade, scientific, technological, cultural and other fields as also in the training, equipping and capacity building programmes for Afghan National Security Forces"¹². India, however restricted its engagement to areas like education and technical assistance, and investment in Afghanistan's natural resources. India has also reiterated its commitment towards an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, broad-based and inclusive process of peace and reconciliation, and stressed upon the need for a sustained and long-term commitment to Afghanistan by the international community in various international forums"¹³.

What has gone wrong with India's Afghanistan Policy?

In the last decade India's Afghanistan policy started off on a good note with the recognition of India's important role in the Bonn Conference, 2001. However, from 2007 onwards India continued to be marginalised by the West in afghan peace process. Logistic and political compulsions made the United States totally dependent on Pakistan for their long term commitment in Afghanistan. This provided leverage to Pakistan to increase its influence and increase anti-India terror activities both within and outside Afghanistan. India's marginalisation was overtly reaffirmed with the exclusion of India from the international conference on Afghanistan - Istanbul Process in 2010 thus keeping India out of the decision making loop.

India has played a proactive role towards the development of Afghanistan with the premise that social and economic development of Afghanistan is central to regional stability. However, 'Soft Power'¹⁴ approach and 'aid only' policy have remained the corner stones of its Afghanistan policy so far.

India has so far failed to extend the influence of its soft power in the countries surrounding Afghanistan and therefore, has not been able to build a robust

consensus on the methodology to deal with Afghan instability. "India believed in the American approach to the afghan situation and failed to take note of the fact that it had been left out of United States' policy for the Central Asian Republics while dealing with Afghanistan"¹⁵. Nor could India use its relationship with the United States to ensure India would be included in any regional initiative aimed at progressing peace and reconciliation amongst warring parties in Afghanistan. In fact the US systematically ensured that India is kept out of decision making process in Afghanistan despite exhorting India to play a larger role in reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts. The apparent reason for this doublespeak is the US 'Greater Central Asia' project which places "Afghanistan and Pakistan in the Central Asian geopolitics. While India is considered important to contain China and is a part of American Asia-Pacific strategy"¹⁶.

India also suffered delays in its endeavour to progress the regional connectivity to Afghanistan via Chabahar port despite having constructed the Zaranj – Delaram highway at enormous economic and human cost¹⁷ since there was a thaw in India - Iran relations due to US pressure on India to vote against Iran's nuclear programme in the UN¹⁸.

India's Afghanistan policy has failed to engage China on the issue of Islamist terrorism spewing out of the *Af-Pak* region. It is an irony that "while India and China bilaterally engage each other and discuss various bilateral issues regardless of the outcomes, there is hardly any engagement on the broader regional issues or at the multilateral forums"¹⁹. The outcome of interaction amongst regional powers in Afghanistan has involved China and Pakistan directly in the peace talks with Iran and Russia as supporters in the background, while India has been left out despite having direct stake in Afghan stability.

Increase in India's engagement in Afghanistan suffers from inherent weaknesses. India's 'Aid only' policy does not define the end state that India wants to achieve in Afghanistan in terms of tangible benefits. The general Consensus that peace and stability in Afghanistan is mandatory for India's continued engagement in Afghanistan gives only broad parameters; it does not define future course of action or results expected from its present commitment.

However, the aid and infrastructure development, at times has had an adverse effect on India's interests in Afghanistan. According to Shri Shrinivas S Sohoni, former senior advisor to former afghan president Hamid Karzai

the Zaranj – Delaram highway relayed by India at enormous cost was used by the Taliban to collect illegal toll tax. The Taliban control of this highway also enabled them to control Nimroz province²⁰. Taliban and other Pakistan sponsored terrorist groups controlled number of other roads constructed or improved by India in the Eastern and Central provinces of Afghanistan thereby indirectly harming India's interests. Unless sufficient security measures are formalised within the agreements for infrastructure projects, Pakistan and its proxies will keep exploiting India's efforts in Afghanistan. Similarly, poor quality road construction in Kunar province also displayed Indian efforts in poor light to common afghan people²¹.

Moreover, the 1 million metric ton wheat donated by India for Afghanistan was distributed by World Food Programme (WFP) to afghan school children in form of high protein biscuits. Contract for the same was won by a Pakistani firm. The packets were surreptitiously labelled as made in Pakistan giving an impression that the aid was from Pakistan. Although, later a biscuit making factory was transported from Italy in dismantled condition and assembled in Jalalabad, Afghanistan²² for the biscuits to be made in Afghanistan itself.

Considering the current security and political scenario, India needs to shift its strategic thinking from economic development to strengthening of Afghan national security in coming years. India is quietly moving to qualitatively scale up military assistance in terms of long-term spares and support through trilateral framework with Russia and Afghanistan. In a major policy shift, India transferred four Mi-25 attack helicopters from its inventory. There is a need to further enhance defence cooperation with Afghanistan.

Future Contours of India's Policy in Afghanistan

India has so far refrained from using all power at its disposal to enhance its influence in Afghanistan, but the need of the hour is to muster all resources to promote its engagement in Afghanistan to a next level. This will involve "all elements of India's comprehensive national power to be brought into play and cannot be done in an ad hoc, much less a whimsical manner"²³. India has to wade through this maze of local and international clash of interests in order to realign its foreign policy as regards Afghanistan as well as the neighbouring countries. India must extend enhanced support to Afghanistan for capacity building both in the military and civic domains. Assistance in improving the system of governance

and strengthening the national security apparatus should be the main focus areas for India's engagement in Afghanistan. Specific recommendations are enumerated below:

Defence Cooperation. Following actions are recommended:

- India has vast experience of urban warfare in fighting fanatic terrorists. Afghan Special Forces can be trained by Special Forces Schools of Indian Army.
- India must increase vacancies for all the field of ranks in own basic schools of military training to improve conventional fighting capabilities of the ANSF.
- Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) – the national intelligence agency continues to be woefully short of "key intelligence capabilities, especially in gathering information from remote areas in order to prevent Pakistan's interference in Afghanistan affairs"²⁴. The NDS primarily relies on human intelligence which often proves to be of low quality. It lacks specialist equipment, training and finances to conduct scientific

intelligence gathering. India must cooperate with the NDS at the highest level to train and equip them for specialised intelligence gathering. At the same time India must utilise Afghan expertise to acquire hard intelligence about terrorist organisations like LeT, JeM and use such intelligence to covertly eliminate terrorist figures inimical to India's security.

- The ANSF suffers lack of critical mobility vehicles as well as spares for repairing damaged vehicles and trained manpower²⁵. India must supply transport vehicles to the ANSF and also provide financial assistance for repair and maintenance of old equipment.
- India should utilise its expertise for training ANSF on issues like "countering improvised explosive devices, or security support functions like literacy training, logistics and supply-chain management, or military medicine"²⁶.
- The Afghan Air Force [AAF] is responsible for air mobility and
- Close Air Support missions to Afghan National Army.

The AAF not only has limited number of air craft. It also does not have enough trained pilots to fly them²⁷. Since bulk of the rotary wing aircraft are Russian Mi-17s India must train Afghan pilots and maintenance crews.

- India must utilise its expertise in repair and overhaul of Russian equipment like Infantry Combat Vehicles and Mi-17 helicopters and help Afghanistan establish advanced repair and refit facilities.
- Afghanistan does not have a specialised industrial security force which will be required to protect manufacturing hubs once the Afghan industry comes up. Such a force will also be required to protect investment assets set up by foreign companies. India must help Afghanistan establish a force on the lines of own Central Industrial Security Force (CISF).

Afghan Governance. Despite efforts by the international community Capacity-building efforts focused on providing policy development support and technical trainings have not achieved a great deal²⁸. "Sub-ethnic entities at local level, such as

tribes and clans, form the foundation of the Afghan political and social landscape”²⁹. The Afghan governance runs along three different levels; the Central, Provincial (34 provincial administrations) and District levels (398 District administrations)³⁰. Lack of coordination amongst three levels is responsible for poor governance to a large extent.

In order to revamp its engagement India needs to establish working relationship at appropriate level within government of Afghanistan which is responsible for policy formulation and implementation. The most important of the Afghan institutions of governance is the ‘Office of Administrative Affairs and Council of Ministers’ Secretariat (hereinafter referred to as OAA-COMS), which is the hub for the government institutions, mainly acting as policy coordinator between the three pillars of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan³¹. ‘While the OAA (Edara ye Umur) and COMS (Darul insha wazarat insha hukumat) were independent entities earlier, the two were merged as one structure named Islamic Republic of Afghanistan’s Administrative Office of the President (AoP)³². India must develop extensive interactions between corresponding ministries as well as with OAA-COMS (now AoP) at the PMO level to ensure meaningful contribution to overall development in

Afghanistan. Recommendations as regards strengthening of government institutions are highlighted below:

- India must start coordination at appropriate level with Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit of the Government of Afghanistan.
- Afghanistan suffers from problems arising out of lack of expertise on higher decision making, policy implementation and governance. India must collaborate at appropriate levels with independent Directorate of Local Governance and enhance capacity building to develop inclusive governance at national and sub national levels.
- India must provide help by training Administrative services in our institutions of higher learning. Seats must be allocated in IIMs in India as also Afghan bureaucracy should get exposure in our institutions on a formal basis.
- In the field of education India can help Afghanistan for Human Resource development, training of teachers and capacity building programmes. Vocational training on the lines

of Indian NGO SEWA³³ should be increased.

- The Afghan government has already requested assistance for capacity building programmes in certification in specific areas in post harvest management and quarantine³⁴.
- India should establish mechanism to improve policy planning and implementation, preventive medicine and pharmaceutical enterprise in coordination with Afghanistan’s Ministry of Public Health.

Conclusion

India has so far not been able to optimally utilise its ‘soft power’ in Afghanistan. Indian cinema, TV programmes have always been popular in Afghanistan. India needs to revitalise its broadcast facilities of All India Radio, in Pushtu, discontinued in 2005, in order to correlate with Afghan people on a cultural basis as also for psychological operations in Afghanistan in a subtle manner.

India’s Afghanistan policy must build on existing friendly and non-exclusive relations with Kabul without being unnecessarily worried about opinion of regional neighbours. Implementation of Indian policies towards rebuilding

and stabilising Afghanistan has to be in consonance within the Afghanistan’s foreign policy framework.

Afghanistan oriented engagement with the Central Asian Republics and Iran assumes a strategic dimension if India were to exercise greater influence in South Asia. Indian initiatives have to be based on the endeavour to aid Afghanistan to regain its sovereignty while simultaneously working with actors in the wider Heart of Asia region.

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