

Full Length Research

India's Involvement in Afghanistan: An Analytic Perspective of Current Interests and Future Prospects

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After World War II, the tragedy of 9/11 is the single event that changed the global security pattern. USA enter into Afghanistan with the purpose of combating terrorism. The presence of NATO and USA in Afghanistan make that region not only media attentive but also it has made Afghanistan to become path way for regional and international powers to attain their own objectives and in promotion of their interests. 9/11 incident has initiated a great game in the region. Afghanistan is being involved in this global game. With the US advancement in Afghanistan India got chance to endorse its own interests and develop image of soft power in the world. Since India had legitimate strategic interests in Afghanistan not only because of the geographical intactness but also being crucial for its expanding economy as well as a path way between India and the energy rich Central Asian Republics. In this backdrop India has joined the international community's efforts in rebuilding Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 and is actively involved in bringing and maintenance of peace and prosperity in the region. In this article an attempt has been made to explore the concerns and interests that motivate India's recent efforts to step up its engagement in Afghanistan; and the future prospects of India's Afghanistan involvement.

Key Words: Geostrategic, Central Asia, Afghanistan, India, Interests.

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INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan has remained central in the global power politics since 19th century. It is mainly due to geo-strategic location of Afghanistan that it has remained central to the global political agenda of the super powers. Afghanistan is a land locked country. It is situated at the crossroads of Central, South and West Asia. It shares its borders with Central Asia on North China's province Xining in the East Iran on the West and in South West with Pakistan. Afghanistan occupies a unique geostrategic placement in South Asian region, which is an important element that helps to shape its history, economy, ethnic diversity and

political situation in the region. The economic interests in Afghanistan are not very significant; however, its geographical location makes it prominent in the region and in the world. India's active involvement is quite realistic. India took the better part of the last decade in getting over her strategic timidity to assume a more assertive security role in Afghanistan. India was content to take refuge behind the façade of exercising 'soft power' only, oblivious to the strategic reality that India had legitimate strategic interests in Afghanistan. Over the past decade India has pursued a multi-faceted approach

in Afghanistan, combining development assistance – India is the largest donor to Afghanistan in the region, and fifth largest bilateral donor overall – with the promotion of security interests, while also providing commercial opportunities for Indian entrepreneurs. India is seeking to explore new opportunities in Afghanistan to address her foreign policy aspirations. Thus, her Afghan Policy involves various strategic and vital interests. Thus, it is significant to explore India's interests and future prospects while pursuing her foreign policy in Afghanistan.

India's Involvement in Afghanistan

To understand India's present role in Afghanistan it is necessary to recount some key elements of recent regional political history. Post India's independence and partition, India and Afghanistan have shared very close ties. Although Afghanistan is not an immediate neighbour of independent India, both share common history and interests which have contributed a close and mature friendship between the two countries. As described by Nehru while welcoming Prime Minister Daud of Afghanistan, on his visit to India in February 1959:

The partition of India separated direct boundaries and direct contacts between the two countries. But that middle little difference to our age –long community of interests and our old friendship survived. And ever since, then we have grown closer to each other for a verity of reasons, among them being mutual interest which is always a powerful reason.¹

During much of the reign of King Zahir Shah (1933-1973), barring a brief interlude during the 1965 Indo-Pakistani conflict, India had enjoyed excellent relations with Afghanistan. Even after his overthrow, India managed to maintain good relations with a succession of Communist regimes including those that were foisted on the country following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.² India was the only South Asian country which recognized the Communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) government and the presence of Soviet military personnel, and provided technical and

humanitarian aid to President Najibullah's Afghanistan.³ The collapse of the Soviet puppet regime of Mohammed Najibullah and the ensuing civil war within the country left India with limited influence in the country. Indeed even during the Burhanuddin Rabbani (1992-1996) regime in Afghanistan India had a limited presence in the country.⁴ The demise of the Rabbani regime in 1996 and the Taliban's seizure of power left India worse off than ever. The Taliban's close ties with Pakistan, its inveterate hatred of religious minorities within the country and its deep-seated truculence toward India effectively resulted in a complete rupture in Indo-Afghan relations. It was during this time that India forged a working relationship with the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance of Ahmed Shah Massoud to oppose the Taliban.⁵

The emergence of the Karzai regime in the wake of the toppling of the Taliban gave India an opportunity to rebuild its ties to Afghanistan. Karzai, who had obtained much of his education within India, was well disposed toward to pursue a cordial relationship. Furthermore, it is believed that he harbors personal misgivings against Pakistan because the Taliban was allowed to assassinate his father in the Pakistani city of Quetta.⁶

Since the downfall of Taliban, India's relation with Afghanistan has steadily improved. India's main focus has been to support the Afghan government and the political process in the country as mandated under the Bonn agreement of 2001.⁷ In early October 2011, President Hamid Karzai forged a strategic partnership with India. This partnership was the first of its kind that the government in Kabul had signed with a foreign country.⁸ The agreement, among other matters envisaged that India might train units of the Afghan security forces as the US seeks to withdraw its forces

¹ Jawaharlal Nehru, speech at banquet in honour of visiting Afghan Prime Minister on February 1959, Foreign Affairs Record (Henceforth FAR) Vol.V, No.2; February 1959, p.13.

² Sumit Ganguly and Nicolas Howenstein, "India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan", Journal of International Affairs, Fall/Winter 2009, 63:1, pp.127-140.

³ Barbara Crossette, *India to Provide Aid to Government in Afghanistan*, The New York Times, 7 March 1989.

⁴ Sumit Ganguly, "India's Role in Afghanistan", CIDOB Policy Research Project, January 2012.

⁵ Sergei Yakolev, "Russia, India, Iran Line Up in Joint Opposition to the Taliban", The Boston Globe, 14 September 2001.

⁶ Cited in Sumit Ganguly's, "India's Role in Afghanistan", CIDOB Policy Research Project, January 2012.

⁷ Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, Bonn Agreement, United Nations, Bonn, Ger., Dec. 5, 2001, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3f48f4754.htm>

⁸ James Lamont, "Karzai chooses India as partner over Pakistan", Financial Times, 6 October 2011.

from the country in 2014.⁹

Under the terms of this agreement India finally chose to cross the Rubicon when it agreed to assist Afghanistan in whatever way possible, including training of ANA forces, and supports the withdrawal of international forces by 2014. The Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh stated,

*“Our co-operation with Afghanistan is an open book. We have civilizational links, and we are both here to stay ... India will stand by the people of Afghanistan as they prepare to assume responsibility for governance and security after the withdrawal of international forces in 2014.”*¹⁰

Furthermore, the agreement also opened up the possibility of greater Indian investments in Afghanistan and most notably in the Hajigak iron ore mines in Bamiyan province to the tune of \$6 billion.¹¹

There is little or no question that India, which is the fifth largest aid donor to Afghanistan, has accomplished much in terms of developmental assistance. Its assistance has included help with education, health and infrastructure.¹² Specifically, India has built Afghanistan's new parliament building and trained its legislators. Its Border Roads Organization has constructed a 218-kilometer long highway linking the town of Zaranj near the Iranian border to Delaram in the northeast despite periodic Taliban attacks on Indian personnel.¹³ It has also help build a power transmission line to Kabul and developed a hydroelectric project at the Salma Dam in Herat at a cost of \$180 million.¹⁴

With regards to humanitarian assistance and education initiatives in Afghanistan, India has played a significant role. Every year, about 1,000 Afghan students study in Indian universities on scholarships, and Afghan civil

servants have access to Indian training institutions.¹⁵ The Indian government also runs a program that provides lunch meals to around 2 million Afghan school children. In addition, India has also constructed numerous field clinics and a children's hospital.¹⁶ Among other matters, it has shipped food to the country, dispatched a team of doctors and even created a camp for the provision of artificial limbs for amputees.¹⁷ In addition to these developmental activities, India had also quietly sought to bolster Afghanistan's security capabilities. According to one analysis, India has provided \$8 million worth of high-altitude warfare equipment to Afghanistan, shared high-ranking military advisers and helicopter technicians from its clandestine foreign intelligence and counter-espionage organization, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).¹⁸

India has also done its best to restore the balance in its engagement with a range of different ethnic groups and political affiliations in Afghanistan. The balance was tilted towards the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance during the 1990s as a counter to Pakistan-controlled hard-line Pashtun factions, led by the Taliban. India has used its vocal support for Karzai, an ethnic Pashtun, to demonstrate its keenness to revive its close ties with Pashtuns.¹⁹

India also piloted the move to make Afghanistan a member of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) with the hope that with the entry of Afghanistan into the SAARC, issues relating to the transit and free flow of goods across borders in the region can be addressed, thereby leading to greater economic development of Afghanistan and the region as a whole. Moreover, South Asia will be able to reach out to Central and West Asia more meaningfully with Afghanistan as a member of the SAARC. It has been estimated that given Afghanistan's low trade linkages with other states in the region, its participation in the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) would result in trade gains of \$2 billion to the region with as much as \$606 million accruing to Afghanistan.²⁰

⁹ Lydia Polgreen, “Karzai tries to soothe Pakistan over warmer relations with India”, The New York Times, 5 October 2011.

¹⁰ Cited in Tisdall, Simon, “India may pay heavily in future for supporting the Karzai regime”, The Guardian, 5 October 2012.

¹¹ Reuters, “Afghan Leader Signs Deal to Deepen ties with India”, The New York Times, 4 October 2011.

¹² Shashank Joshi, “Let India help Afghanistan”, The Guardian, 25 December 2009.

¹³ Nishit Dholabhai, “India accomplishes Afghan Road Mission- strategic highway survives Pakistan scare and Kabul embassy blast”, The Telegraph, 16 July 2008.

¹⁴ Tom Peter, “India outdoes U.S aid efforts in Afghanistan”, Global Post, 9 September 2010, available at: <http://www.globalpost.com/print/5583950>

¹⁵ Jyoti Malhotra, “In Afghanistan, Indians are praised simply for being Indian; Q&A: Jayant Prasad, Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan”, Business Standard, 9 October 2009.

¹⁶ Jyoti Thottam, “Afghanistan: India's Uncertain Road”, Time Magazine, 11 April 2011.

¹⁷ Shashank Joshi, “India's Af-Pak Strategy”, RUSI Journal, February/ March 2010, 155:1, pp.20-29.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Harsh V. Pant, “India in Afghanistan: A Rising Power or a Hesitant Power?”, Centre for International Peace and Security Studies (CIPSS), Working Paper no 3p, April 2012.

²⁰ G. Srinivasan, “Afghanistan's entry to SAARC will lead to \$2-bn gain for sub-continent”, The Hindu Business Line, 29 March 2007.

As a consequence, India has come to enjoy considerable soft power in Afghanistan. Indeed, ordinary Afghans appear to have welcomed Indian involvement in development projects in their country. Indian films and television programs are extremely popular among the local Afghan populace. India remains the favourite destination for Afghans with the Indian embassy and four other missions issuing around 350 visas daily.²¹ India has a fundamental interest in ensuring that Afghanistan emerges as a stable and economically integrated state in the region. Though Afghanistan's economy has recovered significantly since the fall of the Taliban, it remains highly dependent on foreign aid and trade with neighbouring countries. The only way in which the flailing Ghani government can retain and enhance its legitimacy is by bringing the Afghan economy back on track. For this it largely depends on other states and India is playing an important role by laying the foundations for sustainable economic development in its neighbour. The Preferential trade agreement signed by India and Afghanistan gives substantial duty concessions to certain categories of Afghan dry fruits when entering India with Afghanistan allowing reciprocal concessions to Indian products such as sugar, tea, and pharmaceuticals. Kabul wants Indian businesses to take advantage of the low tax regime to help develop a manufacturing hub in areas such as cement, oil and gas, electricity, and in services including hotels, banking and communications.²²

India's Interests in Afghanistan

As outlined above, Afghanistan lies at the crossroads of the Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and South Asian security environments. It was crafted not as a nation-state but as a buffer zone intended to separate the then dominant regional powers Britain, Russia, and Persia. Today, Afghanistan is more of a connector between the surrounding security environments than an insulator. It draws together various security-related issues (for example, narcotics- terrorism with an Islamist background) and spills them over to all bordering regions. Furthermore, today's regional powers in the broader neighbourhood around Afghanistan—Iran, Pakistan, India, Russia, Uzbekistan, China, and Japan—are all involved in the country's affairs. The geo-political position of Afghanistan, because of the various developments in the neighbourhood, had gradually emerged as a third and major aspect governing Indo-Afghan relations. For, in the light of India's deteriorating relations with China on the

one hand and constant threat of Pakistani hostility on the other, Afghanistan took an immediate importance for India, necessitating a change of emphasis in its relations with it. Given that a politically and economically stable Afghanistan is a strategic priority for India, India maintains that the ongoing effort to help Afghanistan emerge from war, strife and privation is its responsibility as a regional power. Taking into consideration the changing circumstances and the overall analysis of India's Afghan Policy, some vital interests are evident under the following headings:

Countering Pakistan

To a large extent, India's approach towards Afghanistan has been a function of its Pakistan policy. It is important for India that Pakistan does not get a foothold in Afghanistan and so historically India has attempted to prevent Pakistan from dominating Afghanistan. India would like to minimize Pakistan's involvement in the affairs of Afghanistan and to ensure that a fundamentalist regime of the Taliban variety does not take root again. Pakistan, on the other hand, has viewed Afghanistan as a good means of balancing out India's preponderance in South Asia.²³ Good India-Afghanistan ties are seen by Pakistan as detrimental to its national security interests as the two states flank the two sides of Pakistan's borders. A friendly political dispensation in Kabul is viewed by Pakistan as essential to escape the strategic dilemma of being caught between a powerful adversary in India in the East and an irredentist Afghanistan with claims on the Pashtun dominated areas in the West.²⁴ Given its Pashtun-ethnic linkage with Afghanistan, Pakistan considers its role to be a privileged one in the affairs of Afghanistan. Given these conflicting imperatives, both India and Pakistan have tried to neutralize the influence of each other in the affairs of Afghanistan. Both are stuck in a classic security dilemma in so far as their policies towards Afghanistan are concerned. Any measure by either Pakistan or India to increase its own security causes the other to act in response, thereby causing a deterioration in the overall regional security environment.

²¹ Harsh V. Pant, "India in Afghanistan: A Rising Power or a Hesitant Power"?, Centre for International Peace and Security Studies (CIPSS), Working Paper no 3p, April 2012.

²² Ibid.

²³ Marvin G. Weinbaum, "Pakistan and Afghanistan: The Strategic Relationship", Asian Survey, Vol. 31, no. 6, (1991), pp. 498-99.

²⁴ Rifaat Hussain, "Pakistan's Relations With Afghanistan: Continuity and Change", Strategic Studies, 22(4), 2002, Available at http://www.issi.org.pk/journal/2002_files/no_4/article/3a.html

Containing Chinese influence in the Region

India is a developing country, still it is providing large amount of aid to Afghanistan. There are many political reasons behind this aid program. All major regional actors are occupied with the task of making their places in the territory by using different ways and means; India is trying to do this by involving itself into Afghanistan. There is race going on between India and China for dominance in the region. China is an emerging superpower; India's intensifying efforts in Afghanistan make it prominent in region and to limit China's influence in the region. China is growing its influence in Afghanistan to utilize unexploited resources. India is providing assistance in many projects of reconstruction to counter the influence of China in the region. After 9/11 attacks and launch of "Operation Enduring Freedom" by US, provides India an opportunity to pursue its foreign policy goals of attaining hegemonic position in the region.²⁵

Containing Islamist Extremism

India's other major interest is to make sure that Islamist extremism remains under control in its neighbourhood and its struggle against Islamist extremism is also closely intertwined with the rise of extremism in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Any breeding ground of radical Islamists has a direct impact on the security of India, resulting in a rise in infiltration of terrorists across borders as well attacks. It is vital for both India and Afghanistan that the latter would never again emerge as a safe haven for terrorism and extremism. A friendly Afghanistan where religious extremism continues to flourish is seen by Pakistan as essential to keep the pressure on India in Kashmir by providing a base where militants could be trained for fighting against the Indian forces. The Militants fighting in Kashmir have not only drawn inspiration from the Afghan resistance against the Soviets but has also drawn resources and material support from Pakistan.²⁶ Kashmiri militants were among the thousands of "volunteers" from various Islamic countries that participated in the war against the Soviet forces. They went back indoctrinated in a version of Islam that destined their victory over the "infidels" as

well as with important knowledge of guerrilla warfare.²⁷ India rightly perceived that the victors of mujahedeen against the Soviet Union would fundamentally alter the direction of Islamic extremism as Afghanistan would end up playing a crucial role in the shaping of an Islamic geo-politics sitting as it does astride the Islamic heartland involving South and Central Asia as well as Middle East.

A Bridge to Central Asia

Afghanistan is also viewed as a gateway to the Central Asian region where India hopes to expand its influence. Afghanistan is the gateway of oil rich Central Asian Republics (CARs) but India does not have direct land passage towards CARs; it has to depend on Afghanistan to access CARs. The penetrating influence of India has advantage for India that it acts like a bridge to enter into CARs. Convivial relations with Afghanistan and its association in almost each field of Afghanistan give prospect of developing good ties with CARs. "India's diversifying and developing economy demands exploration of energy resources, and CARs have rich oil, gas and hydrocarbon resources. Furthermore, Central Asia is crucial for India not only because of its oil and gas reserves that India wishes to tap for its energy security but also because other major powers such as the US, Russia and China have already started competing for influence in the region. The regional actors view Afghanistan as a potential source of instability even as their geo-political rivalry remains a major cause of Afghanistan's troubles. India was forced to increase its military profile in Central Asia after the diplomatic humiliation it had to endure in 1999 when an Indian Airlines flight from Kathmandu was hijacked by Pakistan-backed terrorists to Kandahar in Southern Afghanistan. India had to negotiate a deal with the Taliban that involved the release of the aircraft in exchange for three hardened militants held by India. India then decided to set up its first military base abroad in Farkhor in Tajikistan, close to the Afghan border, that was used to provide assistance to the Northern Alliance fighters and later to provide assistance to the Post-Taliban government in Kabul. This base has been operational since May 2002. This military base shows India's strong physical presence in the region to keep check on Pakistan and China.²⁸

As the geo-political importance of Central Asia has increased in recent years, all the major powers have been keen to expand their influence in the region and

²⁵ Iram Khalid, "The New Great Game in Afghanistan: Role of India (A Pakistani Perspective)", *Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2, July-December 2011, pp.241-257.

²⁶ Ahmad Rashid, "Taliban: The Story of Afghan Warlords", (Oxford: Pan Books. 2001), pp. 183-187

²⁷ Rasyul Bakhsh Rais, "Afghanistan and the Regional Powers", *Asian Survey*, 33(9), 1993, pp. 915-16.

²⁸ Rahul Bedi, "India and Central Asia", *Front line*, Volume 19 - Issue 19 (14 September 2002).

India is no exception. It shares many of the interests of other major powers such as the US, Russia and China vis-à-vis Central Asia, including access to Central Asian energy resources, controlling the spread of radical Islam, ensuring political stability, and strengthening of regional economies. But unlike China and Russia, its interests converge with that of the US in Central Asia and some have even suggested that it is in the US interests to have a greater Indian presence in Central Asia to counter growing Chinese or Russian involvement.²⁹

Expanding Regional Influence

A major factor behind India's pro-active Afghanistan agenda has been India's attempt to carve out for itself a greater role in regional affairs, more in consonance with its rising economic and military profile. India wants to establish its credentials as a major power in the region that is willing to take responsibility for ensuring stability around its periphery. By merging as a major donor for Afghanistan, India is trying to project itself as a significant economic power that can provide necessary aid to the needy states in its neighbourhood. It has been contended that India's "proactive foreign policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan has been predicated upon New Delhi's keenness to be of use to American regional policy "to the detriment of a traditional "independent" Indian approach towards its neighbours.³⁰ It is not clear, however, what alternative policy India can pursue given that America's "war on terror" – its strategic priority–has at its centre the goal of achieving Afghanistan's stabilization. Though India's interests are best served in helping the US achieve that aim, India will have to make some difficult choices now that the US commitment to create an enduring environment in Afghanistan has waned and it plans to leave before achieving its long-term objectives. India will find the going tough if the US decides to revert back to its policy of the 1990s when despite convergent security interests, it failed to develop an effective counter-terrorism partnership with India.

CONCLUSION

Historically both India and Afghanistan enjoyed and still they are enjoying cordial relations with each other.

²⁹ Stephen Blank, *"US Interests in Central Asia and the Challenges to Them"*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2007, pp. 31-32

³⁰ M.K. Bhadrakumar, *"The Taliban turns its Attention on India"*, The Hindu, 28 November 2005

Afghanistan is of crucial for Indian expanding economy. Geographically, Afghanistan provides the path way to CARs. Good bilateral relations with Afghanistan will be beneficial for India's steel industry because of huge and precious iron reserves of Afghanistan. India's future energy security largely depends on Afghanistan, which is the gateway to energy-rich Central Asia. One of the most crucial energy deals - the US\$7.6 billion Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India Gas pipeline (TAPI), scheduled to start bringing natural gas by 2017- is going to be a lifeline for energy-deficit India. A lot will depend on the future condition of Afghanistan, and any partial or full control of Taliban in the region would have an impact on the project. The two countries have time and again discussed revival of the Silk route - an important trade route between India and Central Asia in the past. India has lot to gain from Afghanistan, it is a strategically of crucial importance for India. India's national interest paradigm in broader terms includes the national security perspective of protecting and defending the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of the nation. It also encompasses defending the larger geo-political environment in South Asia affecting Indian economic and strategic interests. The evolving geo-political environment in Afghanistan is one of the most ponderous and crucial issues which needs immediate attention of the Indian policymakers. After all the primary objective of national interest is to maintain and protect national security, including defending the nation from external threats and subversive activities arising from the neighbouring countries. Keeping in view the gravity of situation in mind, India joined the international community's efforts in rebuilding Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. New Delhi has been playing a significant role in the process of reconstruction and development, building and strengthening state institutions, capacity building and skill enhancement in Afghanistan. By pledging around US\$ 2 billion for reconstruction and development, India is the largest regional donor to Afghanistan. New Delhi believes inclusive development is essential to establish a viable and peaceful statehood in Afghanistan.

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