



Issue Brief

India's Reconstruction Efforts in Afghanistan: Current Obstacles and Future Prospects

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President Obama's surprise visit to Kabul (March 28, 2010), at a time when there is a debate going on between major players involved in Afghanistan about the future of the war-ravaged country, has triggered a fresh round of speculation. Was the U.S. President's visit meant to boost the morale of the US troops in Afghanistan or was it to alert the Karzai administration about the imminent withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan? It is more or less clear that U.S. and its allies are preparing to get out of the country in the name of reconciliation with Taliban and transferring power to the Afghans. U.S. and its allies have become more dependent on Pakistan as part of their 'quit-Afghanistan' strategy. This has been clearly demonstrated in the series of developments surrounding Afghanistan in the last couple of months.

Pakistan's assertiveness in opposing India's presence in Afghanistan has got a boost in the London Conclave where India's consistent policy of opposition to Taliban was rejected by the participants. Although India has been a major player in the reconstruction and rebuilding of Afghanistan, it has also been victim of many gruesome attacks on its interests including attacks on the Indian Embassy in Kabul.

Recent terrorist attack

The dastardly attack on February 26, 2010 in Kabul that left 17 people dead, including six Indians (The Hindu, February 27, 2010), had primarily targeted Indian interests in Afghanistan. This was the third major attack targeting Indian interests in Kabul since 2007. India has been contributing in a major way towards rebuilding both socio-economic and political structure of Afghanistan after the ouster of Taliban in 2001. The attack specifically targeted Indian experts and workers, who are serving the Afghan people and earning goodwill for India. It was not the handiwork of Taliban alone, but forces opposing India's presence in Afghanistan have been the brain behind this.

The two guesthouses, Noor and Park Residency, that were the targets on February 26, had been rented out to the Indian embassy to house diplomats, guests as well as officials of the army's medical and education corps. The latter were staying at Noor guesthouse. They have been contributing to building Kabul's Indira Gandhi Child Health Institute as well as imparting English language to Afghan policemen.

The fidayeen first flattened the Noor guesthouse with a powerful car bomb and then two heavily-armed terrorists stormed the Park Residence guesthouse across the road. Both guesthouses were frequented by Indians in Kabul. They were a 'soft target' for the Taliban who had earlier made two futile attempts to get into the Indian embassy. But an elaborate security arrangement around the embassy by the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) had foiled their attempts.

Previous attacks on Indian interest in Afghanistan

India is the fifth-largest donor, pledging \$ 1.3 billion since 2001 to conflict-infected Afghanistan, providing aid that covers education, health and infrastructure, besides other fields. The most significant project has been a 218 k.m Delaram to Zaranj highway, connecting Afghanistan with the Iranian border. India's role in the post-Taliban reconstruction of Afghanistan has always been opposed by the establishment in Pakistan, as well as by the Taliban–al Qaeda combine.

India has been one of the prime targets of terrorist attacks in Afghanistan since 2002, not only by the Taliban but also by other Jihadi outfits in the region who are in league with Taliban and ISI. Three major attacks on Indian interests have taken place in and around Kabul as part of this

agenda. The deadliest of all was the attack on the Indian mission in Kabul in July 2008, killing senior officials of Indian embassy besides visa-seeking innocent Afghans. The second major attack targeting Indian Embassy in October 2009 has demonstrated the Indian interests being the prime targets in Afghanistan. A car packed with explosives blew up outer protective wall of the Indian Embassy on 9 October morning, leaving 17 people dead. The blast appeared to be similar in pattern to the earlier attack, in July 2008, in which a car bomber detonated at the embassy gates.

Besides these three major attacks on the Indian Embassy and its officials working in Kabul, there have been many more in Afghanistan on the Indians working on infrastructure development in the war-ravaged Country. Taliban and its mastermind are opposing Indian presence in Afghanistan tooth and nail. India's presence in Afghanistan, as a major player in rebuilding the devastated country, seems to have made Pakistan more 'insecure' in its ambition to have strategic depth in that country.

Before the first bombing on India Embassy in July 2008, an ITBP personnel was killed and four others were injured by the Taliban in the south-west Province of Nimroz on June 5, 2008. Two Indians, M.P. Singh and C. Govindaswamy of the Indian Army's Border Roads Organisation (BRO), were killed and seven others, including five BRO personnel, sustained injuries, in a suicide-bomb attack in Nimroz on April 12, 2008. Earlier, in the first-ever suicide attack on Indians in Afghanistan, two ITBP soldiers were killed and five injured in Nimroz on January 3, 2008. There were cases in which Indian consulates were attacked in Jalalabad in December 2007 and in Herat province in May 2006. Fortunately there were no casualties in both these incidents.

In April 2006, K. Suryanarayana, working with a Gulf-based company, was abducted and killed by Taliban militants. Further, on February 7, 2006, Bharat Kumar, an Indian engineer working with a Turkish company, was killed in a bomb attack by the Taliban in the western province of Farah. In November 2005, Ramankutty Maniyappan, a 36-year old BRO employee, was abducted and his decapitated body was found on a road between Zaranj and Ghor Ghor, four days later. In addition, there were two attacks in November and December 2003 in one of which an Indian engineer was killed.

Is there a Policy Shift after the London Conference?

The London Conference held on January 28, 2010 on Afghanistan, purportedly to find out a lasting solution and a new roadmap to the ongoing Afghan problem has deviated from the original aims of the 'war on terror'. There has been a complete reversal of the policy at the London Conference. From the outset, it was clear that the major players involved in the Afghanistan imbroglio were looking for an honourable exit route. Political expediency rather than realistic strategic imperatives seem to have dictated not only the agenda but also the outcome of the London meet. The most regressive decision of the conference was on facilitating the entry of Taliban in the governing structure of Afghanistan. Whether there was a policy shift or deviation, will be known only when it is implemented.

In the post-9/11 global 'war on terror, it was Taliban which was the prime target by the US and NATO for its role in spreading terror in the region as well as sheltering and promoting al Qaeda. Taliban was promoted and protected in its design and action by Pakistan and in the process Afghanistan was pushed into dark-age from 1996 to 2001. Taliban rule in Afghanistan provided a golden opportunity and unhindered support to global terror outfits like Al Qaeda to flourish in the Pakistan-Afghanistan region. Instead of decimating Taliban and its collaborators the London Conference has recognized their prowess and hold in the region.

In the fast changing equations of the regional politics, there have been hectic parleys President Karzai has undertaken with neighbouring Iran, Pakistan and China in the last one month, thus signaling that he also has some strategic elbow-room. Iranian President Ahmedinejad visited Kabul followed by President Karzai's official trip to Pakistan and China in the span of few weeks that also sparked speculation of a new alignment giving Pakistan a central role in the future of Afghanistan. Most significant of all was the bonhomie displayed between Afghanistan and Pakistani leadership during Karzai's visit to Islamabad where the Afghan President made statements regarding Pakistan's important role in the region.

Options Before India?

India's reconstruction efforts in the post-Taliban Afghanistan has been a case of helping Afghans rebuild their country which is not liked by Taliban and its collaborators. In the changed circumstances, India has been left with limited options on its Afghan policy. This is particularly after the London Conference where India was assigned a marginal role and was excluded from the regional summit held in Istanbul on the insistence of Pakistan.

New Delhi's long-held position on the Islamic extremist groups like Taliban was not accepted in the London Conference suggesting that India's Afghan policy needs a change. First and foremost, India needs to intensify engagement with the political forces in the country who are opposed to fundamentalism and these would include all ethnic communities the Pashtuns, the Tajiks, the Uzbeks and the Hazaras. While there would be resistance from those Pashtun elements who are supporters of the Taliban, 90 percent of the Afghans have indicated over the years that they are unwilling to see a comeback of the Taliban. It is these forces with which New Delhi will have to link up. India should try to open a channel of communication with the Northern Alliance, which has been dormant since the assassination of Ahmad Shah Masoud in 2001.

Though Indian interests in Afghanistan have been the prime targets of the terror outfits, it is in the interest of peace and regional stability that India should not only continue its constructive work it has taken up but also expand it to other areas in Afghanistan. Besides, India should join with other regional powers like Iran, Russia and other central Asian countries in formulating a common strategy in fighting militancy in the region and strengthening the democratic institutions for peace, prosperity and stability in Afghanistan. Although China is a trusted ally of Pakistan, the growing influence of fundamentalists and terrorists in Xinjiang province, having link with Afghanistan-based outfits is a matter of concern for China. There are some instances of nexus and complicity between Al Qaeda-Taliban combine with Xinjiang-based terror groups including their presence in Af-Pak region. For instance, on March 02, 2010, Pakistan-based Daily Times reported that Abdul Haq al-Turkistani, leader of Turkistani Islamic Party (a Chinese separatist

group), was killed in a US drone attack in North Waziristan close to the border with Afghanistan. Abdul-Turkistani had threatened to attack Chinese interests around the world to avenge the deaths of Muslim Uighurs.

India and China have come together in recent past on major international issues including the Climate Change. Terror emanating from lawlessness and Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan affecting both the Asian giants should provide an opportunity for New Delhi and Beijing in forging an unified strategy on Afghanistan's reconstruction. This will be a panacea in fighting the scourge of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism for regional peace and stability.

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