



## New Regime in Afghanistan and India's Policy Options

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### **Introduction**

India's relationship with Afghanistan has been enduring, strong and based on common interests. India has been playing a constructive role in Afghanistan, and during Hamid Karzai's government, these two countries went on to sign the 'Strategic Partnership Agreement' in 2011, thus, making India the first regional strategic partner of Afghanistan. However, ever since the new government in Afghanistan came to power in 2014, it is being speculated that India has come down in the priority list of Afghanistan. The reason behind this scepticism is a major policy shift in Afghanistan's foreign policy towards Pakistan. The present government in Afghanistan is convinced that Pakistan has unavoidable influence on the Taliban leadership, and has inevitable role in eventual peace settlement. Thus, Pakistan has become a priority for Afghanistan. The strategic community in India was alarmed when President Ashraf Ghani told the Indian National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval that Afghanistan would no longer seek Indian military aid.<sup>i</sup> The belief that Afghanistan is distancing itself from India was strengthened further, when President Ashraf Ghani visited China on his first official tour, which was perceived as increasing Chinese involvement in Afghanistan. China and Pakistan are emerging as important players in Afghanistan in the post NATO withdrawal phase. These developments have led to questions regarding India's role and future policy options in Afghanistan.

## Historical Context and Present Challenges

Afghanistan has, since long, been a land of turmoil. During the Cold War, though Afghanistan remained non-aligned throughout, it was not left so by the great powers. The intervention made by the erstwhile Soviet Union in 1979, to support communist PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) government and, simultaneously, Pakistan's covert support (with the help of the US and Saudi Arabia) to Mujahideens against the government ended in 1989. In these ten years, Soviet intervention resulted in the deepening of the civil war leading to the death of 1.5 million Afghans<sup>ii</sup> and created 6.2 million refugees<sup>iii</sup>, who fled Afghanistan, mainly to Pakistan and Iran. The NATO led International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) launched operations in October 2001, triggered by the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. The US launched the 'war on terror' to eliminate *Al Qaida*. After killing the Al Qaida head, Osama-bin Laden in 2011, ISAF withdrew majority of its forces by the end of 2014. However, under the bilateral security agreement (BSA) between the US and Afghanistan, they will maintain around 12,000 troops in Afghanistan for training Afghan National Security Force (ANSF).<sup>iv</sup> Presently, since the bulk of foreign troops have been withdrawn, Afghanistan is facing serious challenges than ever before. The main challenges are as follows:

1. Weak governance is one of the greatest challenges in Afghanistan. Powerful individuals, mostly outside the government act independently and undermine government power and influence. The fragility of the National Unity Government is apparent, when – even after eight months of power sharing – there is no consensus on the selection of many of the Council of Ministers. This gives a weak picture of the government, which has to face myriad of issues at home. Thus, political consolidation of the government is a top most challenge.
2. The second important and most threatening challenge is the revival of Taliban. The Afghanistan Taliban has not only managed to survive the 14 years of ISAF presence in Afghanistan, but has emerged as a strong force after ISAF withdrawal. Since January 2015, they have carried out several attacks in different parts of Afghanistan. The recent attack on Afghan Parliament and seizing of two districts in Kunduz province in June 2015 is seen as a part of their *spring offensive*.<sup>v</sup>

3. The political and security transition continues to take a heavy toll on Afghanistan's economy. On one hand, due to increased violence and insurgency, trade and economic activities have declined; on the other, unemployment and poverty are being exploited by terrorists. Though the economy has improved slightly since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, largely because of the infusion of international assistance, the overall picture remains grim because of the unstable environment. The economy is projected to grow by 2.5 per cent in 2015, up from 1.7 per cent in 2014, if the political, security, and business environment is stable.<sup>vi</sup> To ensure a stable political environment for economic growth is another challenge before the Afghan government.
4. Afghanistan today produces well over 80 percent of the world's illicit opium, undermining good governance and public health, subverting the legal economy, fuelling corruption and insecurity, and putting money in the hands of the Taliban. The narcotics trade has been a windfall for insurgency. The United Nations (UN) estimates that the Afghan Taliban received at least \$155 million annually from narcotics-related activities including taxation, protection and extortion.<sup>vii</sup> According to the UN World Drug Report, Afghan opium fuels a global trade that generates over \$60 billion in profits for corrupt officials, drug traffickers, organized criminal groups, and insurgents.<sup>viii</sup> Government's effort to curb drug production has remained largely insufficient and non-effective.
5. A key concern is the status of women in Afghanistan. A return to civil war conditions or even a partial resurgence of the Taliban-style regime of the 1990s could result in a swift reversal of the fragile gains made in education, human rights and access to justice for women since 2001.

A concerted effort from the Afghan government as well as international support is required to deal with these challenges. While international support has been forthcoming, both in terms of financial aid and military assistance, it is Afghanistan's close neighbours, who would become crucial to the country's future. India is part of Afghanistan's extended neighbourhood.

## Global/Regional Dynamics

Despite being a war torn country for more than three decades, Afghanistan is important because of its strategic location, which makes it a facilitator for wider regional economic cooperation. After the retreat of ISAF from Afghanistan, regional powers are vying to fill the vacuum by increasing strategic influence in the country. Further, rich natural resources are also a reason for widespread interest in Afghanistan. The following countries are playing active role for the future of Afghanistan:

**The US:** Though post-ISAF withdrawal, the US views Afghanistan in the backdrop of shifted strategic and domestic priorities; developments in Afghanistan are important to the US, since Washington has been the prime driver for the international engagement – military or otherwise – in the country for more than a decade. Afghanistan may no longer be at the centre of the US strategic engagement; however, it will continue to influence the US counter-terrorism policies and regional engagement in South and Central Asia. The US will continue to serve a supporting role in the development and transition of Afghanistan as well as strengthening bilateral relations between the US and Afghanistan.

**Pakistan:** Pakistan is arguably the most important regional player in Afghanistan. Close religious and cultural ties between the two countries give Pakistan leverage over internal matters in Afghanistan. Further, Pakistan's decades old influence on Taliban makes Pakistan unavoidable in any peace settlement in Afghanistan. Pakistan is one of the three countries – along with Saudi Arabia and the UAE – which officially recognised Taliban and have been assisting Taliban insurgency after it was ousted from power in 2001. Presently, the leadership of Afghan Taliban has been based in the Pakistani city of Quetta since 2001.<sup>ix</sup>

After the Ashraf Ghani government came to power, a major policy shift was introduced in favour of Pakistan. This policy shift included lowering down India from the priority list of Afghanistan. It was necessary to do so to bring Pakistan on board. The reciprocal visits made by the leaders of the two countries and the signing of MoU between Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to collaborate on counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing and personnel training were

important milestone in their relationship. However, mistrust looms large in Afghanistan psyche about Pakistan's intentions. The recent attacks in Afghanistan, particularly on the Afghan Parliament by Afghan Taliban, strengthened their suspicion. The future course between the two countries is worth watching.

**China:** China and Afghanistan have been neighbours only in technical sense. They share 76 km border, but lack infrastructure to connect it. They never shared significant relationship in the past. However, after the withdrawal of ISAF, China has started unprecedented moves to fill the vacuum and develop bilateral relationship with Afghanistan. It is not only signing partnership agreements with the government in Afghanistan, but also simultaneously upgrading its negotiating skills with Taliban.

Though in Afghanistan, the interests of both India and China converge, their strategy diverges. Both countries are extremely apprehensive of Afghanistan getting de-stabilised and, once again, becoming base for global and regional jihadist terror groups. Also, China is concerned about the security of its developmental initiatives in the region. China has emerged as the biggest foreign investor in Afghanistan with lucrative energy and resource deals under its belt, including a \$3.5 billion contract to develop the largest copper field in the world in the Aynak mine in Logar Province in Afghanistan.<sup>x</sup> However, China likes to stay on the side of Pakistan while dealing with Afghanistan. China believes that it can pressurise Pakistan to change its destructive policy on Afghanistan.

**Russia:** Russia believed that the withdrawal of ISAF from Afghanistan would have only negative implications for Russian security interests. It is concerned about the recent developments in Afghanistan, such as the revival of Taliban, which would support those jihadists, who fought against the erstwhile USSR forces. Russia fears that coming back of Taliban would seek to bring about the downfall of post Soviet Central Asian governments and replace them with radical Islamist ones that are hostile to Russia.<sup>xi</sup> Though Russia doesn't want to get involved in Afghanistan militarily, because of its past experiences; however, for its security, Russia wants to put a Russian-military presence along Tajik-Afghan border.<sup>xii</sup> So far, it has not materialised. There are other states in the region that share Russia's interest in preventing the Taliban from regaining control over Afghanistan.

The Central Asian republics, obviously, share these interests with Russia, though their capacity to act in Afghanistan is limited. It is in the interest of Russia to work with India and Iran as the three countries share common interests.

**Iran:** Iran wants a stable Afghanistan and has meticulously worked to protect its interests before and after 2001 to this end. Iran has certain strategic interests in Afghanistan, which it would like to preserve. The containment of Taliban is important for Iran to maintain peace within and outside the country (neighbouring countries). It supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance prior 2001, and after September 2001, it was one of the earlier supporters of the US' 'war on terror' to contain Taliban.<sup>xiii</sup> The other interests of Iran in Afghanistan are – protecting Shia Community in Afghanistan, curtailment of narcotics business through Iran, repatriation of 2.5 million Afghan refugees, protecting investment and economic influence in Afghanistan. For these reasons, Iran would prefer Afghanistan's less dependence on Pakistan (which supported Taliban) and would like to work with Russia and India to attain its objectives.

### **India's Role and Policy Options**

India and Afghanistan share a long history of cultural, civilisational and economic ties. Presently, its aspirations in Afghanistan stem from two important factors: first, India's status as a rising power in international system, where India wants to play a decisive role in determining regional security throughout its near and extended strategic environment. Second is India's security concern about the revival of Taliban and their terrorist activities in the Indian sub-continent. Thus, India's involvement in Afghanistan has deep historical and geographical roots. Radha Kumar, expert on Afghan affairs, points out, "India has three key strategic interests in Afghanistan:<sup>xiv</sup> preventing terrorist attacks in India, supporting peace in Afghanistan, and gaining access to Central Asia."

India's political support and commitment to the Afghan government has consistently been very strong and has been formalised by the India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership in October 2011. Presently, India is the largest regional donor in Afghanistan and has provided aid worth \$2 billion so far.<sup>xv</sup> Both the nations share their concerns over

terror and have been equally inflicted by it in the past. India's consistent stance vis-a-vis the Taliban is another source of strength in bilateral relations. Additionally, the sacrifices made by Indians in various developmental projects are also a source of strength. However, until now, India's engagement with Afghanistan has mainly centred on civilian contribution and economic development. It covers four broad areas: infrastructure projects, humanitarian assistance, small and community based development projects, and education and capacity building programmes. The security affairs were largely controlled by ISAF and have been passed to ANSF after withdrawal. India has a minimal role in security affairs. The reason for this is India's strained relationship with Pakistan, which has impeded a stronger strategic and political role for India in Afghanistan. Islamabad's long involvement in the internal affairs of Afghanistan has given it leverage in deciding other external powers' involvement in Afghanistan. The other obstacle between India and Afghanistan's engagement is the absence of direct land connectivity.

Regional dynamics also play an important role in Afghanistan. Increased Chinese involvement in Afghanistan along with Pakistan leaves little space for India's manoeuvring. Economically, China is already poised to dominate Central Asia, including strategic energy assets. In Afghanistan, China has outdone India in terms of acquiring gas and oil assets. China secured three energy blocks in Amu Darya basin in 2012 and has invested \$3 billion in copper mines at Mes Aynak near Kabul.<sup>xvi</sup> By taking lead in the 'Heart of Asia'/Istanbul process, China has also taken a lead role in regional politics. Its entry is widely seen as of crucial importance for two reasons: first, it is the country, which can fill the vacuum after ISAF withdrawal, and through its giant economy, it could ease some economic burden of the US and Europe; and second, China has the ability to pressurise Pakistan Army<sup>xvii</sup> to bring Afghan Taliban on the negotiating table.

In order to bring peace in Afghanistan, President Ashraf Ghani's excessive reliance on Pakistan and China has caused concerns for India. The emerging trio of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China has limited India's maneuvering capacity in the present Afghanistan. Western powers are also convinced that peace in Afghanistan will come through Pakistan; therefore, they are also promoting Afghanistan, Pakistan and China. There is uneasiness in India on being sidelined. Strategists are debating on how India should get involved in

Afghanistan? What attempts it should make to fulfil its strategic interests in Afghanistan? Should India ignore Afghanistan completely or should it adopt the wait and watch policy?

Looking at the strategic importance of Afghanistan to India, ignoring Afghanistan would be detrimental. It will not only harm India's interest, but lead to greater challenges. Adopting wait and watch policy would also be highly ineffective. Afghanistan has bearing on India's security and economic interests. Post 2001, it provided India an opportunity to underscore its role as a regional power. Having invested \$2 billion already and being aware of the security challenge that an unstable Afghanistan can pose; India is resetting its Afghan policies and exploring avenues of regional cooperation. In fact, in order to remain engaged, active and relevant in Afghanistan, India should explore or innovate certain policy options in line with evolving dynamics of political and security transitions.

Some of the policy options for India could be as follows:

- India's primary interest is in establishing secure, strong and democratic state in Afghanistan to prevent an extremist takeover, which could, in turn, lead to terrorism in the region. Many other countries, such as Iran, Central Asian Republics (CARs), Russia and China share similar concerns. India, along with these countries, can jointly develop development and assistance mechanisms to counter terrorism and monitor activities of Taliban. It will provide an effective hold on as well as facilitate trade of goods.
- India's Investment in Afghanistan is another great opportunity for enhancing bilateral relations with Afghanistan. India's winning of a contract for estimated reserves of \$1.8 billion tonnes of iron ore at Haji Gak by a consortium of Indian firms led by the Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) may galvanise Indian support in Afghanistan.<sup>xviii</sup> India should take more such initiatives and first do a survey about the demography and ethnic tribes operating in particular region.
- Since Pakistan is unlikely to provide India direct land transit to Afghanistan, Iran becomes crucial for India's engagements in Afghanistan. The two countries can

work jointly to develop a security cooperation agreement, which may include training Afghan forces, sharing intelligence and providing cooperation on the matter of terrorism. In 2013, India committed \$100 million to upgrade its facilities at Chabahar port in south-eastern Iran and also assisted Kabul in building roads to the Iranian border. Thus, India and Iran can also explore a trilateral trade and transit agreement with Afghanistan. It would facilitate movement of goods through Iran-Afghanistan land route. To fulfil these objectives, India will have to deploy more personnel to its consulates close to Afghan-Iran border.

- SAARC forum is yet another mechanism to facilitate the process of stability, unity and peace in Afghanistan. SAARC Assistance Force (SAF) could be created and sent for peace keeping works, which may work with ANSF.
- The 'Heart of Asia' initiative supported by India to attract finance and investments for Afghanistan from across the globe is also a welcome step. It also closely collaborates with President Ghani's vision. It may take time, but India should put its effort in making it a success so that prosperity in Afghanistan is achieved with its spill-over effects.
- Internally, it is time that India addresses the issues of Afghan refugees in India. It still does not have a refugee policy and deals with the situation on an ad hoc basis. A significant population flow from Afghanistan is currently underway and a good number of them are seeking refuge in India. Talking about the plight of Afghans would make little sense if the Indian government chooses to ignore the plight of Afghans currently inside India.
- Across the region and, in fact, internationally, countries are seeking India's engagement with Afghan peace and stabilisation process. Within Afghanistan, there are a number of other considerations in favour of India. There is a wide political and public support for a closer partnership with India. However, it depends on how much India does on its part. India needs to identify actors and factors beyond Kabul, which might be beneficial for its interests in future.

In fact, New Delhi's engagement with Afghanistan will be linked to its ability to innovate, expand and deepen its engagement at multiple levels. It is, therefore, important that India focuses on those areas, which deliver maximum capital and developmental impact.

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<sup>i</sup> Radha Kumar (2014) "Afghanistan's New National Unity Government: What Can India Expect?" *Issue Brief*, Delhi Policy Group, December.

<sup>ii</sup> M. Sliwinski, "Afghanistan: the Decimation of a People", *ORBIS* 33 (1989), no.1, pp. 39-56, cited in Noor Ahmad Khalidi (1991) "Afghanistan: Demographic Consequences of War, 1978-1987", *Central Asian Survey*, vol.10, no. 3, pp. 101-126.

<sup>iii</sup> Katie Kuschminder and Manoj Dora (2009) "Migration in Afghanistan: history, Current Trends and Future Prospects", in Paper Series, Migration and Development Country Profiles, Maastricht Graduate School of Governance. URL- [file:///C:/Users/Lenovo/Downloads/2009\\_Afghanistan\\_Country\\_Paper.pdf](file:///C:/Users/Lenovo/Downloads/2009_Afghanistan_Country_Paper.pdf) accessed on 15 June 2015.

<sup>iv</sup> Ayaz Gul (2014) "Afghanistan Signs Security Pact with NATO and the US", *Voice of America*, 30 September 2014. URL- <http://www.voanews.com/content/us-welcomes-signing-of-bilateral-security-agreement-with-afghanistan/2467098.html> accessed on 30 September 2014.

<sup>v</sup> Hamid Shalizi and Mirwais Harooni (2015) "Taliban Attack Afghanistan's Parliament, Seized Second District in North", *Reuters*, Monday, 22 June 2015. URL- <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/23/afghanistan-blast-idUSKBN0P20GO20150623> accessed on 22 June 2015.

<sup>vi</sup> Asian Development Bank, Country Profile, Afghanistan. URL- <http://www.adb.org/countries/afghanistan/economy> accessed on 05 June 2015.

<sup>vii</sup> William, R. Brownfield, US Assistant Secretary of State. Hearing before the Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, January 2015, 2014. URL- <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/rm/2014/219833.htm> accessed in May 2015.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid

<sup>ix</sup> Eva Gross (2014) "Afghanistan: The View from Pakistan", *Issue Alter*, European Union Institute of Security Studies, January.

<sup>x</sup> Monika Chansoria, "China is Expanding its Footprints in Afghanistan", *The Sunday Guardian*. URL: <http://www.sunday-guardian.com/analysis/china-is-expanding-its-footprint-in-afghanistan> accessed on 03 July 2015.

<sup>xi</sup> Mark N. Katz (2014), "Putin's Predicament: Russia and Afghanistan after 2014", *Asia Policy*, no.17, January 2014, pp. 13-17.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiii</sup> Sumitha Narayanan Kutty (2014), "Iran and Afghanistan: The Urgent Need for Inclusive Regional Diplomacy", *Asia Policy*, no. 17, January 2014, pp. 40-46.

<sup>xiv</sup> Radha Kumar (2015) "India's Strategic Interests: A Sovereign Afghanistan", in Srikant Paranjpe and Rajendra Abhayankar (eds.) *Afghanistan After 2014*, Kalinga Publication, New Delhi.

<sup>xv</sup> Eva Gross (2014) "Afghanistan: The View from India", *Issue Alter*, European Union Institute of Security Studies, January.

<sup>xvi</sup> Avantika Lal (2013) "Indian Footprints in Afghanistan", *Scholar Warrior*, Autumn 2013, pp. 68-73.

<sup>xvii</sup> Radha Kumar (2014) "Afghanistan's New National Unity Government: What Can India Expect?" *Issue Brief*, Delhi Policy Group, December.

<sup>xviii</sup> Rajeev Agrawal (2014) "Post-2014 Afghanistan: Policy Options for India and Iran", Issue brief #247, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. URL: [http://www.ipcs.org/pdf\\_file/issue/IB247-ColAgarwal-Afg.pdf](http://www.ipcs.org/pdf_file/issue/IB247-ColAgarwal-Afg.pdf) accessed on 16 February 2015.