

INDIA'S AFGHAN POLICY PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The notion of security widening from traditional to non-traditional threats and the changing geo-economic strategies, has resulted in revamping foreign policies of the contemporary nation-states. Realizing this, India also comprehended new outlooks and orientations to deal with rest of the world. Nevertheless, her foreign policy aspirations for socio-economic development, security and peace are dependent on a peaceful and prosperous neighbourhood. Its 'Connect Central Asia Policy' and 'Peaceful Co-existence Principle' provides due recognition to the core and peripheral neighbourhood, particularly, Central Asia in relation to geo-economic, geo-strategic and geo-political aspects. In this respect, Afghanistan also provides a suitable route for India to achieve her foreign policy aspirations in the regional and global context, because of the geo-strategic location of Afghanistan in between South, Central, West and East Asia, as well as the involvement of world powers in this war-torn nation since 9/11. India's assistance to rebuild Afghanistan reaches US \$ 2 billion with the recognition of being largest regional and fifth international donor in this process. India has completed various projects in this troubled country regarding socio-economic development, science and technology upgradation, civil infrastructure, human resource development and capacity building in the areas of education, health, agriculture etc. India attempts to work for a stable, secure, peaceful, democratic and prosperous Afghanistan that holds the political, strategic and economic significance for her to assure a strong foothold for regional aspirations as Afghanistan falls in both South as well as Central Asian region. However, there are various constraints before India to meet and promote her interests in Afghanistan. These challenges have become more complex with the resurgence of Taliban, the return of Pakistan factor in Afghan politics and the US-led ISAF withdrawal. Thus, the study is an attempt to explore India's changing foreign policy aspirations, in general, and her Afghan policy, in particular, to provide an insight towards 'emerging India' as a significant regional and global player of current day international politics. With the vision of 'Asian Century,' India has a major role to play making this dream a reality where, in addition of investment and assistance, efforts for converting hatred into love, improving the efficacy of regional organizations as well as resolving amicably the international and inter-regional issues – all needs a humane approach.

Keywords

Strategic Depth, Traditional / Non-traditional Threats, Indo-Afghan Ties, Geo-centric Soft Power, 9/11 Episode, Transit Routes, Asian Century, Transnational Terrorism, Coalition Forces, Reconstruction Policy. Afghanistan.

The contemporary world has witnessed the concept of security widening from traditional to non-traditional threats in terms of religious extremism, international terrorism, drug trafficking, arms smuggling and so on. These challenges led the nation-states to alter their foreign policies. Evolving the non-traditional threats present in her immediate and extended neighbourhood, India also reoriented her foreign policy. Since the end of Cold War, India strove for securing economic growth, energy security, nuclear capability, democratic tradition and soft-power capability. Realizing the prominence of geo-economic factors in contemporary times, the country comprehended new outlooks and orientations in her economic dealings with the rest of the world, and is now poised to emerge as one of the world's largest economies. The last two decades also witnessed her endeavours to pursuit for the global power status. With the changed internal and external determinants of her foreign policy, the country has brought in an alteration in her vision of the world.

Today, the driving forces of India's foreign policy are the need for sustained economic growth, energy and maritime security, access to technology and innovation as well as internal and external security.¹ The other compulsions of India to relook her basic postulates of foreign policy includes financial crises of early 1990s followed by the adoption of Liberalization-Privatization-Globalization (LPG) as a model of economy, the shock therapy applied to new independent states of erstwhile USSR in 1990s, the process of globalization and the recognition of the Capitalist mode of economy in larger parts of the world. Thus, the end of Cold War, transnational terrorism, globalization of various economies, revolution in information technology, predominance of geo-economics over geo-politics, non-conventional threats over the conventional threats, comprehensive security over the traditional notion of security and the acquisition of nuclear status by India necessitated a paradigm shift in her foreign policy.²

Economic development forms the very base of all foreign policies of contemporary nation-states. For sustaining her economic growth, India needs to assure adequate supplies of energy resources and raw materials. However, her aspirations for socio-economic development, security and peace are dependent on a peaceful and prosperous neighbourhood. Thus, within the regional context, India's foreign policy strives for peace, stability and development of the region while enhancing regional economic integration. The country also has to provide due recognition for the core and peripheral neighbourhood as of their geo-economic, geo-strategic and geo-political significance.

Afghanistan provides a suitable route for India to achieve her foreign policy aspirations in regional and global context. This is so, because of the geo-strategic location of Afghanistan in between South, Central, East and West Asia, as well as the involvement of world powers in this war-torn nation. The links of transnational terrorism with Afghan issue is also essential for India to contain the non-traditional security threats within the region. In this context, India's Afghan Policy forms an essential part of her neighbourhood and extended neighbourhood orientations. Afghanistan's proximity to Iran on the west, Pakistan on the south and east, Central Asian Republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan on the north, and China in the northeast justifies her strategic location. This has led the scholars to call her 'a region at the cross

roads of history,³ that has always been a cause of interest for big powers. Some of the scholars also describe that the geo-centric position of Afghanistan at the crossroads of Asia implies that “a measure of control over Afghanistan will automatically lead to a measure of control over South Asia, Iran and the resource rich regions of Central Asia”.⁴

Historically, Afghanistan has witnessed foreign interventions and perpetual instability that remained a constant feature in the form of ‘The Great Game’, the Soviet invasion and the US-led ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’. The current day crisis in this country is the result of foreign intervention in domestic affairs of the country. It was since 1984 that the resisting elements against Soviet occupation received financial assistance and other support from United States and Pakistan.⁵ During the Soviet occupation, Afghanistan witnessed the emergence of Warlords and religious fundamentalism,⁶ and the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 created a power vacuum that led to the brutal civil war in this war-torn nation. The civil war in early 1990s provided a vacuum for the Pashtun Mujahideen (Taliban) educated in the *Madrassas* of Pakistan to resist anarchy⁷ and later on to establish government at Kabul in 1996.⁸ During the civil war and the Taliban regime, Afghanistan became a ground for a proxy war between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia on one side, and Iran, India, and Russia on the other side.⁹

The discovery of significant mineral resources in Central Asia, transnational terrorism, drug trafficking and nuclearization of India and Pakistan changed the geo-strategic equation of South and Central Asia. The post-Cold War era witnessed the focus of the world shifting towards resource rich Central Asia. Thus, Afghanistan once again attracted the attention of world powers as the country shares boundary with three Republics of Central Asia and stands at the cross roads of three strategic regions. Today, the country and her adjacent regions involve the main security threats of the world community in 21st century. Following the event of 9/11, the United States of America intervened therein to contain the threat of terrorism. This renewed the hope in Afghanistan that the international security forces led by the US will fight and defeat terrorism.¹⁰ Since the fall of Taliban government, many regional stakeholders seek to promote their economic and political advantage in Afghanistan as the country occupies strategic position to become a trade and business hub between the three strategic regions as well as China.¹¹ Besides being a land bridge connecting the Central Asian Republics with the huge markets of South Asia, the country also possesses huge mineral deposits estimated at US \$ 3 trillion.¹² However, the continuous instability in terms of air strikes, bomb blasts, suicide attacks, kidnappings and killings have spoiled the developmental process in this war-torn nation. In addition to the continuous instability, Taliban resurgence and the US withdrawal has raised concerns about her future scenario as well as the security of the adjacent countries. Thus, the existing situation within the country is not favourable for regional peace and security in the near future.

India and Afghanistan share strong cultural and economic ties. Historically, Afghanistan remained a route for almost every military journey into India.¹³ In cultural sense, the country served as a route for spreading Buddhism and Sufi Islam, the Arab-India exchanges of knowledge, and the arts and aesthetics of Greek and Persia.¹⁴ The modern ties between the two

countries go back to the anti-colonial movements in India. With the aim of strengthening the close ties, independent India signed a 'Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation' with Afghanistan in 1950.¹⁵ India's market intensified for Afghan shawls and dry fruits in post-independence era.¹⁶ Both of them also approached in a similar manner to the prevailing circumstances of Cold War at international level. From Mohammad Daoud to Nur Mohamed Tarakki, India signed various agreements to promote cooperation.¹⁷ The Soviet era in Afghanistan also witnessed strengthening relations between the two. India's programme of developmental assistance continued after the formation of Najibullah government in post-Soviet era, and provided humanitarian assistance to the Rabbani government that replaced the former in 1992.¹⁸ With the outbreak of civil war and the emergence of Taliban, their bilateral relations experienced a setback. Taliban's support to Pakistan in using Afghan territory as a sanctuary for anti-Indian militant activities¹⁹ as well as the Kandahar Hijacking in 1999 further deteriorated the relations. Post-9/11 era witnessed Indo-Afghan relations moving from the tradition of historical and cultural ties to the development partnerships. The event of 9/11 and its aftermath have "made Afghanistan alive in the global scenario, especially amongst Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China, United States and India."²⁰ Taking into account India's security, economic diplomacy, energy requirements and her quest to reach Central Asian resources, Afghanistan holds a strategic significance. Thus, in the post-9/11 era, India intensified the efforts to re-establish her influence in Afghanistan.

India, since 2002, has pledged US \$ 2 billion as her assistance to rebuild the Afghanistan and has the recognition of being largest regional and fifth international donor in this process. Indian government has completed various projects in Afghanistan regarding social and economic development, skills and capacity building, and science and technology up gradation, besides civil infrastructure, human resource development and capacity building in the areas of education, health, agriculture etc.²¹ Her activities of capacity building and skill development in Afghanistan range from "catering to school children to technical capacity building."²² The country has contributed to reconstruct Afghanistan in all sectors including health, education, polity, economy, infrastructure etc, and is building structures from public sanitation units including toilets to power transmission lines. Civil aviation, irrigation, power generation, industry and rural development are other areas of focus.²³ The assistance covers broader areas including the support to political development and political consciousness, economic development, development of basic amenities, educational development, capacity building, infrastructural and technical development, cultural development and cultural exchanges and so on.²⁴ This assistance is the outcome of the realization that socio-economic development is essential for stabilizing Afghanistan as well as the whole region.²⁵ Instead of hindrances in terms of attacks on her projects and personnel in Afghanistan, the country continues to provide generous assistance. In the words of former Foreign Secretary of India, Nirupama Rao, "India is engaged in developmental and humanitarian work to assist the Afghan people as they build a peaceful, stable, inclusive, democratic and pluralistic Afghanistan..."²⁶

Afghanistan and India have signed a first-ever agreement on Strategic

Partnership on 04th of October 2011, on the realization that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) would not be capable to resist extremism and Taliban resurgence after the NATO-exit.²⁷ The agreement is significant in extending their bilateral relations from economic and capacity development to the security aspects. India, as a part of the Strategic Agreement, agrees to train ANSF in post-2014 Afghanistan.²⁸ Hailing the essence of this agreement, India's former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh stated, "*India will stand by the people of Afghanistan as they prepare to assume the responsibility for their governance and security after the withdrawal of international forces in 2014*".²⁹ The agreement provides to establish new institutional framework for political, security, trade and economic cooperation.

The investments of India in Afghanistan have been largely developmental with a little focus on exploring natural resources.³⁰ Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to count India's Afghan policy moralistic with no calculation of realism. Instead, perceiving India's role only to promote security and stability of the Afghan people is in itself an unrealistic approach.³¹ India's Afghan Policy involves various strategic and vital interests. Her policy design is to stabilize the war-torn nation as well as explore new opportunities in this country to address her foreign policy aspirations. Further, there are some constraints as well that pose threats for her Afghan policy. Thus, it is significant to explore India's interests as well as challenges to pursue her foreign policy in Afghanistan.

India's Interests in Afghanistan

India works for a stable, secure and prosperous Afghanistan that holds the political, strategic and economic significance to suit her interests. This will also ensure regional stability, in general, and a long-term solution to India's problems of terrorism, extremism and separatism, in particular. The country strives to develop Afghanistan in political and economic aspects with a stable democratic tradition. She counts her security interest in ensuring a sovereign, stable and united Afghanistan, free from all external influences. She aspires to stimulate Afghan economy with her potential market to import goods and services. Afghanistan too has expressed the will to enhance Indian business within the country while developing the manufacturing hubs in different sectors as cement, oil, gas, electricity, banking, communications etc.³² A democratic and peaceful Afghanistan will assure a strong foothold for India in the South-West-Central Asia to explore regional trade ties.

The rapid population growth, economic expansion and energy-deficit increased India's energy requirements causing energy security a necessity to sustain the economic growth.³³ The country recognizes her need for seeking alternative energy sources as she imports 70% of oil and 50% of gas. The demand for energy has been growing at a rapid rate as expected to increase from 122 million tonnes in 2001-02 to 364 million tonnes in 2024-25.³⁴ This suggests a comprehensive relationship with the resource-rich Central Asian Republics (CARs), and Afghanistan has the significance to act as a transit route for this energy supply to India. Connecting Central Asia via Afghanistan will also provide overland routes for India to reach the resources in Russia and Middle East as well.³⁵ India seeks to intensify stronger regional cooperation on trade, transit and energy to promote regional economic integration. Thus, her

major policy framework is to rebuild Afghanistan as a bridge connecting the regions adjacent. The country does not have direct access to the Central Asian region and depends upon the transit rights provided by others to reach therein. Pakistan, repeatedly, refused to grant her the transit rights forcing India to seek alternatives. Thus, the country's assistance to build Chah Bahar Port on the Makran coast in Iran and Zarang-Delaram highway in Afghanistan facilitates an alternative route to connect the Central Asian region.³⁶

Being a victim of various terrorist outfits, India has the apprehension that the radical and extremist elements in Kabul would marginalize her influence and encourage her internal disturbances, particularly, in J&K. Various Islamist militant groups operating in Kashmir are well known to coordinate training, resource allocation and logistical support with groups operating out of northwest Pakistan (i.e. East Afghanistan).³⁷ Thus, the country has an abiding interest in preventing the rise of terrorism within the region and strives to design her Afghan policy to combat terrorism and contain religious extremism. Afghanistan's southern provinces contain about eighty percent of world's opium production and is considered a significant contributor of drug market³⁸. The illegal trade of these drugs is a major source for the terrorist groups to generate money.³⁹ The prevention of opium production in Afghanistan and drug trafficking within the region, is another dimension of India's Afghan policy.

Challenges for India's Afghan Policy

However, there are various challenges before India to meet and promote her interests in Afghanistan. These challenges have become more complex with the resurgence of Taliban, the return of Pakistan factor in Afghan politics and the US-led ISAF (International Security Assistance Forces) withdrawal. Taliban resurgence does not augur well for India, as its impact on the regional and Pakistani extremist groups is a major security concern. There is also apprehension of the growing nexus between Taliban and other terrorist organizations active in the region, including Haqqani Networks and Lashkar-e-Toiba. The rising terrorist attacks in Afghanistan since 2006 resulted in the killing of several Indian personnel working therein.⁴⁰ This makes it difficult for India to execute her assistance projects and poses a serious challenge to secure her interests.

India has made immense contribution in rebuilding Afghanistan, but all these efforts succeeded under the security umbrella provided by the US-led coalition forces.⁴¹ The US decision of withdrawing the International Coalition Forces from Afghanistan has put the peace and reconstruction process in scuffle. The US doublespeak regarding the presence of terrorism on Pakistan soil is also a challenge for India. Besides criticizing her for the links with terrorist groups, the US is continuously providing military aid to Pakistan. This has put India under suspicion regarding the US designs in the region. The training of the ANSF (Afghan National Security Forces) after the US withdrawal has become a question for all interested players in Afghanistan. India has agreed to train and support ANSF, but has to work hard to transform this weak force into a real fighting force capable of facing Taliban. Another challenge for India in Afghanistan is the suspicion over her presence in this war-torn nation. There is

a perception among the stakeholders that the hegemonic designs in the region are driving India's Afghan policy. Some perceive India's activities as a design to control the land routes for Central Asian resources.⁴² Thus, the country has to generate a perception among the regional community that her interests in Afghanistan are not against any nation.

Pakistan is the primary rival of India in South Asia and a main challenge for her Afghan Policy. 'India-Pakistan-Afghanistan' as a strategic triangle is evident with the observation that "Central aim for Pakistan's military tsars is to make sure that the future political make-up in Afghanistan does not allow India to expand security or even develop footprint".⁴³ Besides the issues of Kashmir, Siachen, Sir Creek and trans-border water disputes, the Indo-Pak rivalry has moved to more complex issues including economic battle, international-cum-regional status, intra-regional and inter-regional alliances with diverge interests, access to the unexplored natural resources in the regions adjacent and so on. Thus, Central Asia is also a matter of concern now, because of its resource potential. As a product of the mistrust and discord between the two, India's presence in Afghanistan has created apprehensions within Pakistan.⁴⁴ The country views India's design as a part of her Afghan Policy to marginalize Pakistan's position to become a strong partner of Central Asian resources.⁴⁵ Thus, resisting her presence in Afghanistan is vital for Pakistan's strategic designs to prevent India from reaching the Central Asian Republics.⁴⁶ The country also comprehends that India perceives Afghanistan as a geopolitical constraint on Pakistan and is encircling to destabilize her.⁴⁷

The perception of Pakistan is that India uses her Consulates in Afghanistan to encourage conflict in Pakistan's Baluchistan and other provinces.⁴⁸ The country projects these Consulates working for India's intelligence agency RAW (Research and Analysis Wing),⁴⁹ to supply money, arms and ammunition to the insurgent groups in Pakistan's tribal areas.⁵⁰ The Strategic Agreement between India and Afghanistan made the Pakistan officials to express concerns that such kind of pact could harm her long-term interests in the region.⁵¹ The country, since last few years has witnessed sudden increase of domestic violence in the form of terrorist attacks, and India being inherent rival of Pakistan, is the primary target to be accused.⁵² However, the US officials and intelligence reports repeatedly attribute the Taliban resurgence and growing strength of al Qaeda to the safe havens of Af-Pak region.⁵³ This made Pakistan a victim of her own policies to support and provide shelter to the terrorist groups. For instance, Tehrek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) turned against the Pakistani army and civil society after the Red Mosque incident⁵⁴ and now poses serious security threat to the entire country.

India also has the apprehension of security threats as evident with the fact that Pakistan has been very influential in the past, particularly, during 1990s, in Afghanistan. Pakistan's Afghan policy is a product of the 'Strategic Depth' designed to neutralize the influence of India and use the territory of Afghanistan against her.⁵⁵ Thus, the country is again counting to redesign this policy to limit India's role and presence in post-US Afghanistan.⁵⁶ The country aspire this policy to enable her to use the Afghan territory, as previously done, to organize and train terrorist groups against India to forge violence, particularly, in Jammu & Kashmir.⁵⁷ Thus, India is not at ease with Pakistan's

attempts to come back in Afghan affairs that continues to be a crucial challenge for India's Afghan Policy.

The major findings of preceding analysis leads to believe that India since 9/11 has played an influential role in the development and stability of Afghanistan. Her assistance is focusing the economic development of this war-torn nation. Following the 'economy first' strategy, her "Connect Central Asia Policy" (CCAP) is a part of her economic diplomacy. Her efforts in regional context reveals that India's Afghan Policy forms the significant part of this "Connect Central Asia Policy" as Afghanistan has the significance of providing a strong link for India with the Central Asian Republics. The country has an abiding interest to develop stronger economic relations and cooperation within South-Central Asia as well as the Middle East on trade, transit and energy via Afghanistan. However, there are some intense and common threats within Afghanistan in the form of terrorism, religious extremism, nexus between terrorist organizations, illegal weapons and drug trafficking, which concerns all regional countries and require collective action to eliminate. Besides all these challenges, Taliban resurgence and the US withdrawal has added to the complication. Thus, India has to assure a proactive role in winning the goodwill of Afghan people, on one side, and training the security forces of Afghanistan, on other side. The country has to equip and train the ANSF with modern war tactics and weaponry to prevent the spread of religious extremism as well as establish a democratic polity in Afghanistan. In relation to Pakistan, India has to deal cautiously while assuring cooperation for the development, stabilization and democratization of Afghanistan, and to contain any attempt on part of Pakistan to marginalize India's influence in Afghanistan or use Afghan territory against her interests. Keeping in view the geographical constraint and the dynamic nature of Indo-Pak relations, the country has to engage Iran passionately to disengage her dependence on Pakistan to reach Afghanistan and Central Asia. Besides, the country has to continue her reconstruction assistance, capacity building, human capital development and other developmental projects in Afghanistan to sustain her presence as well as challenge the disturbing elements within the region.

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