

# INDIA'S AFGHAN POLICY

## PAKISTAN PERSPECTIVE AND CHINA FACTOR

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### **Abstract**

*India has adopted a pro-active Afghan policy since the fall of Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The country has extended her financial assistance covering economic, social, political and even cultural development of this war-torn nation. US-decision of ISAF-withdrawal has necessitated the resolve to strengthen Afghan security forces. India has extended her support to train and equip the ANSF to deal with Taliban resurgence and other security related aspects. However, there are some interpretations, especially constructed by Pakistan think tanks regarding the suspicious role of India in Afghanistan. These interpretations manifest India's presence in Afghanistan as a strategic design to encircle and destabilize Pakistan. Since the US-NATO exit strategy, China too has become pro-active in relation to Afghan issue. Besides her economic considerations, the country has mainly the security concerns with increasing violence and instability of Afghanistan. There is also ambiguity regarding China's dual stand regarding terrorism and Taliban. It is in light of these issues that the paper focuses India's Afghan policy in changing circumstances. Besides analyzing Pak perspective and counter-responses regarding India's Afghan policy, an attempt has been made to underscore China as a factor for India in Afghanistan. The paper also highlights the common concerns of India and China in Afghanistan with the potential to push these nations for a joint workable strategy to deal post-ISAF situation.*

### **Keywords**

Afghanistan, China, Extremism, India, ISAF, Pakistan, Exit Strategy, Taliban, Terrorism, US, Think Tank, Cold War, Diplomatic Engagements.

Post-World War II era witnessed the ideological conflict between two power blocs that was termed by Bernard Baruch as 'Cold War'. This confrontation inseeded the seeds of conflict at certain places in a way that, even after twenty-five years of post-Cold war, achieving peace and stability has become a complex task. Afghan conflict also represents the same legacy of Cold war that has not only dismantled the country, but has emerged out as a most serious threat to the regional and global peace. Thus, it is obvious for the world-nations to dwell in for seeking a viable solution to assure peace. With the

NATO (Northern Atlantic Treaty Organization)-drawdown from Afghanistan and designs to withdraw International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) completely in near future, the regional actors including Pakistan, Iran, India, China, Central Asian Republics (CARs) and even Russia have to share the burden for assuring stability and prosperity of the region. The main issues of concern for these regional countries in relation to Afghanistan include terrorism, religious extremism and drug trafficking. Besides it, there are better prospects for enhancing inter-regional trade via Afghanistan as the country has the geo-strategic advantage of connecting South, West, Central and East Asia. The vital energy resources of the Central Asian region further adds to the significance of regional economic ties with Afghanistan as a connecting bridge. However, the ambiguities in the foreign policies of these regional actors regarding their relative gains has enhanced the complexities for designing any such regional cooperation.

India, being vulnerable to security threats and an energy-deficit nation, also aspires for same in relation to Afghanistan. Thus, the country has invoked a pro-active Afghan policy since the fall of Taliban regime. However, there are certain disturbances regarding her interests and concerns that are preventing the country to move smoothly for addressing her needs. The fundamental challenge is the perspective constructed by Pakistan in relation to India's presence in Afghanistan. This has been accompanied by the pro-active diplomacy of China in Afghanistan since 2012 and her support for Pakistan regarding certain issues that does not augur well for the interests of India. In this regard, it is significant to analyze India's Afghan policy from Pakistan perspective and subsequent stand of China.

India's foreign policy aspirations are at securing a stable, secure and prosperous neighbourhood and Afghanistan constitutes a road for such design. Thus, India's Afghan policy aims at promoting development, peace, security and stability of the Afghan nation. Besides promoting commercial relations, her investments in Afghanistan have been largely developmental. The country is seeking to explore new opportunities in Afghanistan to address her foreign policy aspirations. The country is helping this war-torn nation to promote democracy, strengthen political institutions and ensure security. Taking into consideration the changing circumstances at international scene, India has some considerable interests in Afghanistan. The country has a strong security interest in ensuring that Afghanistan remains a sovereign, stable, united and free from external influences. There are certain economic interests as well to explore the mutual benefits while connecting Afghanistan through wider road networks within the region. Afghanistan too provides a space for Indian companies currently engaged in the reconstruction process, and has repeatedly expressed her will to enhance Indian business while developing the manufacturing hubs in different sectors as cement, oil, gas, electricity, banking, communications etc.<sup>1</sup> India's efforts are to gain strong foothold in the South,

West and Central Asia by strengthening trade ties with Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> The country is also one of the fastest growing economies of the world and requires external energy resources to sustain her economic growth. This 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.<sup>3</sup> Importing energy has thus become one of the important components of her foreign policy. All this suggests a comprehensive relationship with CARs considered as energy hub region of the contemporary times. Afghanistan can act as a transit route for energy supply from the Central Asian region to the India territory. India aspires to develop stronger economic relations and cooperation between south and central Asia and acknowledges the need to promote inter-regional economic integration. With the geo-strategic position of Afghanistan, India's major policy framework is to rebuild this country as a land bridge between these regions. This requires a peaceful, stable and modernized Afghanistan that essentially constitutes the basis for India's Afghan policy.

Bearing the geographic barrier to access to the Central Asian region and Afghanistan, Pakistan provides first-best option for India to reach therein. However, Pakistan's refusal to grant transit rights to India and the dynamism of Indo-Pak bilateral relations act as a big obstacle for India's 'Afghan Policy' and 'Connect Central Asia Policy'.<sup>4</sup> This pushes India to think of second-best option. Thus, the assistance to build Chah Bahar Port on the Makran coast in Iran and Zarang-Delaram highway in Afghanistan provides India an alternative route for connecting the resource rich region of Central Asia. Such developments and constructions assist the country to reach the CARs while cutting off Pakistan.

As per her security aspect, India has an abiding interest in containing and reversing the tide of religious fundamentalism and terrorism. Spread of Islamic extremism being the major threat to her security,<sup>5</sup> one of the objectives of India's Afghan Policy is to prevent the resurgence of radical Taliban. From realistic perspective, nexus between the terrorist groups operating in Af-Pak region would be hostile to her interests. Thus, rooting out terrorism and weakening its sponsoring agencies constitutes significant aspect of India's foreign policy.<sup>6</sup> It is under these security apprehensions that the country has designed her Afghan policy to combat terrorism and contain religious extremism. Illegal trade of drugs and opium production in Afghanistan are again a matter of concern for India as it constitutes a major source for the terrorist groups to generate money.<sup>7</sup> Thus, fighting drug trafficking and Narco-terrorism also forms a significant part of her Afghan Policy.

Thus, India's interests and policy initiatives in Afghanistan constitutes of the economic, political, social, cultural and strategic aspects. The country has spent nearly \$US 2.5 billion in some vital areas including infrastructure development, health facilities, education and so on with the aim to promote her interests in Afghanistan. However, there is suspicion regarding her

activities in this war-torn nation created by some international actors. This necessitates a scrutiny to analyse India's Afghan policy to check the validity of this suspicion. Thus, Pakistan perspective regarding India's Afghan policy is significant in this respect to evaluate the validity of this apprehension.

### **Pakistan Perspective regarding India's Presence in Afghanistan**

India and Pakistan are two primary rivals in South Asia. Both the countries have differences regarding their role in Afghanistan. The strategic triangle of 'India-Pakistan-Afghanistan' 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 (her) security or even develop footprint*".<sup>8</sup> India's pro-active role and presence in Afghanistan since the fall of Taliban regime has created apprehensions within Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> The conflict between the two nations has moved beyond the traditional issues like Kashmir and has become more complex in terms of economic competition, international and regional status, regional alliances with divergent interests, access to the unexplored natural resources within the regions adjacent and so on.<sup>10</sup> Thus, resource rich Central Asia has also become a matter of concern among the two.<sup>11</sup> Pakistan perceives that India's presence in Afghanistan has the aim to marginalize the position of Pakistan in becoming a strong partner of Central Asian resources.<sup>12</sup> Thus, reducing India's influence in Afghanistan is vital for her strategic designs to prevent the country to reach Central Asia.<sup>13</sup> The country also has the apprehension regarding alleged designs of India to encircle her while maintaining foothold on Afghan soil,<sup>14</sup> with the aim to encourage conflict in Baluchistan and other provinces.<sup>15</sup> Various think tanks and observers in Pakistan have interpreted India's policy designs in Afghanistan with the aim of destabilizing Pakistan.<sup>16</sup> Referring to the building of hydropower projects on the Indus, Jhelum and Chenab rivers, Pakistan claims that India has restricted the flow of waters to this country. Now, the initiatives to build hydropower projects on the Kabul River are certainly going to have severe consequences for Pakistan.<sup>17</sup> All this is being perceived as a strategic policy to undermine Pakistan's political stability, territorial integrity and economic viability.<sup>18</sup> Regarding the Indo-Afghan Strategic Agreement, Pakistan has raised concerns about her long-term interests in the region.<sup>19</sup> The country also construes India's Afghan policy as a design to counter-balance Pakistan's support to the insurgency movement of Kashmir.<sup>20</sup> Thus, India is Pakistan's primary target to blame for increasing violence and terrorist attacks on Pak soil and suspects her support for insurgencies in Baluchistan and Waziristan.<sup>21</sup> Even, there is a perception that India's construction of Zaranj-Delaram highway on one side and dams on the Kabul River on the other side aim at creating rift between Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, Pakistan has always seen Afghanistan as her backyard. The country was among the only three countries that recognized Taliban

government in Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup> There was a policy framework under the designs of Strategic Depth whereby Pakistan used Afghan territory against the interests of India.<sup>24</sup> The country has again emerged out with strong resolve to engage Taliban and Haqqani Network in peace talks with Kabul. Thus, there is suspicion regarding Pak designs for reengaging strategic depth to limit India's role and presence in post-US Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup> The country announced the end of support to the Taliban immediately after the event of 9/11. Now, when the US has announced to withdraw troops, and the new NATO-led mission "Resolute Support" commenced her new task solely to train, advise and assist the Afghan National Security Forces since 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2015. Pakistan has the designs to map out the future arrangements in Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup> This may prove harmful for India's regional interests. Thus, the long-standing objective of India has been to support and strengthen a friendly democratic government in Afghanistan with no external influence.<sup>27</sup> Intruding militant organizations in power sharing at Kabul will help Pakistan reassure her influence in Afghanistan. Thus, the country is trying hard to bring Haqqani Network into the negotiating table with Kabul.<sup>28</sup> Assessing that US is not capable of handling the Afghan war properly; the Pak Army shows the interest for the workable exit strategy to set the deal with Taliban.<sup>29</sup>

Resurgence of Taliban has been attributed to the operation grounds mainly across the southern Afghanistan in the tribal areas of Pakistan.<sup>30</sup> US officials and intelligence reports also expressed the same concern that Taliban resurgence intensifies because of the safe havens in Af-Pak region.<sup>31</sup> India, being the victim of state sponsored terrorism at domestic level since 1990s, is now facing the same in abroad. This is evident with the attacks killing Indians workers and targeting her official establishments in Afghanistan. Thus, India is not at ease with direct involvement of Pakistan, backed by China, in the process of reintegration and reconciliation of Taliban. Containing Pakistan from playing such proxies is thus a crucial challenge for India's Afghan Policy.

### **China Factor in Afghanistan**

China has an interest in Afghanistan's long-term stability. The deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan with the drawdown of ISAF has pushed the country for a pro-active role in seeking alternative designs. Her main objective is to ensure that instability doesn't spread to the disturbed Xinjiang province. Thus, the country abandoned her policy to remain totally passive about post-NATO Afghanistan. Relying on her traditional strength of economic engagement, the country is stepping up with a newly proactive diplomacy in the region. Thus, it is imperative to understand China's Afghan policy vis-à-vis the changing circumstances.

China and Afghanistan are neighbours sharing 76-km border, though it lacks the infrastructure required to connect the two countries. After the formation of the People's Republic of China, exchanges between the two sides

were low for a long time. However, due to the Soviet expansionist threat, it was during 1970s when China started extending support to resistance groups, the *Mujahideen*, even before Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.<sup>32</sup> After the Soviet withdrawal and its subsequent disintegration, there was again no formal relation or involvement of China in Afghan conundrum. During Taliban era, Pakistan proved crucial for China in facilitating the diplomatic meet between Chinese representatives and Mullah Omar, the then Taliban leader.<sup>33</sup> As an outcome of this meeting, Mullah Omar assured the Chinese government that Afghan territory will never be allowed for militant organizations which were fighting for an independent Uighur province of Xinjiang. Following the event of 9/11, Beijing was stuck in the middle to see the fall of Taliban on one side and the US presence in Central Asia and Afghanistan on the other. In post-9/11 era, the country again remained less active in Afghan affairs with minimal economic assistance up to US\$ 250 million.<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, China has a policy resolve that economic development will ultimately led to address the issues of terrorism and extremism in Afghanistan. This is evident with the opinion of Foreign Minister Wang Yi during his Kabul visit in February 2014 that: *“We hope to see the development of Afghanistan. Development is fundamental and only with economic growth can the poverty problem be solved and the foundations of terrorism and extremism be eliminated.”*<sup>35</sup> It was in 2007, that China won the tender for investment in the Aynak copper mine.<sup>36</sup> If the country will continue and enhance such economic initiatives, this will provide her an easy access to the resources therein, taken into account the technical and local expertise of Chinese firms. However, with the strong resurgence of Taliban and violent activities of extremists since the ISAF-drawdown, protecting economic assets and personnel in Afghanistan has become a difficult task for all investors. For instance, the above referred Chinese investment in Aynak copper mine was attacked more than 20 times over the subsequent years, leading to the departure of 40 Chinese engineers because of security issues.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the basic concern of China is to shape post-ISAF Afghanistan's strategic environment for her own interests.

Internally, China is facing certain problems that made the country vulnerable for religious extremism and terrorism. Ethnic unrest, terrorism and Islamic extremism in Xinjiang province have been an ongoing concern for Chinese authorities for decades. Tensions have been particularly heightened since 2009, when nearly 200 people died in ethnic violence in the provincial capital of Urumqi.<sup>38</sup> More than 100 people died in violent incidents in June 2014, including 59 ‘terrorists’ gunned down by police.<sup>39</sup> Restrictions on religious expression has also become a matter of concern in relation to China and this has direct link with the Islamic extremism within the region. For example, ‘Project Beauty’, launched in 2013, is a program aimed at encouraging Uygur women to dress less conservatively.<sup>40</sup> More recently, the city of Karamay introduced rules to ban temporarily the people who are

sporting beards or wearing hijabs from catching the bus.<sup>41</sup> Also, there have been reports of Uyghur students or government officials being forced to break their fast during Ramadan (Holy Month of fasting for Muslims).<sup>42</sup> Thus, all this is providing a ground for extremist organizations operating within the region to influence the ongoing scission movement in Xinjiang province.

Threat of terrorism can not be ruled out in China with the existing terrorist organizations in the region targetting the country. The Sunni Uyghur militant groups based near the Af-Pak border have claimed responsibility for a small number of attacks in China. Among them, the most prominent group, Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), claimed responsibility for several bus bombings in 2008<sup>43</sup> and also for an attack in Kashgar in July 2011 that killed three dozen people.<sup>44</sup> In 2012, Abdullah Mansour emerged as the TIP's leader, and since then the group has issued frequent and more sophisticated videos with the media wing of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) praising attacks in Xinjiang.<sup>45</sup> In 2013, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri endorsed the right of militants to fight Chinese in Xinjiang.<sup>46</sup> In July 2014, Islamic State (ISIS) leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi said in a speech to rally global support that "*Muslim rights are forcibly seized in China, India, Palestine*",<sup>47</sup> raising concerns among Chinese authorities. Thus, there is an expert opinion regarding the unrest in Xinjiang to be adopted as a cause by extremist groups operating within the region.

Beijing view all these security risks and the impact of consequences of post-ISAF Afghan instability on the country's security with utmost concern. Thus, the policy-makers have designs to contribute to the stabilization of Afghanistan. Hu Shisheng of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) states, "*Now with the US strategic focus shifting, neighbouring countries cannot just let Afghanistan descend into chaos.*"<sup>48</sup> Li Wei, also from CICIR, indicates that: "*Although the US will leave behind a level of military force, the pressure on terrorist forces in Central and South Asia will inevitably be eased...in this upcoming period pressure from terrorism in Xinjiang will be quite large.*"<sup>49</sup> Some Chinese analysts argue that the drawdown of ISAF will provide Uyghur militant groups with an opportunity to co-opt other terrorist groups to their cause. There is also the fright regarding Afghan territory being utilized by Uighur militants as a operational grounds. For example, Hu Shisheng of CICIR argues that: "*The Pakistan and the Afghanistan Taliban are sympathetic towards the Uyghurs. So we absolutely have to pay attention to this, in a way that perhaps we did not before.*"<sup>50</sup> However, taking into consideration China's foreign policy stance of non-aggression and non-intervention, the experts suggest diplomatic and economic engagements of China with Afghanistan, besides strengthening her own immunity.

China's diplomatic engagement with Afghan issue has strengthened significantly since 2011. The country has deepened her bilateral relations with Afghanistan while signing a new partnership agreement and sending the first

politburo-level visitor to the country in decades. Beijing has been reportedly rebuilding the direct links it had with the Taliban prior to the US invasion in 2001.<sup>51</sup> This may continue and perhaps strengthen after the ISAF withdrawal. Re-engaging Taliban after its strong resurgence is in the interest of China as the country wants to prevent Afghan territory from being used against her interests. Thus, China is now-a-days active in facilitating peace talks between the government of Afghanistan and Taliban. Besides US and Pakistan, China was behind the peace talks initiated between Taliban and Afghan government in the town of Murree on the outskirts of Pakistani capital Islamabad in July 2015.<sup>52</sup>

Beijing has been overwhelmingly proactive in Afghan affairs since last few years. With the commitment to increase her economic footprint in Afghanistan, both the countries declared a “strategic and cooperative partnership” in June 2012. While appointing Sun Yuxi as the country’s special envoy to Afghanistan in July 2014, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that, Sun was appointed “*to step up the communication with Afghanistan and all parties concerned and safeguard lasting peace, stability and development of Afghanistan and the region.*”<sup>53</sup> Realizing that the US was not planning to maintain ISAF presence in Afghanistan for a long-term, the country engaged regional actors including Pakistan, Russia and India into bilateral and multi-lateral dialogues to discuss what next? In addition, China and Russia hosted a 6+1 (China, Russia, Afghanistan, India, Iran, Pakistan + United States) Dialogue on the Afghanistan issue in Geneva in March 2014.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, China is committed to the stability of Afghanistan and has initiated economic engagements and regional cooperation in this regard. Being unlikely to make any meaningful security commitment to Afghanistan, Beijing will continue to enhance its diplomatic and economic engagement with the country. However, the security concerns of the country are much deeper than the economic considerations. As per the Chinese concerns in Afghanistan, it is indicative that the country has much more to share with India’s Afghan policy. Both the countries are committed to establish peace and stability in this war-torn nation. Both are seeking a pro-active role to deal with Afghan conflict. The countries are also economically engaged with Afghanistan in terms of trade, infrastructural development, investments and exploration of natural resources. They have a common interest to enhance inter-regional trade links via Afghan territory. Religious extremism and terrorism also concerns both the nations as they are, in one way or other, the victims of terrorism and have security threats within their territorial domains. The emergence of ISIS (Islamic State) at the international scene and the reports regarding the presence of this group in Afghanistan has intensified these security concerns within the region. Besides it, both the nations are also concerned about the issue of drug trafficking within the region. There are some differences on certain issues including Taliban talks. However, both the nations have initiated bilateral and multilateral means



to deal with the Afghan issue. India's permanent membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) will strengthen the relations between the two countries that can further enhance the cooperation to discuss Afghan issue vis-à-vis the changing circumstances.

In terms of military engagements, both China and India have agreed to support and train Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to deal with post-ISAF situation. India is providing training to the Afghan forces under the Strategic Agreement signed in 2011. China too has agreed in 2012 to train around 300 Afghan police officers in China over four years.<sup>55</sup> One of the options discussed and debated among the analysts is that providing training and equipment for ANSF would be a more direct way to shape the security and stability of Afghanistan. Along with co-authors Raffaello Pantucci of the Royal United Services Institute in London and Ravi Sawhney of New Delhi's Vivekananda International Foundation, Hu Shisheng proposed that China and India could jointly train a "mineral-assets protection force" in Afghanistan.<sup>56</sup> This joint mechanism can be further enhanced to assure a stable Afghanistan.

Finally, China trusted Pakistan during 1990s for engaging militant organizations in a dialogue to assure her own national security. However, the new generation of terrorist organizations in Af-Pak region are explicitly out of control and are instead targetting Pakistan establishments. This indicates that relying on Pakistan to deal with this new generation of terrorism is suicidal. Thus, China has to engage India passionately with respect to the regional terrorism and extremism. As discussed above, both the countries are vulnerable for terrorist threats and the post-ISAF situation may demand Indo-China joint mechanism to deal with the regional security scenario. Thus, there should be no fundamental reliance on the good and bad boy theory of terrorism. China has to follow the Indian and Russian stand regarding terrorism that all terrorists are same requiring same treatment to be eliminated.

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