

# AFGHANISTAN FACTOR IN INDO-CENTRAL ASIAN RELATIONS

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## **Abstract**

*The strategic location of Afghanistan at crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia is itself defining the importance of Afghan factor in India–Central Asia relations. Afghanistan, one time a buffer state between British India and Soviet Union, has shaped the post-9/11 India foreign policy to stabilize Afghanistan through Low Politics Approach (LPA) for regional integration and stability. India's growing interest in CARs through the embedded policy of economic, energy and strategic synergy benefitting both, has further enhanced the Afghan factor in relation between the two for common interests and concerns in the region. The focus of this paper is to understand the common concerns both India and Central Asia have on Afghanistan as well as importance of Afghan peace for the regional stability. The argument is further elaborated to explain India's policy towards Central Asia.*

## **Keywords**

Strategic Synergy, Low Politics Approach, Great Game, Domestic Security, Regional Organizations, Strategic Location, Chessboard, Afghanistan, India, Central Asia, Silk Route, Pakistan, Look West Policy, Buffer Zone, Greater Central Asia, Durand Line, Extended Neighbourhood.

## **Introduction**

The relations among Afghanistan, India and Central Asia go back to the ancient period when Afghanistan was an integral part of many great empires like Mauryan Empire, Durrani Empire right up to the Mughal Empire. India, Afghanistan and some Central Asian parts, particularly, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were ruled by many great empires. The north of present day Afghanistan was linked to Transoxiana / Turkestan, the region to the north of Amu Darya, more or less corresponding to the territories of contemporary Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The Durrani Empire is considered to be the founder of modern state of Afghanistan. The Durrani Empire founded in 1747 by Ahmad Shah Durrani, spread over present day Afghanistan, north-eastern Iran, eastern Turkmenistan (including Panjdeh Oasis), most of Pakistan and North-western India, including Kashmir region. However, his successor failed to succeed resulting in the fall of the empire in the latter period. Only after the colonial rule these modern nation-states came into existence. Afghanistan as a territorial state existed during the British rule in the East.<sup>1</sup>

Afghanistan has been a significant route to India for the outside world through the selected passage of Khyber and Bolan. The invasion of Huns,

Kushans, Alexander, Mongols and Mughals took place through this passage. Thus, Afghanistan has been central to the external relations of the Indian subcontinent since time immemorial.<sup>2</sup> In modern sense, colonial and post-colonial periods only drew the boundaries and borders of Afghanistan with undivided India and Central Asia. However, sharing civilisation, religion and customs are some features that interlinked relations among the region alongwith trade and business. The Silk Route period explains the importance of Afghanistan as a transit route between the regions. Great Game upheld the importance of Afghanistan as an equation between colonial empires in the whole region of Central and South Asia. Great Game was the strategic rivalry and conflict between the two great empires to rule and control over Central Asia. From British side the objective was to protect Middle Eastern and Indian possessions, expand its empire towards north to Central Asia as far as possible. Tsarist Russia intended to control and protect its Asian territories as far as possible to access the warm water port of Asia on the Arabian sea in south. As part of the Great Game, Persia (presently Iran) was divided between British Empire and Russian sphere of influence during most of the nineteenth century. However, to prevent any direct conflict and war with each other, the two great empires sought to create a buffer zone, Afghanistan, to prevent any unwarranted direct conflict between the two in which Afghanistan demonstrated a accomplishment as desired.<sup>3</sup>

The name Afghanistan also originated from the British and Russia Empire during the Great Game of the middle of nineteenth century. British carved out Afghanistan as a geographical area creating Durand Line named after Sir Mortimer Durand, foreign secretary of British India government. Roughly the size of Texas approximately 1600 mile long border was to act as buffer zone between British India and Tsarist Russia. The demarcation of this border without considering the interest of native people and dividing various tribal Pashtu tribes on both side of the border created a chaos near the border areas which still continues. These border areas are poor and still occupied by Islamic fundamentalist and terrorist groups from both sides and are the safe haven for militants groups.

### **Central Asian Perspective on Afghanistan**

The Central Asian States also share same interests and concerns on Afghanistan as India does. Their internal security is linked up with stability and security of Afghanistan as that of India. Secondly, drug trafficking, illegal arms smuggling etc. are causes of concern for the region, since these are traded along the porous border between Central Asia and Afghanistan. Stressing on drug trafficking and related non traditional security threat emanating from Afghanistan, President of Kazakhstan, Nazabayev Nursultan in 2010 during the summit Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, stated that the recovery of Afghanistan's socio-political and economic conditions is not only important for Afghan people but for CARs as well. The slogan "politics follow by economy should be applicable to Afghanistan in real spirit."<sup>4</sup> Kazakhstan one of the important leading countries of CAR joined ISAF lead by NATO forces in support of the war in Afghanistan. It has been engaged since then through transportation of non-military cargo for ISAF and coalition troops, and also

has offered a deeper humanitarian and constructive support by providing food and construction materials and training experts in the areas of civilian specialities. Another Central Asian country cooperating with NATO forces is Kyrgyzstan. It has provided Manas Transit Centre near Bishkek, recognised as the most important transshipment and refuelling point for the U.S. and NATO forces in support of operations in Afghanistan. However, Kyrgyzstan shows more comfortable and accommodative attitude towards Russia with regard to security and development in the region rather than other external powers.

Tajikistan is in the most vulnerable position regarding the security situation in Afghanistan. Earlier it had experienced conflict with radical Islamic groups. Tajikistan shares a long porous border with Afghanistan that brings traditional and non-traditional security threats. Tajikistan is mostly dependent on Russia for its security arrangements through bilateral, regional and global forums. Moreover, it is an active partner during the war on terrorism in Afghanistan. Domestic security factor is the prime reason behind Uzbekistan's engagement with Afghanistan. Radical Islamic militant groups linked, trained and funded in Afghanistan created a hostile situation in Uzbekistan in past. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) and Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT) are prime groups. Liberation of Fergana Valley by creating Islamic Caliphate called "Turkestan" is the prime motive. The multiple brutal attacks by the IMU in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000 and IJU gun and suicide attacks in Tashkent in March and July 2004 as well as in the Fergana Valley in 2009, exposed the inability of CARs to combat against terrorists groups. Uzbekistan is one of the most important supporters and partners of US lead war on terrorism through leasing the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) base to US military forces and Tarmez base to Germans. It is active partner of NDN (Northern Distribution Network). However, Andijion incident changed the fate of bases of United States and Uzbekistan showed more accommodative attitude towards Russia for the security arrangements of the region. Moreover, Uzbekistan president is well known for bargaining the influence of Russia and US in this country.<sup>5</sup>

On bilateral level Uzbekistan has developed a good relation with Afghanistan through two sectors – electricity and transportation. It benefits from a Soviet legacy of infrastructure that connects it to Afghanistan's southern border. It also reopened in 2002 the Khairaton Bridge on Uzbek-Afghan border known as Friendship Bridge. It is also with the partial funding of ADB that Uzbekistan constructed round the clock and first and only electricity grid to Kabul and construction rail link to northern Afghanistan. Turkmenistan which is known for its permanent neutrality policy is the less engaged country regarding economic development and security of the region. It is not involved with any kind of economic or security based grouping such as EURASEC, CACO, SCO or CSTO. Its contributions to regional security with respect to conflict in Afghanistan also remain indirect and diverse. It is being less engaged among CARs which initially opposed the offensive war on terror in Afghanistan. However, later it cooperated in a limited manner through allowing the air and ground transport used by NATO forces and also cooperated with the international community on humanitarian assistance.

Another important dimension relating to Afghanistan is its geographical

proximity as a landing bridge between South Asia, Eurasia, Europe and the Middle East. It is in the cross roads of Asia. From CAR perspective geographical proximity of Afghanistan between Central Asia and South Asia leads to its importance. As the experience of various parts of the world has shown that one of the successful ways in which different regions in the world have tried to set up their economic growth and development trajectories, is through regional cooperation and integration. The economics of neighbourhood and regional integration assume greater importance in regions that are particularly landlocked region with unexploited natural resources that need inward investment for their development. The economics of the regional economic integration in the realm of trade, including both goods and services and investment have unleashed dynamic paths of growth and development. Additionally, foreign policies of Central Asian countries are oriented to intensifying a multi vector policy or carrying an independent foreign policy with the outside world. While their own financial crisis, landlocked nature and challenges in the Af-Pak region have limited the development of their natural land route to South Asia, India and further to South East Asia. The CAR region is very positive and is cooperating to link the region with South Asia through land routes and sea ports. CAR is mostly dependent on the Russia and China for the passage of their goods and energy transportation. A route through Afghanistan will help to diversify their trade routes and partners. The proposed international North-South Corridor project and new Silk Route project interlinked with India's "Connect Central Asia Policy" have potentially to integrate land routes linking India to Central Asia via Afghanistan. These are massive infrastructure and development projects that have plans to transport high volumes of goods at competitive prices, not only between India and Central Asia but also between the European Union and South Asia, as an alternative to the interestingly volatile and piracy infested shipping routes using Suez Canal.

### **India's Soft Power Approach**

India's policy towards Afghanistan is embodiment of "soft power approach" without any conflicting interests. Soft power is actually the capacity of a state to influence others without twisting arms, threatening or compelling. It is the capacity to attract the common people at large. India in Afghanistan is quite successful in this regard. According to opinion poll conducted by BBC, American Broad Casting Company and German Broad Casting Company in 2010 the common people of Afghanistan prefer more India's role and leadership in their territory compared to the great power, U.S., and regional power, China, the almost positive rating of India compared to any other surveyed Asia-Pacific country. Indian influence permeates various aspects of daily lives of Afghan People. It includes Bolly wood movies, Hindi songs etc. Thousands of Afghan visit India every year for education, medical care and tourism. Hence, India has already earned a positive attitude among the Afghan people. Afghanistan, on the other hand, also considers India as a great friend. Afghanistan has welcomed India's efforts in reconstruction project throughout the country. India also shares a civilisational, privileged, historical relationship with Afghanistan. India supports Afghanistan efforts to build a

peaceful, pluralistic, democratic and prosperous country. Additionally India's growing interest in CARs through the embedded policy of economic, energy and strategic synergy benefitting both, has further enhanced the Afghan factor in relation between the two for common interests and concerns in the region.<sup>6</sup> However, success is not only due to India's soft power policy with Afghanistan. India from earlier period has always favoured the people's choice rather than Taliban power in Afghanistan. India has historically enjoyed amicable relations with every government in Kabul with the exception of the Taliban regime. India also shared a friendship treaty agreement signed in 1950 with Afghanistan. During pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan, India had a very cordial relation with Afghanistan in the field of industrial irrigation and hydro-electricity projects.

India's humanitarian assistance in the reconstruction projects in Afghanistan has formed a continuous part of India's developmental engagement with Afghanistan. Its economic and developmental commitments since 2002 till now are in the form of grants. These projects are spanning a variety of sectors identified by the Afghan government and Afghan national development strategy as priority areas, particularly, infrastructure, small and community based development projects and capacity building projects. In the capacity building projects, India is providing annual scholarship to the students of Afghanistan intended to study in Indian Universities, numbering almost 500 to 600 per year. Also, India is providing training and scholarship to the civil servants of Afghanistan. On the community based projects, India is providing medical assistance and facilitating healthcare services to the common Afghan people by Indian doctors. Linking a telecommunication network for its 11 provincial capitals and a TV network across the country, a power transmission grid from Uzbekistan to bring additional electricity to Kabul, completion of construction of Afghanistan's parliamentary building, construction of 220 km road linking land locked Afghanistan with the Chabahar port of Iran, supply of aircrafts, buses and other vehicles etc. are some important projects India has contributed in the development projects of Afghanistan. All these developmental projects are focused on the socio-economic development of border areas. India is also engaged in the construction of schools, colleges, hospitals, parliamentary building, drilling tube wells and exporting some food items to Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

### **Pakistan Factor**

India's interest in Afghanistan is further underlined due to hostile relations with Pakistan. Security view is interlocked with India's domestic and regional security perspective connected with India's CAR policy too. India has experienced Pakistan sponsored terrorism and Pakistan earlier search for Strategic Depth in Afghanistan extending to CAR by encompassing radical Islamic groups. As a result, India through the development measures wanted to change the political economy of dependence on Pakistan for resources and access to major ports of the landlocked country of Afghanistan. Since 2001 about 100 Indian companies have invested in Afghanistan ranging from services, construction and industrial sector etc. Services sector is the top most trade agreement for further increase of trade and investment. India is one of

the largest trade partners of Afghanistan and its fifth largest sources of Imports. Though size of trade is very small but it is increasing steadily. Recently, India was awarded the mining rights of the Hajigak iron ore, which is biggest iron ore deposit in Afghanistan, by a consortium of seven Indian companies for an investment of \$6.6 billion. This also forms the largest single investment in Afghanistan by any country so far.<sup>8</sup>

As per report of United Nations Security Council, the core al-Qaida leadership remains holed up in Pakistan's western areas while the global terrorist group is now increasingly embracing local issues, grievances and responding with targeted violence. It is also important to note that Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the biggest India centric terrorist groups based in Pakistan, is described as one of al-Qaida notable affiliates. LeT is known for training its cadre in Afghanistan's Kunar province where LeT was born. Lashkar is active in Pakistan, Afghanistan and India. The Qaida affiliates Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Harakat ul-Mujahidin, LeT all are concentrated in Afghanistan and Pak remote areas and they are involved in training and funding the terrorist organisation which are involved against secular politics and intended to create an Islamic based region. The eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, Jaish-i-Mohamad and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi are such terrorist groups affiliated to Qaida. They provide suicide bombers for the planned and coordinated attacks of Taliban and the Haqani Network. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan has increased its recruitment among Afghans and has developed a field presence in several provinces of northern Afghanistan. These threats are no less pressing than Taliban threat which is the mastermind of all terrorist activities in the region.<sup>9</sup> Pakistan's strategic threat for from India, has been linked with Pakistan's sphere of influence through the concept of strategic depth policy that surfaced in the late 1980 and defined Pakistan's objective in Afghanistan throughout the 1990s which was, however, very recently articulated by former General, Ashfaq Kayani. This concept has a longer history of using Afghanistan against India. First objective was to place a Pakistan friendly Pashtun dominated government in Kabul as an insurance policy in Pakistan historical rivalry with India. This vision of strategic depth policy amounted to rendering Afghanistan a satellite state and had a two pronged strategy – deny India military and political influence in Afghanistan and ensure that the government in Kabul would not incite Pakistani Pashtuns to secede. This has both defensive and offensive side. Afghanistan helps to formulate its strategy against India in the sense that the structures that were created during the covert war against Soviet occupation were redirected by the Pakistani state to achieve its national objectives against India. Jihadi groups are first line of Pakistan's strategic policy used against India without any direct military conflict. The other aspect of Pakistan strategic depth in supporting Taliban regime in Afghanistan and expanding its influence in the CARs region with the help of religious sentiment to curtail India's friendly influence in the region. This also enables Pakistan to set up training for Jihadists and bases in Afghanistan during Taliban regime to create unwanted security situation particularly in the region of J&K and liberate the region from Indian clutches. Thus, a pro-Pakistani Taliban regime provided perfect strategic depth that Pakistan wanted

in the region. However, this policy was reversed after 9/11 attack, when the U.S. ousted Taliban and recruited Pakistan as a critical partner in the global war on terrorism in Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup>

### **Strategic Location of Afghanistan**

With its geo-strategic location having much more locational benefits, Afghanistan has remained a focus of India's regional foreign policy. Although rise of Afghan Mujahideen, disintegration of Soviet Union alongwith domestic financial crisis led diplomatic isolation with Afghanistan, India shared warm relations with ousted government of Afghanistan. Moreover, India also supported the non-Pushtun groups opposing the Taliban regime and formed the Northern Alliance that controlled areas in the north of Afghanistan, bordering the Central Asian States of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. India also provided high altitude warfare equipments, technical support and medical facilities in the borders of Tajikistan by establishing a hospital in Farkhor on the Afghan-Tajik border and provided medical assistance to soldiers. During the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, India's efforts were aimed at marginalising the influence of Taliban and encouraging groups linked with India. India also approached Russia and Iran and worked closely with them to curtail the influence of Taliban regime in the whole region. The post-9/11 episode carried a new opportunity for India to pursue its earlier relationship with new dimension by providing humanitarian assistance in the reconstruction projects in war-torn Afghanistan. After the ouster of the Taliban regime in 2001, India was one of the first countries to re-open its embassy in Kabul. With its pledge of more than \$2billion since 2002, India is the sixth largest bilateral and the largest regional donor to Afghanistan reconstruction. In 2011, India was the first country to sign a strategic agreement with Afghanistan which outlined an institutional framework for cooperation on economic development and security. India also was a prime advocate behind the inclusion of Afghanistan in SAARC as a member.<sup>11</sup> The economic viability of Afghanistan depends on its fuller integration into its neighbourhood. It opens the possibility of Afghanistan becoming a trade, transportation and energy hub linking together the countries of the region from Central to South Asia. India further hosted the Delhi investment Summit on Afghanistan emphasizing importance on investment in productive opportunities in the mining infrastructure, telecommunication, agro-based and small-scale industries, health, pharmaceuticals, education and information technology sectors of Afghanistan.

To incorporate Afghanistan's development and prosperity with Central Asian Region and South Asia, U.S. has advocated a GCA concept for the adjoining two regions. While there are many definitions of wider or Greater Central Asia, for the current purposes GCA includes the five Central Asian republics including Afghanistan. This policy framework is advocated by western countries to link the security and stability of economic space through the diplomacy of pipeline, trade and investment. It has also at other side of diplomacy the objective to bypass Russia and curtail its influence in CAR. However, positive aspect of GCA would be beneficial for the whole region. From Indian perspective, it will improve India's energy security alongwith regional stability as it may go through Afghanistan to energy market of Central

Asia. It can also fundamentally change India's sea based continental trade. Simultaneously, it can generate tremendous opportunity of trade and transit for Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia itself. India can find significant investment opportunities in GCA, which, in turn, can transform their small and medium-sized industries, as well as agriculture. The growing realization of these opportunities has influenced policy makers not only in India, but also in Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup> Since CAR and India do not have any interest but rather shares some common interest for the regional integration of South and Central Asia, factoring Afghanistan will lead prosperity of the region without any traditional and non-traditional security threat domestically and regionally. Given the rich natural and human resources availability, industrial base, services sector dynamism and macroeconomics resilience, the South Asian region offers complementary economic structures that are quite conducive for South Asia-Central Asia economic integration.

### **Indo-Afghan-CAS Regional Symbiosis**

The foreign policy of Central Asian countries focus on developing a healthy economic trade and strategic security relationship with range of global and regional powers to diversify their relations with Russia, China, U.S. and Europe. Engaging with South Asian countries especially with India will not only help in their foreign policy goals but it will help to mitigate their historical search for warm water ports. India's assistance in the development of Iran's Chabahar port and India's interest to build the roads and rail links in border areas of Af-Iran- CAR enhance possibilities of further cooperation between the two. Afghanistan's geographical proximity between South and Central Asia extending to China's Xinjiang province and Iran allows it to play a pivotal role as a potential trade hub or transit route among the region. Continental transport of goods and energy resources and concerns shared by CAR and India regarding time, cost and distance makes Silk Road Project one of the most economically attractive and most viable projects. The proposed TAPI pipeline project is one such important project that would link CAR and South Asia. Furthermore, in CAR, India poses neither a security threat, as is the case with Russia, nor an economic or demographic threat, as is perceived to be the case with China. Although Russian media have still substantial influence in Central Asian airwaves, Indian films and music are widely popular among the Central Asian people. Surveys indicate a similarity with Afghanistan and CARs. Finally, India's role in Afghanistan is an asset not for that country only, but holds true for Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours as well. General Stanley McChrystal, Commander of ISAF, affirmed and acknowledged India's role in Afghanistan in benefitting largely the Afghan people as well has approval in all the Central Asian capitals.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, India's interest to link CAR is not to be seen through the prism of hard power politics of selling arms and equipment, training forces and assisting in military reform. Indian policy concentrated mainly on cooperation in the field of trade, education, health, technology and transport with a win-win deal in the energy exploitation or construction activities. Therefore, India's expanded presence, while still limited in CAR, needs to move into areas that are directly relevant to ordinary people in Central Asia and Afghanistan and not just to a limited circle of people. India

also shares great relations with Iran. India's construction of road between Iran and Afghanistan which shows, if necessary, India is ready to bypass Pakistan and will help the other countries to bypass Iranian port to Afghanistan and CAR.<sup>14</sup>

Historically, CAR including Afghanistan has literally been a crossroads for the movement of goods, people, capital and ideas across Europe, on one hand, and the East Asian region, on the other hand, via West and South Asia. Silk Route and its transport networks show the interesting role Central Asia played as a centre during that period. War on terrorism in Afghanistan once again has placed CAR at a crossroads in the region. Furthermore, topography and geography of CAR appears quite amenable to regional security and economic integration. Although landlockedness is a disadvantage but it cannot be the ultimate or absolute hurdle. Development of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan can be illustrated as examples. Untapped natural energy and mineral resources put CAR a locationally advantageous position, making it an ideal candidate for deeper regional economic integration. Furthermore, post-Soviet security vacuum was another cause of concern of CAR. Under Soviet control the whole military purpose was administered through a centrally controlled body. As a result, CAR countries are lacking the skills and military hardware needs to secure a country. Trying to secure its domestic security crisis, CAR countries tried to supplement their military weakness through many bilateral and multilateral regional forums. However, Russia is always preferred by these countries since both share historical ties and interest to maintain security and stability in the region. CSTO and SCO are such two organisations established to preserve security and stability of the region.

Since 2009, Pakistani policymakers have been trying to shift foreign policy directions to become a pivot through the economic diplomacy between South and Central Asia. Described by its architects as "Pakistan's Regional Pivot" the policy has four major objectives: normalisation of political relations with India and Afghanistan, increased trade with India, access to Central Asian energy sources and making Pakistan a land-bridge for trade and energy transportation from Central and South Asia. Pakistan and India both are trying to improve relations, since 2011 as there has been an unparallel focus on Islamabad on deescalating relations with India. In 2012, alone there were many high level visits from both the sides to start the dialogue that stopped after 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack.<sup>15</sup> Further India's approach towards Afghanistan and Central Asia is not linked with hard power goal. Although, Afghanistan's government is seeking India's military help repeatedly, India has limited its help to providing training to Afghan forces and a small group of Indian security forces are in Afghanistan to guard its consulate. India's policy engagement in Afghanistan and extending to CAR is rooted with defensive policy restraining itself against getting involved in a hostile relation with any country in the region. The failure of the dialogue process with Taliban advocated by Pakistan and U.S., on the other hand, compels Pakistan to be offensive against the Taliban in the safe heaven areas of northern Waziristan after a serial terrorist attack in Pakistan. Hence, recent offensive military operation of Pakistan carries a positive signal. Moreover, Pakistan in coming days should stop the anti-Indian activities within the security establishment and other groups to further strengthen relation

between the two get into the pipeline project, energy or economic grouping involving the CAR. In the backdrop NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan without any concrete achievement, the attack on the Indian consulate in the Heart province of Afghanistan, kidnapping of Indian Priest by Taliban and declaration of Taliban's intention to disrupt Indian Prime Minister's swearing in ceremony reveal the fragile security conditions and situation in Afghanistan, linking it with India's national security concern. CAR and China in this regard share the same concern. To intensify its role in South and Central Asian region, India in future may go for joining a multilateral forum to enhance the security of the whole adjoining region. India is aware of the impact of hard power approach. India has already approached the SCO for a full membership in its forum to play a big role without any conflict with Russia and China. SCO, from the Security perspective of the region, is an active forum since it was established in the background of threats from terrorist and separatist groups in the region. India is also quite aware of the fact that without involving China and Russia, a security arrangement in this region is futile.

India's "Look West Policy" further enhances the application of the same approach. These include Afghanistan's membership in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, signing of South Asian Free Trade Area, Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan, the emerging India-Kazakhstan partnership, and continuous interest in the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India TAPI gas pipeline, as well as the Iran-Pakistan-India IPI pipeline.<sup>16</sup> In terms of pragmatic and strategic equation, both Central Asia and India have common concerns regarding their engagement with Afghanistan. Central Asia and India's engagement in Afghanistan can be viewed from two perspectives. First and foremost is the domestic security and socio-political stability. Secondly, India needs a productive transit route to meet its growing energy demands and it requires linking with Central Asia. India's domestic security compels India to engage with Afghanistan's security and political stability. India's relation with Afghanistan was friendly and warm. However, Taliban's rule in Afghanistan and Pakistan at that time created a volatile security situation in India, particularly, J&K region. India was concerned regarding Taliban's Islamic fundamentalist behaviour since India is a secular country with large number of Muslim population. In CAR region also earlier Pakistan had applied 'Strategic Depth' policy in the name of religion. Although, CAR refused to allow Pakistan's policy to succeed and always favoured India regarding its concern with Pakistan.

An unstable Afghanistan will mean the dominance of radical groups or criminal warlords in the country which will have serious impact on regional security vis-à-vis terrorism, drug trafficking and other crimes. Hence, to keep the sectarian groups away, CAR has to work with countries which share common concerns to preserve both domestic and regional socio-political stability. CAR region, especially those states bordering with Afghanistan, was the most affected region during Taliban regime in Afghanistan. CAR also with other regional countries like Russia, Iran and India helped Northern Alliance forces of Afghanistan in their conflict against Taliban in Afghanistan. They welcomed the United States 'War on Terror' policy in Afghanistan allowing the passage of military hardware and other goods through their region. Also

they allowed establishing U.S. bases in their land. However, they are not supportive of the great power rivalry in their region, pushing the U.S. to close down its base in their territory. India also is supporting the U.S. in the struggle against the Taliban through humanitarian assistance, developmental and the reconstruction projects. India's security engagement with Tajikistan also can be outlined as a mutual cooperation and based on concern regarding the volatile situation in Afghanistan. India is engaged in CARs also in regards to the security situation, since both have experienced separatist sectarian violence led by Taliban regime. In the past, India's links with Central Asia have relied on the strategic passes of Afghanistan whose approaches are now controlled by Pakistan. India's growing engagement with the landlocked CAR region needs a passage and gateway to Central Asia while Afghanistan is a country bordering with three countries of Central Asia namely Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Energy, economic policy and strategic equation with other regional powers are central motive of India's growing engagement with CAR. Domestic needs and international compulsions are prime factors in foreign policy of a country. India's fast growing economy needs energy resources that requires a very balanced relation with CAR since its economic policies are energy driven. Hence, a linkage through the region of Afghanistan will facilitate both Central Asian and India's interests. Past experience alongwith geographical proximity has made Afghanistan an unavoidable entity for both South and Central Asia not only from a limited security perspective but for the economic prosperity and development of the region. However, since GCA is a western concept with a view to bypass Russia it may not be attractive for Central Asian states from a long term developmental perspective and stability of the region.

An overview of the tri-lateral parleys, as analysed in the aforementioned scenario reveals that India and Central Asian relations, considering Afghanistan as an important factor, have both historical and geo-strategic implications. While historical factor amplifies cultural contacts of people, geo-strategic factors point towards mutual beneficial relations. Afghanistan as a prime factor between CAR and India has two aspects. Its location as a bridge between the two. Geographical proximity of Afghanistan in the cross roads of Asia makes it inevitable linkage between CAR and India. Afghanistan shares a long land border with three Central Asian Countries. On the other hand, Afghanistan is India's extended neighbour just across Pakistan. In all these countries people have cultural-religious similarities with each other. Only post-Soviet era has created the present Central Asian nation-states. This has pushed both India and Central Asia to go beyond the cultural relations and cooperate with each other to meet the challenges facing these countries through bilateral or multi lateral framework. Regional security and stability relating to Afghanistan and a transit route is the prime consideration in this regard. However, the most important impediment between CAR and India is the accessibility of land or sea routes. CAR is a landlocked region sharing border with Russia, China, Iran and Afghanistan. The closest route is via Pakistan and Afghanistan. For India, it is closer than foreign partners. Hence, India is not able to access CAR vice versa to India because of India's strained relations with Pakistan. Afghanistan has a history of playing buffer between the two great empires, on one side, the

Tsarist Russia and British Empire, on the other. Since then Afghanistan has been used by superpowers to get influence both in South Asia and CAR. The latest form of persuasion is the religious-cultural factor used by the Taliban and Pakistan to get access and curtail the other powers' interest in the region. Many western scholars have opined that the next great game in Afghanistan will be between India and Pakistan. However, that is a conflicted argument since India does not carry a policy of development and assistance benefitting both. CARs and Afghanistan, as a result, are being accommodative of India's partnership for development the border region. From Central Asia perspective, it is land locked region. Helping India to connect with Central Asia via Afghanistan will help their region to open up to South and South-East Asia. Cooperating with India to solve Afghanistan's problem will help to mitigate the regional problems which will be beneficial to all the stakeholders.

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