



REASSESSING INDIA'S ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN

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Afghanistan undoubtedly holds significant economic, political and strategic importance for India. Economically, India needs Afghanistan because the latter is located at the cross-roads of the Southern Asia and energy-rich Central Asian countries (CAC) as well as Iran. Since, India does not have direct geographical exit to the Central Asian region (CAR), Afghanistan became an important factor for land route to engage with the CAR. Politically too, India needs Afghanistan on its side to contain Pakistan's uncongenial policies of manoeuvring allies with the Muslim countries to gain support for Pakistan's stand on Kashmir. Besides, there are about 4000 Indian national engaged in various reconstruction projects in Afghanistan, and as many as 3,000 persons of Indian origin belonging to Sikh and Hindu religions permanently settled in Afghanistan, in various provinces like Kabul, Ghazni, Khost, Kandahar, Helmand, Jalalabad and Parwan.¹

As a result of these indispensable socio-economic and political factors, India highly values its relations with Afghanistan and has been actively involved in a wide range of reconstruction and rehabilitation programmes in Afghanistan. India's assistance programme range from construction of roads to Parliament building, agriculture to hydro-electric power projects and training for educational development to Afghan diplomats and police force which have significantly impacted the lives of the Afghans. For example, Afghanistan faced severe power (electricity) problem in almost every part of the country including Kabul as the availability of secure energy supplies in Afghanistan disrupted in the ongoing war. Since the country's power generation, transmission and distribution infrastructures were destroyed, Kabul,

was known as the "capital of darkness." However, Indian government's initiatives have assisted to turn Kabul from darkness to light with the successful completion of the 220 KV Double Circuit Transmission Line (202 km) from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul and 220/110/20 KV Sub-station at Chimtala near Kabul. Again, in 2001, only about a million children were recorded to have gone to school in Afghanistan with no girl students. Today, around 6.3 million Afghan children, which is a six-fold enrollment growth since 2001 are in school, with 36.3% of the girls student population.²

The splendid use of India's soft power (healthcare, education, finance, technology, machinery assistance and training of Afghan technicians, diplomats, police officials and army personnel etc) is greatly appreciated and acknowledged by almost all the countries of the world including the Afghans. But, the challenges remain. The Taliban has regrouped, reequipped and is playing active role in destabilising Afghanistan. The resurgence of Taliban and other militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan's abhorrence policy of trying to thwart India's relations with Afghanistan pose a serious challenge to India's Afghanistan policy. What is more disturbing is the fact that the war in Afghanistan does not seem to come to an end in the near future,

although the US and some of its coalition partners (Belgium, Britain, Canada and France) have announced withdrawal of their troops from Afghanistan in response to their country's popular public support for the "war sapped at home."³

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The Need for Strategic Change in India's Afghanistan Policy

Indian policy makers need to restructure Afghan policy and engage more aggressively in Afghanistan if India

genuinely wants to help in rebuilding and stabilising Afghanistan. A mere use of soft power (materials and economic helps) alone will not suffice. India has to start engaging more aggressively through the use of hard power (by providing logistic and military helps, training of the Afghan National Army and police forces etc) along with humanitarian, financial and project assistance, because if Afghanistan and Pakistan are in turmoil India cannot remain unaffected. Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh on the eve (May 11, 2011) of his recent visit to Afghanistan voiced similar concern, "India cannot be immune to instability in Afghanistan as it will affect our progress, development and security." Prime Minister's observation is supported by the fact that peace and development of the people of Southern Asia region are inextricably intertwined with those of their neighbours and none could live in isolation. Ironically, despite Pakistan's military intelligent (ISI) actively involved in carrying out covert activities to destabilise Afghanistan, Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari too had expressed the views that peace cannot be expected in the Southern Asian region "if we don't have peace in Afghanistan."⁴

Today, the most serious soft underbelly of Afghanistan lies in the security domain. What India can do in these circumstances is to help the Afghan government in building a strong competent Afghan security forces to defend their own country from anti-national elements. Without a strong and competent national security forces the country will remain weak and unstable, which in turn would impede peace, a pre-requisite for socio-economic development of the country. However, India should not deploy its military forces in the war torn country as historical evidence prove that Afghans are always conscious of the external powers interfering in the political affairs of their country. The same holds true even to this day and is perhaps the reason why Pakistan and the US are looked upon with suspicion and hatred by the Afghans. The result of the domestic poll carried out in all the 43 provinces of Afghanistan between December 11 and 23, 2009 commissioned by BBC, ABC and German TV ARD indicated that about 71% of Afghans favour India, 51% favour the US and only a dismal of 2% of Afghans voted in favour of Pakistan. India should act cautiously and take serious note of the Afghan's sensitiveness towards external powers intervention in the political affairs of their country, while formulating its plans and policies on Afghanistan.

The Taliban cannot be simply written-off from Afghan politics, Taliban has long term objective and certainly want to come to power, they are there to stay. Afghan President Karzai has realised that peace and stability in the country would not be possible without the cooperation and involvement of the Taliban and he has repeatedly expressed his desire and the need to negotiate with the Taliban.

At the same time, Indian policy makers also need to realise that peace and stability in Afghanistan does not lay with the central (Kabul) authority alone. It would be unwise on part of the Indian government to solely depend on a consistently pro-India leadership in Afghanistan. The reality is that unlike other countries in the region, in Afghanistan ethnic, linguistic, religious, tribal identities and regional affinities play an important role in Afghanistan. Therefore, taking into consideration the unique social, cultural and political condition of the Afghans India government should try to include every section of the Afghan society including the Taliban while formulating its policy on Afghanistan. The reality is that India cannot afford to simply disregard the Taliban. Because, the Taliban cannot be simply written-off from Afghan politics, Taliban has long term objective and certainly want to come

to power, they are there to stay. Afghan President Karzai has realised that peace and stability in the country would not be possible without the cooperation and involvement of the Taliban and he has repeatedly expressed his desire and the need to negotiate with the Taliban. Surprisingly, of late even the US felt the need for the involvement of the Taliban in the peace process and even went to the extent of carrying out secrete high-level talks with the Taliban.⁵

India's plans and policies in Afghanistan will remain fragile unless India adopts a more inclusive policy and takes into confidence all sections of the Afghan population. Hamid Ansari, Indian Vice President articulation that "A stable regime in Afghanistan and one that is friendly to India is clearly in India interest"⁶ speaks volume. India cannot afford to have another anti-India government in Afghanistan. Thus, Indian policy should be to win over all sections of the Afghan society and we should be willing to deal with whichever government is in effective power in Afghanistan. This is important due to the fact that the past experience of the Indian government in dealing with the Taliban did not go down well with India's strategic and security interest.

India's Afghanistan Policy-The Road Ahead

Afghanistan is economically ruined, socially divided and politically unstable, therefore, it needs complete social, economic and political transformation. For example, many Afghan locals took up opium cultivation, not because of their choice but compulsion. There is no other means of

livelihood for many Afghans as almost all the infrastructures including irrigation facilities in the country were destroyed in the 1980s and 1990s. As a result, when one looks into Afghanistan's future, one has to take into consideration not only the political aspects in a historical context, but also other aspects like its economy, society, culture, and religion. One needs to first and foremost understand the colossal impact of the political crisis on the lives of Afghans and pursue strategies to solve the problems if the world community genuinely wants to rebuild Afghanistan. One such approach to win over the Afghans is to provide them with certain measure of economic and political security and strengthen local governance. At the same time, there is a need for greater Afghan participation in their country's reconstruction programmes. Afghans should be encouraged and involved in the reconstruction and development activities of their country. This would help them in identifying their own needs and calibrate in their own setting the process of nation building and at the same time increase the economic wellbeing of the Afghans and prevent them from becoming new conscripts of extremism.

India's role in rebuilding Afghanistan is critical. Despite Pakistan's jealous attitude towards India, the international community have begun to realise the vital role of India and thus repeatedly urged that without India's active support and participation there could not be amicable solution in the political crisis in Afghanistan. The US, UK, Iran, France, Russia, Germany and many other countries including the Afghan government have been supportive of India's role in Afghanistan. Nicholas Burns, former US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs once emphatically stated that the international community can't "afford to turn down assistance from great countries like India. India has a major role to play in Afghanistan." Appreciating positive role being played by India in Afghanistan he said, "I don't think we're in the position to say this country cannot participate in rebuilding of Afghanistan because of differences between Pakistan and India."⁷ In June 2011, in an interview to state-run PTV Afghan President Hamid Karzai during his visit to Islamabad acknowledged India's helps and said that "Pakistan should feel happy that Afghanistan is being helped [in the reconstruction] by another neighbour."⁸ It's a welcome sign for India, because it's not only the external powers and Afghan government who voiced their support

for India to play more active role in Afghanistan but the Taliban as well. What is ironic is the fact, despite the Taliban continuous attacks on Indians in Afghanistan in an interview with the *Times of India* in March 2010 the Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid commented, "The Taliban aren't in any direct conflict with India. Indian troops aren't part of NATO forces, they haven't occupied Afghanistan." He further added, "If the Taliban return to power, [Taliban] would like to maintain normal relations with countries including India. It's possible for the Taliban and India to reconcile with each other."⁹ This statement of Zabiullah Mujahid indicates that India's stake of playing more pro-active role in Afghanistan has considerably increased.

Now that most of the countries of the world are asking India to play greater role in Afghanistan. India needs to reassess its plan and policies in Afghanistan and engage more vigorously with other regional powers (especially Iran and Central Asian countries) to help in building a strong competent and efficient Afghan government and strong security forces. The political crisis in Afghanistan is a complex issue; therefore, India needs the help and cooperation of all the regional actors. No matter how prudent and effective India's policy might be, it alone

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cannot bring about any sustainable change in Afghanistan. Developing closer relations with Iran and Central Asian countries will enable India to bring different Afghan ethnic groups into a common political platform. At the same time, it can also help in counterbalancing Pakistan's uncongenial policies of maneuvering allies with the Muslim countries on the Kashmir issue and in trying to thwart India's role in Afghanistan. J. N. Dixit, former

Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan and Indian Foreign Secretary very aptly said that India cannot effort to make another mistake of not trying "to forge an effective link on the Afghan question with Iran [and Central Asian countries] to develop a joint strategy to resist the forces of ethnic and religious extremism in Afghanistan."¹⁰

Hedayat Amin Arsala, former Vice President and senior adviser to the President of Afghanistan pointed out that "[T]here is little doubt that Afghanistan's [geo-strategic] location will [cease] to have a significant influence on the [Asian] country's future political and economic prospects."¹¹ This brings us to the conclusion that without peace and stability in Afghanistan, there can never be substantial peace and stability in the region. At the same

time, it also reveals that without the active support and cooperation of its neighbouring countries mainly India, Iran, Pakistan China and Central Asian countries there can never be long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan. Therefore, the only solution to the present socio-economic and political problems and crises of the region is to join hands together and improve the security and economy (well-being) of the Afghans. Today, what the Afghans need is not bullet but bread, butter and security. An early amicable political solution to the Afghan crisis is the only real guarantee for peace and security in the region.

Notes

¹ MEA, "Basic fact About Afghanistan," at <http://www.mea.gov.in/aforeignrelations/09fr01.pdf> (accessed April 26, 2010)

² Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, "Background Note: Afghanistan," December 6, 2010, at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5380.htm> (accessed March 22, 2011); and Ministry of External Affairs, *India and Afghanistan A Development Partnership* (Government of India: External Publicity Division, 2008), at <http://meaindia.nic.in/staticfile/Report.pdf> (accessed May 12, 2010)

³ Agence France-Presse, "Canada heads for Afghan exit," *Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), July 8, 2011

⁴ "Pakistan President Zardari meets Afghanistan's Karzai," June 10, 2011, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13723251> (accessed July 8, 2011)

⁵ "US held secret talks with Taliban," May 17, 2011, at <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/180410.htm/> (accessed June 15, 2011)

⁶ Hamid Ansari, "India's Strategic Neighbourhood (i) Setback in Afghanistan, Ambivalence in Iran," in Satish Kumar (ed.), *India's National Security Annual Review 2007* (New Delhi: Knowledge World: 2007) p. 144

⁷ "India's role in Afghanistan crucial, says Burns," May 11, 2009, at http://www.thaindian.com/news_portal/world-news/indias-role-in-afghanistan-crucial-says-burns_100190776.html (accessed March 21, 2010)

⁸ Rezaul H Laskar, "Indian present not against Pak: Afghan President," *Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), June 13, 2011

⁹ Quoted in "Taliban not in direct conflict with India: Spokesman," *Dawn*, March 27, 2010, at <http://archives.dawn.com/archives/34483> (accessed December 1, 2010)

¹⁰ J. N. Dixit, *India's Foreign Policy 1947-2003* (New Delhi: Picus Books, 2003) p. 364

¹¹ Hedayat Amin Arsala, "Revitalizing Afghanistan's Economy: The Government's Plan," in Robert I. Rotbert (ed) *Building A New Afghanistan* (Massachusetts: World Peace Foundation, 2007) p. 134



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