

ROLE OF INDIA, PAKISTAN, CHINA IN AFGHANISTAN POST-US DRAWDOWN

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Afghanistan is facing multiple challenges on various fronts post the US drawdown. It is difficult to trace a stable phase in Kabul's history which has had a troubled past, faces a striving present and has an uncertain future. Afghanistan experienced controversial elections in 2014, followed by a rather uniquely complicated political set-up. There is division of opinion as to how the Afghan economy will grow as it is highly dependent on foreign aid and lacks self-sufficiency. The security situation has worsened as the pull-out of the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces has further encouraged the Taliban to intensify the terrorist operations and network.

The drawdown was completed in December 2014 but there still seems to be lack of clarity about how the state would shape and stabilise itself in the midst of the raging insurgency. The regional actors are strong and have influential roles to play in the future of Afghanistan. In this context, it is needless to say that Pakistan is the most important player and could be a potential game changer for Afghanistan. Islamabad remains wedded to the idea of maintaining "strategic depth" in Afghanistan and is deeply conscious of strengthening its footprint. India has been engaged in Afghanistan in the

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developmental role and enjoys soft power dominance. China is a new player, with strategic, economic and security concerns, and is increasingly engaging in Afghanistan on various fronts, including the facilitation of the peace talks.

The aim of this article is to analyse the objectives and roles of the regional actors – India, Pakistan and China – in Afghanistan post the drawdown. The three players have varied interests in Afghanistan and have adopted different approaches, not essentially coordinating with each other.

The study intends to understand India's challenges in Afghanistan as the other two powerful players (Pakistan and China) have had a strong strategic and military alliance for more than five decades.

PAKISTAN'S ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN: DESIRE FOR STRATEGIC DEPTH

To understand what role Pakistan could play in Afghanistan in the future, it is essential to understand and evaluate its strategy of strategic depth. Undoubtedly, Pakistan has been overly obsessed with the desire to gain strategic depth in Afghanistan. The all powerful military and the intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which authored and executed the policy of strategic depth since the late 1980s through the 1990s, when it strongly backed the Taliban, till today, strongly believes in having strong control over Afghanistan. There has been a slight change in the terminology regarding the military's policy in Afghanistan, but the bottom line remains unaltered. At no stage was the policy of "strategic depth" logical or viable for Pakistan, and its adoption of this doctrine and, thus, control over Afghanistan, is considered a *strategic blunder* which has actually facilitated the country's drift into extremism and not allowed it the option of altering

its strategic calculus. In Pakistan's perception, the strategic depth policy has allowed it to maintain a conventional balance against India, but, on the other hand, this policy has made the tribal areas of Pakistan the hub of terrorism.

The doctrine of strategic depth has been considered outdated and rejected by several scholars who believe that with the overt nuclearisation of Pakistan, the doctrine has lost whatever meaning it had. According to the traditional approach (primarily based on the military aspect of the concept), the creation of strategic depth would allow a country's forces to move back deeper into their own territory, absorb the offensive thrust of the enemy, short of his military objectives, and also, apply power on the vulnerabilities of the attacking military.¹

Strategic depth, when interpreted in purely military terms, can have three-fold offshoots: the first is where the combatant seeks strategic depth in his own territory; the second, when a state seeks strategic depth in the neighbouring country, extending its control in the foreign territory, and the state is, thus, able to trade territory for a better partner; and the third, when the state decides to create buffer states at its borders.

The second approach to strategic depth is ideological and religious, wherein the state tries to extend its control and influence by disseminating ideology or religious interpretation. In this context, China's efforts at spreading its Communist socialist ideology (through revolutions and war) for extending its control can be well understood.

In the case of Pakistan, one must remember that the classical model of strategic depth in relation to India simply cannot work because all its key cities and industries are within 70-odd km from the Indian border. Hence, any withdrawal westward would leave the soul of Pakistan in India's

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1. Air Cmde Jasjit Singh, "Strategic Search-Strategic Depth and the Question of the IAF's Strategic Posture", *AIR POWER Journal*, vol 2, no. 2, Summer 2007, pp. 11-26.

hands. What we need, therefore, is to understand the contours of Pakistan's concept and motivation for strategic depth. Essentially, it has adopted a mix of both the military and ideological approaches in order to gain strategic depth in Afghanistan. Pakistan has been overly concerned about having a hostile government in Afghanistan, and over the decades, has interfered in the Afghans' domestic politics. It has perpetually sought a 'friendly government' in Kabul. But, ironically, the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan are scarred by turbulence and mistrust. The evolution of the concept of strategic depth took place in the context of the various strategic, political and ideological developments which surfaced in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the historical details in this context are not covered in this paper.

By using the term strategic depth, Pakistan seeks rationalisation of its control and influence in Afghanistan for a number of reasons which can be listed as follows:

- One of the most important factors in determining Pakistan's policies in Afghanistan is the lingering Afghanistan-Pakistan border issue based on the Durand Line, which separates the tribal areas of Khyber Pakhtoon Khwa (KPK) of Pakistan from Afghanistan. No Afghan regime, including the Rabbani government, has ever accepted the legitimacy of the border drawn up by the British in 1893 – the so-called Durand Line.² The Durand Line Agreement was to last for 100 years and expired in 1993. It was very clear that the Afghan regime would not recognise the agreement and would seek to incorporate the Pashtun areas east of the Durand Line into Afghanistan. As the Soviets were leaving in 1989 and the timeline for the expiry of the agreement (1993) too was close, Pakistan publicly pursued the doctrine of strategic depth, creating Afghanistan as a satellite state for itself.
- Pakistan has faced the issue of Pashtun nationalism which demanded a separate Pashtunistan from the 1940s. There have been concomitant calls

2. The British accepted the traditional boundary roughly established by Ranjit Singh along what came to be known as the Durand Line based on the agreement between Emir Abdul Rehman, the ruler of Afghanistan, and Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, British foreign minister, in 1893, leaving the majority of the Pashtun population and tribes in India.

for an independent Pashtun homeland in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), KPK and parts of Baluchistan. These areas have been alienated and grossly underdeveloped for decades, and the state has always had unique administrative and legislative arrangements which successive governments have used to administer the region. The Pakistani leadership which anyway was extremely dissatisfied with the small size of the country, that Jinnah had called a “moth-eaten” Pakistan, certainly wanted to prevent the creation of Pashtunistan and, thus, further disintegration of Pakistan. Control and influence over Afghanistan by a Pashtun dominated (essentially Taliban) government would, therefore, reduce the demand for Pashtunistan and yet have the Pashtuns under Pakistan’s control.

- During the 1965 War, Pakistan managed to move its aircraft to the Iranian airfields of Zahedan across the Baluchistan border. Pakistan was not certain that the same facility would be available in the future. Therefore, for protecting its aircraft against Indian strikes, Pakistan looked at the airfields in Afghanistan, but their use by the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) would be conditional to the government in Kabul agreeing to it. Pakistan’s military objective was to use the Afghan territory and air bases as a sanctuary for Pakistan. The Afghan territory would also provide the military with a much larger space for combat training without the risk of being monitored by the radars on the Indian side.
- Pakistan has followed the strategy of covert war through terrorism against India for more than 25 years now. The strategy is not new and Pakistan’s first aggression in 1947 was initiated in the name of tribal revolt and, thus, the same was repeated in Operation Gibraltar in 1965. Pakistan’s covert war against India has been much more active since the late 1980s which can be correlated to the expertise gained as a frontline state during the Afghan War and also acquisition of nuclear technology in 1987. Afghanistan provided Pakistan a safe haven to train the Islamist militants such as the Harakat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT), which were to conduct terrorist activities in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and, eventually in other parts of India,

including Punjab. A pro-Pakistan government in Kabul would certainly be much more supportive of Pakistan using Afghanistan to nurture these groups.

- Undermining the Indian influence in Afghanistan has always been a priority for Pakistan. A former French diplomat, Frédéric Grare, has said, “According to Pakistan, whatever India does in Afghanistan is a ploy against Pakistan, be it economic investment, infrastructure, or any related matter....As a result, Pakistan has ensured that Indian interest would be blocked whenever and wherever possible”.³
- Islamabad has always viewed India’s actions in Afghanistan as a policy of encirclement and, thus, in its view, a radical Islamist regime – the Taliban – would help to cut down India’s role in the region.
- Pakistan’s control over Afghanistan gives it access to the Central Asian Republics. Pakistan is undoubtedly keen to expand its options for energy transportation due to the increasing demand for energy in the country. It wants to occupy the commercial and strategic space in the Central Asian Republics before India can expand its influence.
- Lastly, and very importantly, by using the normally not well understood terminology “strategic depth”, which sounds impressive, the Pakistani leadership could influence the public opinion in support of its policies.

SUCCESS OF STRATEGIC DEPTH

How successful Pakistan’s policy of creating strategic depth in Afghanistan has been is, obviously, a matter of debate, although the general consensus is that Pakistan’s Afghanistan policy has been, by and large, unsuccessful. Pakistan supported the Taliban regime in the 1990s for strategic objectives but did not get the desired results. The Pakistani leadership miscalculated that the Taliban regime in Afghanistan would lead to recognition of the Durand Line and also, Pashtun nationalism would be much more under control. But, obviously none of the Pakistani assumptions came true: the Durand Line issue remained, Pashtun nationalism has been further

3. Frédéric Grare, “Pakistan”, in Ashley Tellis and Aroop Mukharji, eds., *Is a Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), p. 21.

nurtured by the Taliban and New Delhi remains important for Afghanistan and enjoys soft power in Kabul.

Pakistan had some success in keeping the government in Kabul weak and under some control. It has managed to create bilateral trade relations with Afghanistan and is Kabul's leading trading partner. The long awaited Afghan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) which was signed in October 2010, was implemented in June 2011. Trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan is rising steadily. But the fact remains that Pakistan has failed to generate any goodwill amongst the Afghans. The political leadership in Kabul has been increasingly apprehensive about Islamabad's intentions and role in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's continued support to the Afghan Taliban and other extremist factions allowed the insurgency to resurface in 2003, during the Musharraf regime. Continued Pakistani support has not allowed the insurgency to dissipate. Islamabad has been unable to exercise its soft power influence in the neighbourhood. The general opinion in Afghanistan resists Pakistan's involvement in the country and the Pakistani elites are well aware of this. *Dawn*, a leading Pakistani daily reported: "...how can Afghanistan be our 'strategic depth' when most Afghans hate our guts, not only the northerners, but even those who call themselves Pakhtuns?"⁴

Although Pakistan has recently displayed interest in the peace talks and has tried contributing in the negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban, certainly the underlying aim which directs Islamabad's moves has been to have a pro-Pakistan government in Afghanistan. Pakistan has lately refrained from using the term 'strategic depth' and has denied its urge for seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan. But clearly, Pakistan's objectives in Afghanistan have not been altered and, thus, it will continue to expand its influence in Kabul.

INDIA'S INTERESTS AND ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN

India-Afghan relations have gone through changes owing to strategic developments, but, by and large, post 2001, the two countries have shared

4. Kamran Shafi, "Defining Strategic Depth", *Dawn*, January 19, 2010.

The location of Afghanistan at the strategic crossroads between South Asia and Central Asia as well as South Asia and the Middle East, makes Kabul extremely important for India.

a cordial relationship which has not been limited to governmental exchange, but has also been driven by strong people-to-people contacts. As Afghanistan proceeded towards transition, India's position was, and has been, of a supporting actor focussed on development and capacity building in Afghanistan.

India has deep-rooted civilisational ties with Afghanistan and both countries have historically shared a good relationship. The location of Afghanistan at the strategic crossroads between South Asia and Central Asia as well as South Asia and the Middle East, makes Kabul extremely important for India. India's relationship with Kabul did suffer a major blow during the Taliban's seven-year rule in the 1990s, when India continued to support the Northern Alliance. Ever since the fall of Taliban and installation of an Interim Authority in 2001, India has been active in its approach towards Afghanistan and its engagement with Kabul has been multi-dimensional. Stability in Afghanistan is important for India, and New Delhi has made consistent efforts to contribute towards it. India has growing stakes in peace and stability in Afghanistan. Its policy in Afghanistan faces multiple challenges, and the most significant is obviously Islamabad's approach, which has been rather disparaging and invariably perceives India's role in Afghanistan as a threat.

Ranjan Mathai, former foreign secretary of India, very eloquently talked about India's concerns in Afghanistan as it transitions:

Afghanistan is passing through a critical phase as it transitions towards a greater responsibility for its own security and governance and as NATO/ISAF forces move from a combat-role to an advise, train and assist role. Success or failure of this transition process will impact security and stability for many years to come, not just in Afghanistan but also in Afghanistan's immediate neighbourhood, particularly in Central Asia and South Asia. For many of us who are Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, we have

neither the luxury of a 'withdrawal' or a 'drawdown' from the situation that prevails in that country today.⁵

India's Interests in Afghanistan

India has had historical and cultural linkages with Afghanistan and has been in favour of increasing ties with Kabul. Assistance to Afghanistan is part of India's strategy to carve out its own position in South Asia as an influential regional power. New Delhi wants to establish its credentials as a preeminent power and is keen to play a role in the stability of its neighbourhood. India's

geographical size, development of human resources and economic growth qualify it to take that positioning. Also, India's economic and military growth in the last two decades has been significant, and has complemented its strategy to expand its regional influence.

India's growth as an economic power and its integration into the global economy has certainly led to its image boost and, more importantly, the positive perception that it can assist stability around it. Moreover, New Delhi, as a responsible big power, cannot afford to have an unstable Afghanistan in the neighbourhood.

Pakistan has always tried to thwart India's efforts and moves in Afghanistan. For Islamabad, Afghanistan was one of the most logical choices to be used to balance India's influence in South Asia. A pro-India regime in Afghanistan was never acceptable to Pakistan as it would counter Pakistan's objectives. The Pashtun-ethnic linkage enables Pakistan to retain a leverage in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan provides Pakistan a safe haven to train the anti-India state sponsored groups which have been actively conducting terrorist activities

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5. Keynote Address : Ranjan Mathai, foreign secretary, India, at the Fifth IISS-MEA Foreign Policy Dialogue, London, October 4, 2012.

in J&K, and also in other parts of India. One of the prime objectives of Pakistan in pursuing its strategy of strategic depth was to use Afghanistan as a sanctuary to train and equip the anti-India terror groups. It is essential for India to have firm ground in Afghanistan and retain its political and diplomatic influence in Kabul to be able to control Islamabad's ambitions.

Another major concern of India is to control the spread of Islamic extremism. India has suffered from terrorism backed by Islamic extremism in the Valley and also in other parts of India (Punjab). The problem of Islamic extremism in Pakistan and Afghanistan affects India both directly and indirectly. Since a majority of the anti-India groups which have been nurtured by Pakistan for decades have their support base in Afghanistan, and draw their ideological and logistical support from the international terrorist organisations based in Afghanistan, India's concerns regarding spread of extremism in Afghanistan are not unjustified.

Afghanistan is also viewed by India as the gateway to Central Asia where New Delhi wants to expand its presence due to India's inflating energy requirements. According to the World Bank ICP Report 2011, India is the third largest economy in the world by share of the world Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms.⁶ Given the fact that the Indian economy is growing at a rapid pace, the energy requirements for India are obviously high – it is the fourth largest energy consumer in the world. Central Asia, with its rich natural energy resources, is vital for India, and Afghanistan is New Delhi's route to Central Asia. India is certainly interested in the imports of oil and uranium from both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Turkmenistan is the fourth largest gas reserve holder and one of the top natural gas producers. Other major powers like the US, China and Russia have already started to expand their role and influence in Central Asia. Consequently, New Delhi needs to adopt an assertive policy to be able to maintain its influence.

6. "2011 International Comparison Program Summary Results Release Compares the Real Size of the World Economies", *The World Bank*, April, 29, 2014, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2014/04/29/2011-international-comparison-program-results-compare-real-size-world-economies>. Accessed on December 15, 2014.

India-Afghanistan: A Developmental Partnership

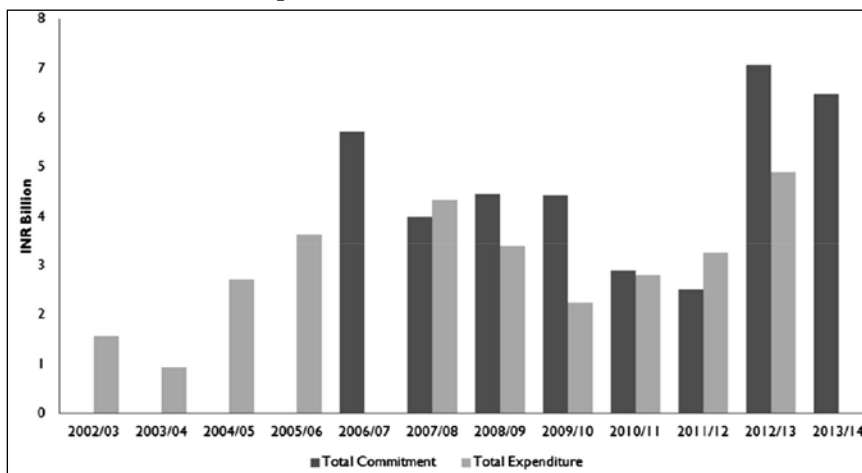
While India's role was constrained in Afghanistan during the anti-Soviet *jihad* between 1979-89, it did try to extend its support and activities in Kabul after the Soviet withdrawal. Also, during the Taliban regime in the 1990s, India's role remained restricted. Post 2001, the focus of the Indian activities has been on developmental projects, including the industrial, hydro projects, education and health sectors as well as humanitarian assistance. India's role post 2001 needs to be analysed not only in the context of the historical ties between Kabul and New Delhi, but also due to India's changing stature and role on the global platform, with its growing power, economy and image.

India is a key donor to Afghanistan and the cumulative level of commitment of Indian assistance to Afghanistan amounts to US\$2 billion. The Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between India and Afghanistan in 2011 provided a further boost to the relationship. India is the fifth largest provider of developmental assistance to Afghanistan with a total commitment for 2013-14 at approximately US\$120 million⁷ (Fig 1). India's grant and loan-based allocations towards Afghanistan remain unaltered between Financial Year (FY) 2014-15 and FY 2015-16 (Fig 2). India's commitments to Afghanistan stand at INR 6.76 billion.⁸ The cooperation is likely to increase in the future, but, obviously, much depends on how the relationship takes shape with the new regime led by Ashraf Ghani in Kabul.

7. Rani D. Mullen, "India-Afghanistan Partnership" *Indian Development Cooperation Research*, <http://idcr.cprindia.org/blog/india-afghanistan-partnership>. Accessed on April, 14, 2015.

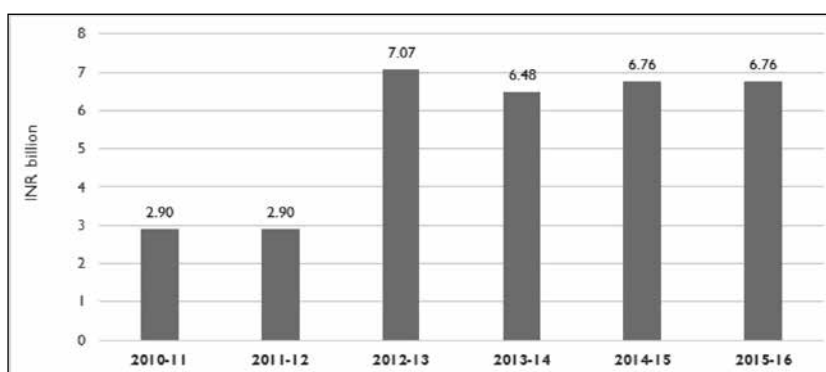
8. "Update on Afghanistan-India Relations", *Indian Development Cooperation Research*, April 25, 2015, <http://idcr.cprindia.org/blog/update-afghanistan-india-relations>. Accessed on May 25, 2015.

Fig 1: India's Development Cooperation with Afghanistan: Commitments and Expenditures, 2002-03 – 2013-14



Source: Preliminary calculations by the Indian Development Cooperation Research (IDCR) initiative at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, based on data from Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) Outcomes Budgets 2006/07-2013/14, Government of India and Union Budgets 2002/03 - 2013/14, Ministry of Finance, Government of India, as cited in Rani D. Mullen, "India-Afghanistan Partnership," Indian Development Cooperation Research, <http://idcr.cprindia.org/blog/india-afghanistan-partnership>

Fig 2: Indian Grant and Loan-Based Commitments to Afghanistan in INR Billion (between 2010-11 and 2015-16)



Source: Calculations by the Indian Development Cooperation Research (IDCR) initiative at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, based on available data from the Union Budget 2014-15, Ministry of Finance, Government of India, as cited in "Update on Afghanistan-India Relations", Indian Development Cooperation Research, April 25, 2015, <http://idcr.cprindia.org/blog/update-afghanistan-india-relations>. Accessed on May 25, 2015.

India's Soft Power in Afghanistan

India has been actively involved in the developmental projects in Afghanistan and has played a significant role in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Afghanistan. India is one of the leading donors in Afghanistan and, by far, the largest regional donor. Obviously, India's role has been constrained given the circumstances and Pakistan's continuous unhappiness over Indian presence as well as its soft power enhancement in Kabul. The efforts by the Indian government clearly indicate that New Delhi believes that the sustainable development of Afghanistan requires long-term investment. Specifically, investment that can assist the exploitation of Afghanistan's natural resources. A stable Afghanistan is essential for regional stability. As Jayant Prasad has said:

India's objective is to stabilise Afghanistan. Getting the Afghans to stand on their own feet is good for the Afghan people, good for India and good for the world, including all the regional countries.⁹

India's influence in Afghanistan is quite significant and it is able to wield a considerable amount of soft power. On August 30, 2009, in a confidential report submitted to US President Obama, by Gen Stanley McChrystal, he wrote:

Indian political and economic influence is increasing in Afghanistan, including significant development efforts and financial investment. In addition, the current Afghan government is perceived by Islamabad as pro-Indian. While Indian activities largely benefit the Afghan people, increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan is likely to exacerbate Pakistani countermeasures in Afghanistan or India.¹⁰

9. Jayant Prasad, Indian ambassador to Afghanistan, in an interview, in "Afghanistan, Indians are Praised Simply for Being Indian", *Business Standard* (New Delhi), October 9, 2009.

10. Ajay Prakash, "Rising Indian Influence in Afghanistan Worries US and Pakistan", *WSWS.org*, November 19, 2009, <http://www.countermeasures.org/print.html>. Accessed on April 12, 2013.

The Bollywood movie industry – which makes close to 800 movies every year portraying glamorous lifestyles and events – has permeated the Afghan society. These cultural products have penetrated deeply into the Afghan society and are watched with great fondness by the Afghans.

India's developmental programmes do impact the Afghan lives directly and some of the high profile Indian projects like the building of the Afghan Parliament and donation of planes to Ariana Afghan Airlines have created a significant positive image of India. The Bollywood movie industry – which makes close to 800 movies every year portraying glamorous lifestyles and events – has permeated the Afghan society¹¹ These cultural products have penetrated deeply into the Afghan society and are watched with great fondness by the

Afghans. One of the most popular TV shows in Afghanistan is an Indian soap dubbed in the *Dari* language.¹² The entertainment industry and the education sector impact the youth in the country, and India's role in these sectors has enabled it to gather support from the Afghan youth.

India has also made an effort to create linkages with the Afghan elites who have had long standing ties with India. Hamid Karzai, for example, studied in India in Himachal Pradesh and speaks fluent Hindi, and Abdullah Abdullah's wife resides in New Delhi. There have been specific efforts to increase business partnerships with Afghanistan which have attracted elite business personnel from Afghanistan, further building up credibility for India: for example, the Investment Roadshow in Ahmedabad in 2014, the participation of the Afghan delegation in the India Mining Summit in 2014, inauguration of the 'India Bazaar' in Kabul in 2014, and the participation of Afghan businessmen in PHARMEXCIL 2015 in Gujarat.¹³

11. "What is Bollywood", *Newsround*, undated, as cited in Larry Hanauer and Peter Chalk, "India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the United States and Region", *Occasional Paper*, RAND, Centre for Asia Pacific Policy, 2012, p. 21.

12. Shashi Tharoor, "Hooray for Bollywood: India's 'Soft Power' ", *Taipei Times*, January 7, 2008, as cited in Hanauer and Chalk, *Ibid.*, p. 21.

13. "India-Afghanistan Relations", January 2015, Embassy of India, Kabul, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi.

CHINA'S INTERESTS AND EMERGING ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN

The last few years have witnessed increasing signs of Chinese interest and engagement in Afghanistan. In early 2014, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a rare trip to Kabul for a meeting with his Afghan counterpart. Following which, in July 2014, China announced the appointment of a special envoy for Afghanistan (for the first time), under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Sun Yuxi, who is a former ambassador to both India and Afghanistan, has been appointed as a special envoy for Afghanistan. Beijing, is obviously keen to contribute in ensuring peace and stability in Afghanistan and official representation in Afghanistan is a welcome initiation. China clearly does not want Afghanistan to become a safe haven for South-Central Asian militants which would threaten its own stability in its western provinces.

Another significant move came from China in February this year (2015) when it offered to mediate in the prevaricated efforts to engage the Afghan Taliban in the peace process. Reuters reported that China has initiated mediation between representatives from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Taliban in the framework of a "peace and reconciliation forum". China's interest in Afghanistan has gone through a political, economic and military transition, and how China and Afghanistan perceive each other has also undergone a change. In the last few years, as the United States' drawdown was underway from Afghanistan, China raised its profile, and increased its involvement and presence in Afghanistan. China's policy towards Afghanistan in the last few years has been driven primarily by its economic interests and security concerns. China has been obviously worried about the rising Uighur secessionism in the western Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR)

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bordering Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) and Afghanistan. China is apprehensive about the proliferation of rising extremism and Talibanisation from the Afghan-Pakistan border into the restive Xinjiang.

China's Security Concerns in Afghanistan

Security is the core concern of China as it shares an 85-km border with Afghanistan. Beijing's objective is stability, both internally in XUAR and externally, in Afghanistan. China faces a security challenge from the religious-separatist terrorist elements in Xinjiang, that have found a safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The ethnic Uighurs, who are (mostly) Muslims and culturally close to the Central Asian Republics, have had historical grievances with the majority ethnic Han Chinese of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and have been posing a serious internal threat to Beijing. Xinjiang, rich in vast mineral resources, is potentially an important trade route for China, and also home to Lop Nor, which was used by China to conduct a nuclear test for Pakistan.¹⁴

Historically, there have been tensions between the Uighurs and the Chinese government but after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of the Central Asian Republics, the cries of self-determination from the Uighurs have increased significantly. As John K Cooley has observed:

During the opening years of the Afghan *jihad*, China joined the anti-Russian coalition. It did so far for its own strategic reasons. It paid a terrible price during the blowback period after the war's end. That price was the renewed and spreading revolt of the Uighurs, the Muslim and Turkic-speaking peoples of China's far west, the vast province of Xinjiang, many of whom who yearned for independence in their own Muslim state...¹⁵

14. "Controlling Xingjiang: Autonomy on China's "New Frontier," *3 Asian-Pacific Law and Policy, Journal*, vol 3, issue 1, Winter 2002, p.121.

15. John K. Cooley, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), p. 66.

There have been numerous incidents of terrorist violence in Xinjiang, entailing the issue to be in the priority list of the central government. Since 1990, there have been several separatist uprisings, protests and killings of Han Chinese officials, and a dramatic rise in the demands for the creation of an independent "East Turkestan".¹⁶

Till now, the Chinese response to the Xinjiang insurgency and violence has been primarily with the use of force and suppression, with little economic incentives being offered to the region.¹⁷ There has been lack of political means for combating the resistance and Beijing has been using harsh tactics. Little has been done to address the alienation of the region which has not allowed the insurgency to settle down. Rohan Gururatna, the head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, says that the violence comprises acts of resistance by the "disaffected" Uighurs.¹⁸

China has been deeply concerned with the support these militants draw from the terrorist organisations based in Pakistan and Afghanistan. And, there have been numerous incidents in the past indicating this linkage. Beijing is concerned about the spread of separatist ideology from Afghanistan and the insurgency-prone regions of Pakistan. The Uighurs have been using Afghanistan and Pakistan as a sanctuary for a long time now. According to Ahmed Rashid:

Uyghur militants from Xinjiang, China are increasingly using Afghanistan as a sanctuary, a supply base for training and weapons, and a means to fund their movement back home through the lucrative opium trade. Heroin addiction is now a major social problem in Xinjiang. Although the Taliban are not directly recruiting Uyghurs into their forces, Uyghur militants have

16. Teresa Poole, "Fresh Rioting in Xinjiang", *Independent*, February 20, 1999, as cited in n.14, p.122.

17. See Elizabeth Van Wie Davis, "Uyghur Muslim Ethnic Separatism in Xinjiang, China", Centre for Security Studies, January 2008, at, <http://www.apcss.org/college/publications/uyghur-muslim-ethnic-separatism-in-xinjiang-china/>. Accessed on July 21, 2014.

18. Dan Levin, "At Least 50 killed in Xinjiang Violence, Officials Say", *The New York Times*, September, 25, 2014, at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/26/world/asia/death-toll-in-xinjiang-violence-may-be-higher-than-reported.html?_r=0. Accessed on December 12, 2014.

enlisted with, and get support from, the foreign Islamic units fighting for the Taliban. These units include the 800-man Arab brigade led by Osama Bin Laden, units of Pakistani student militants, and the 2,000-man force of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan led by Juma Namangani, now based in northern Afghanistan.¹⁹

China's additional worries arise from the support that Al Qaeda has pledged to extend to the militants in Xinjiang.²⁰ There have been reports in the West citing the fact that many Uighurs separatist of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) have deep links with Al Qaeda and have received, and continue to receive, training in the Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan and also weapons (and training) from Pakistan. Post 9/11, the Chinese have been quite concerned about aggravation of the existing separatist movement due to the spillover effect from Afghanistan. China fears that the Uighurs have got in the past, and will continue to get, support from the transnational Muslim extremist forces. China is trying to ensure that the East Turkistan separatists do not benefit from the Taliban when the Western forces leave.

The second factor, which China also suffers from, is the drug problem from Afghanistan. A major share of the drugs entering China are smuggled into China from the Golden Crescent (meaning Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan). The western province of China has been deeply affected by the drug export from Afghanistan, and Xinjiang, apart from serving as a transit route, has also been the final destination for the drug suppliers, with an increasing number of drug consumers.²¹

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19. Ahmed Rashid, "China Forced to Expand Role in Central Asia", *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analysis*, July 19, 2000, at <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/7187-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2000-7-19-art-7187.html>. Accessed on August 12, 2014.
 20. See "Al-Qaeda Leader Ayman al-Zawahiri Sets out His First Jihad Guidelines", *Reuters*, September 18, 2013, at <http://www.scmp.com/news/world/article/1311795/al-qaeda-leader-ayman-al-zawahiri>. Accessed on January 12, 2015.
 21. Nerkez Opacin, *China's Role in Afghanistan : A Capitalist Peace Approach* (Hamburg: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2014), p.38.

China's Quest for Enhanced Economic Engagement

China has enhanced its economic engagement with Afghanistan and has invested in the infrastructure, telecom industry and, quite substantively, in the energy sector. China's expanding energy requirements have been an important driver for its renewed engagement and interest in Afghanistan. The US Energy Information Administration (EIA) predicts that in the near future, China will account for one-third of the world's energy consumption. Afghanistan provides China with an opportunity to access minerals and other energy resources. China is keen to invest in the Afghan infrastructure as the new transit corridors would facilitate Chinese trade towards the west, into Iran and the Middle East, and towards the south, into Gwadar, Pakistan.²²

China has extended economic assistance to Afghanistan and provided aid worth Yuan 1.3 billion (US\$ 203 million) and waived debts worth US\$19.5 million during 2002-10.²³ In 2012, when the Strategic Partnership Agreement was signed, Beijing pledged additional assistance of Yuan 150 million (US\$ 23.7 million). Although the Chinese contribution is a relatively small fraction as compared to that of the West, it does demonstrate an alteration in the Chinese foreign policy towards Afghanistan.

China has pledged an investment of \$3.5 billion in the Mes Aynak copper mines in Afghanistan's Logar province, which is the largest foreign direct investment in the Afghan history. China has emerged as the largest foreign investor in Afghanistan. In 2007, a 30-year deal was signed between the Afghan government and two Chinese state owned companies, the China Metallurgical Group Corporation and the Jiangxi Copper Company, to mine copper in the eastern region of Afghanistan, at the Aynak copper mine. In 2012, The Afghan Ministry of Mines made a statement, "The Aynak project represents the largest private sector project in the country's history, and it will generate more jobs, revenues and enhancements to Afghanistan's

22. Zalmay Khalizad, "Why Afghanistan Courts China", *The New York Times*, November, 3, 2014, at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/04/opinion/why-afghanistan-courts-china.html?_r=0. Sccessed on December 12, 2014.

23. Vishal Chandra, *The Unfinished War in Afghanistan 2001-2014* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2015), p. 249.

China has invested in the oil and natural gas sector, and in 2011, the Chinese state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Watan Energy, a local Afghan company, signed an agreement worth \$700 million. The agreement reportedly allows the Chinese firm to search for oil and natural gas in Sari Pul and Paryab, an area known as the Amu Darya river basin.

infrastructure than any other single project to date..."²⁴

The project would invariably generate opportunities for Afghans. According to the World Bank Report, the project would create 12,000 direct jobs and 62,500 "induced" jobs while adding \$250 million in annual revenues once the mine hits capacity.²⁵

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The agreement includes the following: "(i) CNPC will build a refinery, which would be Afghanistan's first refinery; (ii) the Afghan government will receive 70 percent of the profits from the sale of the oil and natural gas; and (iii) CNPC will pay 15 percent in royalties, as well as corporate taxes and rent for the land used for the operations."²⁸

24. Kathleen Caulderwood, "China and Afghanistan's Minerals: Archaeologists Still Scrambling To Save Mes Aynak", *International Business Times*, August 25, 2014, at <http://www.ibtimes.com/china-afghanistans-minerals-archaeologists-still-scrambling-save-mes-aynak-1668808>. Accessed on November 11, 2014.

25. Ibid.

26. Patrick Quinn and Slobodan, "Afghanistan, China Sign First Oil Contract", [Afghan News] December 28, 2011 - 02-26-2012, *PashtunForums*, at <http://www.pashtunforums.com/showthread.php?t=26211>. Accessed on February 12, 2015.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

Assessing Beijing's Engagement

Beijing has kept itself aligned with the international community in the last few years and has increased its engagement in Afghanistan. China, by and large, maintains an independent policy on Afghanistan, primarily reflective of its deep security concerns and economic interests, which are the prime drivers of its proactive diplomatic engagement. Beijing certainly wants a stable Afghanistan, which does not become the home of, or sanctuary for, the Uighur militancy, but, on the other hand, it is conscious of the challenges which accompany engagement with Afghanistan. It has refrained from any direct military involvement in Afghanistan (till now!) but has offered assistance in military training. It has learnt from the troubles which the West has been facing, with 13 years of war in Afghanistan, leading to attracting the attention of international terrorist groups, and it certainly wants to avoid these problems. Also, many Afghans don't particularly view the Chinese as friends and sending armed forces into Afghanistan might not be a logical option, according to the Chinese leadership. China has been an eager player in the mediation with the Taliban, as it realises that the Taliban is a reality in Afghanistan which has to be involved in the (sustainable) political settlement.

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Being a large power and a committed ally of Pakistan (for over four decades now !), which would invariably be an important player in Afghanistan, China can actually play a significant role in the shaping of Afghanistan. According to Pakistan's Senate Defence Committee Chairman Mushahid Hussain:

Unlike Russia or the United States, China carries no historical 'extra-baggage' and unlike Pakistan, Iran, Turkey or the Central Asian Republics, China has stayed away from all previous conflicts or civil wars in Afghanistan, therefore, it is not tainted in any way as far as the Afghan people are concerned, and unlike the increasingly bankrupt West, China has the financial resources to sponsor much-needed investment in key sectors of Afghanistan's development.²⁹

Dr Davood Muradin, director general of the Afghan Institute of Strategic Studies, has also commented that China, being the most prosperous and important neighbour of Afghanistan, can play a very important role.³⁰

Looking into the recent developments, the following conclusions could be drawn regarding China's emerging role in Afghanistan:

- The Xinjiang province and its problems have a linkage with Afghanistan and have received assistance in the past from the groups operating from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Thus, the Chinese engagement is aimed to primarily take care of the security concerns and to ensure the containment of the spillover effect of extremism and terrorist groups operating in the neighbourhood.
- China's quest for energy has led to investments in the Afghan energy sector. Certainly, it aims to build up the transportation network which would connect it to the Iranian oilfields and Central Asian Republics, and also Gwadar in Pakistan.
- A good foothold in Afghanistan would certainly provide leverage to China in terms of containing the expansion of the other major players – the US and Russia – in the region.
- China wants stability in Afghanistan but has no plans of stabilising Afghan politics, facilitating its ethnic rivalries and modifying its social structure.

29. "Pakistani, Afghan Experts Eye China's Greater Role in Afghanistan", *Daily Times*, October 26, 2014, at <http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/national/26-Oct-2014/pakistani-afghan-experts-eye-china-s-greater-role-in-afghanistan>. Accessed on January 10, 2015.

30. Ibid.

- China would enhance investment in the social sector like building hospitals, roads and cultural institutes promoting Chinese culture, in order to build goodwill among the Afghans.
- China is likely to continue to maintain and enhance its diplomatic and economic engagement in Afghanistan as stability in Afghanistan is in Beijing's interest.

AFGHANISTAN: A BATTLEGROUND OF DIVERGENT INTERESTS AND APPROACHES

Afghanistan is indeed going through a challenging phase of transition on three fronts: political, economic and, most critical, security. On the political front, a unique power sharing deal has been negotiated between President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah. The new political regime has established its legitimacy but it still needs to establish its credibility within the country. Political factionalism and ethnic factions have grown tremendously along with the raging insurgency and terrorist outfits in Afghanistan posing severe challenges to the stability in future. The divisions between Pashtuns and non-Pashtun nationalities that make up for the complex weave of the Afghan national carpet, are deep-rooted.

The Taliban and their Pakistani patrons appeared ready for an agreement in the past few months, but have continued attacks on the government outfits, expressing their rage against the state and foreign powers. It is ironical that even with the initiation of the peace talks, with the help of Pakistan and China, the spring offensive announced by the Taliban in 2015 continued, with fierce and frequent attacks within Afghanistan. The NATO troops claimed to have taken hundreds of Taliban off the battlefield every year (during the military operations) and the average age of the Taliban fighters has decreased to 23 from 35 earlier, and they remain the most crucial factor in the future of Afghanistan. The Taliban still maintain ties with Al Qaeda and cooperate with the outfit in some eastern provinces. The emergence and expansion of the relatively new non-state actor Islamic State in Syria (ISIS) has complicated the security matters even more in Afghanistan. Kabul becomes a natural

choice for the ISIS, as a turbulent state with strong factions of radical ideology presents fertile ground for its future planning and actions.

The future of Afghanistan will depend on multiple factors and the role of the state institution is obviously critical. The effectiveness of the political leadership to resolve and balance the ethnic divides, progressive economic planning, and managing relationships with the US and regional powers are the critical factors required for stability in Afghanistan.

While undoubtedly the onus of stabilisation and national growth is on the state itself and external assistance is always restrained in terms of state building, in the case of Afghanistan, the role of the major regional powers, Pakistan, India and China, is extremely important. The political and ethnic dimensions in Afghanistan are influenced by Pakistan to a large extent. The leadership in Islamabad plays a crucial role in the political and social power politics of Afghanistan. The Afghan economy is largely aid-dependent and will need external support for a long time to be able to sustain itself and eventually grow. The country is reportedly rich in minerals but the exploitation of these minerals demands heavy foreign investments. The foreign investments depend on the security situation in the country and consistent security challenges would certainly dissuade the investors.

Although Pakistan is struggling economically and faces severe security challenges within, with rising extremism, it is certainly the most influential actor in the stability or, for that matter, instability of Afghanistan. Not only the geographical proximity, but the strong religious and ethnic ties which the two countries share, place Pakistan in a dominant position to shape the future of Afghanistan. While Islamabad refrains from using the term “strategic depth”, it has shown little signs of change in its objectives in Afghanistan. Contrary to the world opinion which does not support the Taliban, Pakistan continues to treat them as its strategic asset and patronises them. Pakistan’s ambitions and its desire to control Afghanistan to be able to fulfill its objectives have till date not allowed Kabul to stabilise. Pakistan’s support to the “selective” non-state actors and its ambition to use the Afghan territory to further

its strategic interests (against India) have not allowed the insurgency to settle down in Afghanistan.

The military in Pakistan remains centred on catering to its strategic interest, and its desire for “strategic depth” is unlikely to change. The new regime in Afghanistan under President Ghani did try for a new beginning with Pakistan and, in a rather surprising move (different from his predecessor, Karzai), Ghani visited Pakistan before approaching Afghanistan’s developmental partner, India. The relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan remains stressed, with mistrust and constant accusations, and it is difficult to predict how the ties will shape up in the future.

China’s role is evolving in Afghanistan and is dominated primarily by its security and economic interests. Beijing is increasing its footprint in Afghanistan with not only heavy economic investments, but also trying to play an active role in the peace talks. With its economic profile, China can potentially play an effective role in boosting the Afghan economy in the future, but currently, the Chinese position and policies are more or less targeted to cater to its security and economic interests.

India shares strong historical and cultural ties with Afghanistan, has strategic and economic interests in the region and desires the stability of Afghanistan. India’s interests have multiple dimensions which range from expansion of its regional influence, building its soft power, trade and commerce, countering the growth of Islamist extremism from Afghanistan and deterring Pakistan from using Afghan territory for sponsoring terrorism against India. New Delhi has adopted a completely different approach as compared to the other regional powers (Pakistan and China) and has been engaged in developmental and humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan. As a multi-ethnic democracy, with a growing economy, India is able to project an extremely positive image. India’s initiatives do impact the Afghan society directly and, thus, it enjoys immense popularity in the country. India has refrained from any form of military engagement in Kabul, apart from contributing towards the capability of the Afghan forces through training, etc.

Pakistan has till date, tried to thwart all Indian efforts in Afghanistan and India's growing popularity is detrimental to Pakistan's interests in Kabul. Islamabad certainly wants to contain New Delhi's role in Afghanistan and its ability to manage its moves would be encouraged further with the strong presence of China in the Afghan territory. With the Chinese present in Afghanistan, Pakistan now has a strong partner to conduct itself in Kabul. On the other hand, China certainly gets support for its economic and security related activities due to Pakistan's role in Afghanistan. The challenges for India are likely to increase with the engagement of the two major players in Afghanistan, that have a close alliance between themselves.

The three regional players that actually have the potential to contribute in the stability of Afghanistan, have different interests and follow different policies, which are mostly contradictory in nature. The solution to the Afghan crisis demands a regional approach, with integrated policies complementing each other.