

India's Afghan Journey: Where from here?

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Abstract

India's contemporary Afghan journey is a tale of tailored interest with qualified destiny of Afghanistan. India embarked on Afghan journey more aggressively only after the fall of ruling Taliban in 2001 with defined geo-political objectives, firmly placed under the security cover of NATO occupation of the country. The objectives of NATO and New Delhi not only squarely merged in Kabul but also found identical companion – Northern Alliance – to realize stable Afghanistan. The most aggressive presence of New Delhi in Afghanistan was its political, economic and diplomatic investment with choreographed goals, revolving around the critical desire of favored strategic response from government in Kabul and NATO. With planned withdrawal of NATO forces, New Delhi however faces decisive challenge for its ongoing operation in the country. The diminishing security cover of NATO and growing influence of Taliban would eventually paralyze New Delhi's maneuvers. Given these uncomfortable realities, where and how New Delhi shall go from here? What is the nature of Indian interest and its significance in that country? More significantly what Islamabad would make of this? This paper explores India's surging challenge in Afghanistan and argues that it would have to be much more attentive to regional callings, chiefly emanating from Pakistan, and China and carefully prefer its pathways ahead. India's prospective preferable pathways notwithstanding, South Asia shall continue to be a problematic region from 'stability' and 'peace' perspectives.

Keywords: India's Afghan Journey, geo-politics, NATO, and South Asia.

Introduction

As soon as Taliban were removed from power in Kabul by the US led Western forces for affording shelter and logistics for the perpetrators of 9/11 attacks, India resolved to re-work its engagement in Afghanistan. Its then External Affairs Minister Mr. Jaswant Singh announced appointment of a full-fledged

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ambassador to Afghanistan and re-opening of consulates in Afghan cities of Jalalabad, Kandahar, Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif – New Delhi did not have any consulates in Mazar-e-Sharif, dominated by Hazara and Uzbek ethnic minorities earlier. It pledged the new government \$100 million, one million tons of wheat, and additional \$1 million for meeting a part of the requirements of the interim administration (Rediff, 2004). The eventual occupation of Afghanistan by NATO and its penetrating security cover - over and beyond Kabul - came as handy and India increased number of projects, personnel and consulates, concomitantly. Moreover, the US, the prominent contributor to NATO efforts, viewed its presence in Afghanistan as responsible partner and its activities pleasing. The US State Department spokesperson, Victoria Nuland said, "We are pleased with the support that India is giving to strengthen security, stability, prosperity in Afghanistan" (IBNLive, 2012).

India's activities in Afghanistan had a geo-strategic flavor though, which not only confine to Afghanistan but travel deep into Central Asia. It is now widely accepted that India's Afghan policy seeks access to energy resources of the region (Fair, 2010). The competitors for energy resources and political influence in Central Asia include, among others, Pakistan and China, with whom New Delhi has border disputes - still unresolved. Further, geo-political realities are changing rapidly, bringing with it a cluster of challenge for New Delhi (SAM, 2007). The planned withdrawal of NATO forces in 2014 may well be the most critical challenge and perhaps a beginning of an end of India's thick presence there, because it would make more vulnerable its vital interest to attacks from anti-India forces operating in the country. The anti-India force essentially comprise - Taliban and the ISI, - well known for their deep dislike of India and have repeatedly attacked Indian interest in the past.

NATO's Diminishing Security Cover

The declared purpose of NATO's presence in Afghanistan is to assist the Afghan government in exercising and extending its authority across the country and creating a secure environment which will pave the way for critical reconstruction and effective governance and hence its name - "International Security Assistance force" (ISAF). To be more concrete, NATO's objectives include (a) conducting stability and security operations; (b) training, equipping and mentoring Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF); (c) supporting Afghan government in disarming illegally armed groups; (d) facilitating the management of Afghan National Army ammunition depots; (e) providing humanitarian assistance; (f) supporting reconstruction needs such as rehabilitation of schools, medical facilities, restoring water supplies and support for other civil-military projects; and (g) supporting Afghan government and other international agencies' counter-narcotics efforts.

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As on 18th October 2011 there were approximately 130,638 military personnel deployed as part of ISAF from 49 contributing nations. The US is largest contributing nation with about 99,000 security personnel followed by UK, France, Germany, Italy, and Australia. With such thick expanse of NATO's security cover New Delhi operated with considerable ease and opened up several regional consulates. It was chiefly so because India had a very small contingent of its own security personnel. Noteworthy is the fact that India was the only non-NATO member who has taken and continues to take, the most effective advantage of the time and re-established its foot-prints in that country. Moreover, it recently concluded a strategic security pact with Kabul with vivid military orientation.

NATO Foreign Ministers in the meanwhile reached an agreement on a common roadmap for progressive security transition to Afghan authorities, beginning in late 2010. Accordingly, the plan for transition was agreed at the security conference in Kabul on 20 July 2010. A communiqué that was released reads: "that the Afghan National Security Forces should lead and conduct military operations in all provinces by the end of 2014" clearly setting the time-frame for NATO troop reduction. A number of countries have also set their own specific timetables for withdrawing forces, in consonance with 'the Time Table for Security Transition'. The US review of strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, for instance states: "As a result of our integrated efforts in 2010, we are setting the conditions to begin transition to Afghan security lead in early 2011 and to begin a responsible, condition-based US troop reduction in July 2011". President Obama laid out his plan for withdrawal in an address to the nation, on 22 June 2011 and said that the drawdown of US forces in Afghanistan would begin in July – 10,000 troops will be withdrawn by the end of 2011, with a further 23,000 withdrawn by summer 2012. He also added that: "After this initial reduction, our troop will continue coming home at a steady pace as Afghan security forces move into the lead. Our mission will change from combat to support. By 2014, this process of transition will be complete, and the Afghan people will be responsible for their own security" (CRS, 2012).

India's Interests in Afghanistan

At the outset, it is important to remind ourselves that India is the only functioning democracy and emerging economy of some consequence in the region and hence nurses a desire of establishing its writ all over the extended neighborhood. And its maneuvers in Afghanistan are an integral part of this ambitious desire of dominance (Melanie, 2009; Mohan, 2006). There is however several compelling reasons exerting pressure on New Delhi's external policy - the boiling question of Jammu and Kashmir with Pakistan is one such reason exerting pressure (Lamb, 1993). Simply put, there are discernible motivating factors behind India's Afghan journey, namely –

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national security, energy security and geo-strategic compulsion;, besides democracy/human rights. Let's consider these factors in some detail.

The prime concern which motivates New Delhi's actions and response in Afghanistan is national security (Subhash, 2010). Firstly, India considers Afghanistan a close neighbor with whom it had historical ties – political, economic and cultural - and therefore sees no reason behind keeping its relations constrained or suspended. Moreover it believes that good relations with Kabul suit the national interests best. If any of its neighbors (read Pakistan) attempts to put constraints on developing good relations, New Delhi perceives them as morally wrong. Islamabad's objections about the nature and extent of its relations with Afghanistan therefore are squarely rubbished, in no uncertain terms. In other words, New Delhi is not doing any strange thing by substantiating ties with Kabul but abetting mutual prosperity. Moreover it believes that there is immense desire and political will wanting to rekindle good relations with India and Afghans look for support - financial, educational, diplomatic etc. (Mariet, 2010). Additionally, friendly government there could also act as transit-route to extract resources from central Asian republics. India in fact has emerged as an educational destination for young Afghans for professional/technical pursuits - comparatively affordable and welcoming.

Thirdly, New Delhi has been facing a determined threat to territorial integrity from Islamist militants that operate from safe heavens in Pakistan/Afghanistan. This is the most worrying factor which could potentially threaten the national interest. The weak political environment and interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs by outsiders - actively encouraged and greased by Islamabad - has been a lifeline of militant groups there. All militant groups may not be exclusively working against India, but they perceive India's regional maneuvers constituting a challenge to their cultural project. India continues to endure militant violence in J&K and elsewhere, as a consequence. Furthermore, sad social, economic and educational conditions of Indian Muslims, communal violence against them, and disenchantment among young Muslims - are often cited as reasons behind India being targeted by radical Islamists. Threat from Islamist militants, operating from across the border constitutes one of the most influential variables affecting India's regional behavior. The ruling elites have consistently therefore maintained that friendly relation with Kabul is an imperative, no longer an option.

The second motivating factor of New Delhi's Afghan journey is energy security (Devika, 2010). Presently unfolding Indian growth story considerably depends on as to how growing energy requirements are met - crude oil, natural gas, coal etc. Given regional disturbances in West Asia, where she imports most of her energy requirements from, and its desire therefore to explore new avenues elsewhere New Delhi looks at central Asian region as supplier-

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alternative. And interestingly, Afghanistan is geographically so situated that it could act a critical-transit-route. Kabul is also aware of its geopolitical significance and expressed desire to act as such, if benefit occurs to both. The scientific-technological expertise that New Delhi inherits from its vast base of industry-military establishment enable her to offer a comparable advantage, which is not otherwise easily available to Afghanistan as well as to many central Asian landlocked countries. Often these mutually enforcing benefits do drive the currents in the region, particularly between New Delhi and several Central Asian regimes. Equally important is the fact that, Afghan territory itself is believed to contain substantial energy raw. For New Delhi therefore establishing and nurturing good relations with Kabul is an imperative, directly linked with its economic rise. New Delhi in fact has been trying very hard to widen the ties with key Central Asian Countries with offers of educational, scientific and industrial sops, in exchange for assured access to energy exploration/extraction. Any ties with Central Asian Countries without comparable friendly ties with Kabul render such efforts constrained, leading to partial realization of benefits.

The next motivating factor of New Delhi's Afghan journey is geo-strategic (Tennyson, 2011). This is a compelling variable having express bang on India's global standing. Due to commercial, political and strategic reasons, Central Asia has long emerged on world stage as resource rich bastion unexplored; and the world powers have consistently taken interest there. The Soviet Block's iron hold on Central Asian Republics and their dependence for defence, socialistic development, (in the last six decades) on Soviet protection/assistance illustrate its significance for global power projection. Now an earnest desire of the US to pursue good relations with key Central Asian Republics is similarly an indication of their growing centralization in world politics (Stephen, 2008). The contemporary Central Asia however is not eyed by the superpowers alone but regional big brothers too are in the race – China, India, Pakistan, and Iran. In fact, a chess-game is being played by all these countries (Renaud, 2010).

Given the involvement of Pakistan and China in particular, New Delhi has been watching developments closely. It believes that due to border disputes with Beijing and Islamabad and consequent ups-and-downs in their relations, China and Pakistan can close the ranks easily. India would therefore ill afford turning blind eye towards what transpires in Central Asia and have kicked off multi-facet strategy - weaving friendly net with regional republics (FPRCJ, 2010). New Delhi has also made it plain the desire of going along with any player, desirous of making resource exploration and extraction a top priority. Moreover, Pakistan's growing involvement in the region with Chinese blessings is causing alarms because of Pakistan's known desire of seeking strategic space via Afghanistan (Rahman). It affects India's security adversely. Compressing and containing Pakistan's influence over Central Asia in general

and in Afghanistan in particular has therefore been New Delhi's game-plan and it is one the critical objectives of its Afghan journey (Singh, 2006).

The last and equally significant motivating factor of New Delhi's Afghan journey is spreading democracy and culture of human rights. There is actually no articulated position on promotion of democracy as one of the components of foreign policy; India however has attempted serious efforts in democratization process in Nepal recently. New Delhi has always expressed the desire of seeing democratic forces rise in the neighborhood particularly in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. This is so, in spite of India being repeatedly singled out for undermining democracy and violating human rights of its citizens (in J&K, North Eastern for instance) by several agencies. Yet, New Delhi not only boasts its democratic governance but also parades proudly a desire of seeing democratic systems and culture of human rights spread across the neighbourhood. In fact, supporting and encouraging moderate socio-political forces in neighboring countries, particularly in Sri-Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, for instance has been the long acknowledged component of regional policy. Given New Delhi's own successful experiments on democracy and the benefits it offers, it genuinely believes that it is more fruitful to deal with democratically elected regime than those self-anointed military-led and or military-controlled ones. There is no doubt that after its rise as an emerging economic power house, India has shown keen desire to add adherence to democratic systems of governance, liberal economy and respect for human rights, as one of the critical guiding principles of its foreign policy. The nature and content of India's Afghan journey is an accumulated result of these factors, that aim to cushion its interest.

Advantage Pakistan?

As we have pointed out earlier for security perspective, Pakistan and its behavior around Afghanistan is of extreme significance for New Delhi. It moreover has been a victim of insurgency, sabotage, and terrorism, aided and abetted by Pakistan security establishment. Almost all organized Islamists operating from across the border and fanning trouble in Kashmir and elsewhere constitute a serious threat to its national security. A striking, none the less, is a fact that Pakistan has suffered military defeats by the hands of India in 1964, 1972 and 1999 and perceptibly believes that India does wish her dismemberment and it could someday over-run Pakistan if not comprehensively deterred. Moreover Islamabad has justified its nuclear weapons program, as a part of the deterrence against India's conventional superiority.

Equally significant is the fact that Pakistan has responded to perceived threats from India by propounding a security doctrine of "First Strike" with nuclear arsenal (Mansoor, 2012), besides projecting Afghanistan as a 'strategic-depth'

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territory (Qandeel, 2011). Here, we analytically explore the later element (strategic-depth) and not the former (nuclear first strike) since it is beyond the scope of this paper. Afghanistan Strategic-depth territory means - securing political and strategic leverage over Afghanistan and use that territory as a tactical retreating ground for Pakistani forces, in the event of an existential threat. According to Islamabad an existential threat emanates from India and it has left with no other option but secure Afghan territory as a retreating ground. Guided by such strategic calculus Islamabad has been trying to influence political formations in Afghanistan and successfully installed a rag-tag Taliban, after Soviet Russia withdrew its forces from Afghanistan in mid 1990s. The US however removed Taliban from power when it came under attack on 9/11 by those who enjoyed shelter in Afghanistan. Pakistan did not abandon Afghan as strategic-depth territory though. What had none the less changed were political realities, not the ground rules. Ground rules, for Pakistan, were the same, as before – securing substantial leverage over political formations in Afghanistan and thereby seeking qualified stake in its future. Things however did not unfold as Islamabad had originally conceived – re-storing Afghanistan with West's backing, minus Indian involvement. Islamabad thought this would lend Afghan territory and political dispensation in Kabul as obedient proxy, furthering its national interest. Noteworthy here is the fact that India is to be kept out of Afghanistan.

As soon as the West occupied Afghanistan and declared an intention of securing democratic future for it, New Delhi welcomed it and promised all possible support for reconstruction effort. For the purpose, the West sought active cooperation from neighboring countries. India was better placed to serve the purpose because of its known democratic/secular credentials, which the wider world has been lauding. For India most significant factor that came extremely handy was the NATO security cover thrown all across Afghanistan. Under it New Delhi expanded the strategic/diplomatic entrenchment, mounted on the back of developmental initiative. Since NATO has now started withdrawing the force, India is worried that its interests would be exposed to attacks from Taliban and Hakkani groups - Islamabad's patronized assets (Jeffery, 2010). Islamabad moreover now re-energizes old networks with radicals, on account of thin presence of western forces around. This would definitely make New Delhi revisit its current as well as future engagements in Afghanistan.

Challenges to Indian Interests

It is clear, from above analysis that India faces a huge challenge of “security-deficit” and the moot point is how it surmounts that deficit? More importantly, where does India go from here? The Indian projects and personnel laboring on them will undoubtedly be more prone to hostile attacks. The ongoing drawdown of NATO would certainly hasten risks to Indian interest. The

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NATO's shrinking security umbrella interestingly shall not be compensated by any other comparable force. The Afghan Army which is poised to take over from NATO may not necessarily fill the vacuum. Afghan Taliban has on the other hand, consistently demonstrated the ability to re-group, re-energize, in a quickest time; and no target is beyond their reach. Increasing Taliban attacks on Western interests do suggest trouble ahead. In view of Pakistan's determined effort to seek friendly political dispensation in Kabul coupled with West's weakness to carry peace agenda forward, India would have protect its projects and personnel, on its own. The old and trusted friends of India – Northern Alliance and non-Pashtun factions have not unfortunately demonstrated matching unity and desire to take on resurgent Taliban-Haqqani nexus, in spite of NATO, Delhi, and Iran affording them every possible material help to fight off Taliban/Al-Qaida offensives.

Increasing Pakistani involvement in Afghan affairs and its proven leverage over anti-India war-lords there is extremely worrying for New Delhi. Not just because of its projects and large number of personnel stationed in Afghanistan but it can also boost violence in Indian Kashmir. Given fragile peace in Indian Kashmir, militancy may again raise its ugly head and bring back bitter memories of daily violence. Moreover, the external elements (militants) would more aggressively campaign cause of independent Kashmir - pointing out abuses being committed by Indian security establishment and killing hundreds of civilians. The regional/global media have also been, to New Delhi's discomfort, extensively covering Kashmir. It is no known that socio-politically instable Afghanistan can easily fall pray to nefarious designs by militants and would produce domino effects in other parts of the region. New Delhi knows too well that whenever Islamabad interferes in Afghanistan's internal affairs, Kashmir not merely boils but spills over dangerously. For New Delhi, contain effects of NATO's shrinking security cover in Afghanistan would indeed be a real challenge.

Besides, India may also have to mitigate ill-effects of growing radicalization of Muslims across the border in Pakistan/Afghanistan, because it may radicalize Muslims in India too – there are more Muslims in India than Pakistan. Muslims constitute about 17% of total population - around 160 million. It has now officially established that Muslims in India do face “double- discrimination”. Educationally, economically and politically they are the most backward social segment. This is a result of system embedded discrimination, than often alleged cultural reason. Moreover, violence - both structural and societal, regularly breaks out against Muslims. The Hindu radicalized nationalists are the known perpetrators. Demonizing Muslims, Islam and its symbols is what Hindu radicals love the most. In fact, wherever communal violence occur, singling out Muslims, the law enforcer round up Muslim youths on flimsy ground and lock them up for years. Targeting Muslim places of worship and worshiper seems to be the emerging pattern of Hindu radicals. The cumulative

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effect of all this is profound 'alienation' and disenchantment among religious minorities - Muslims and Christians in particular. Condition of Muslims is so pathetic that they now live in filthy ghettos, dotting towns/cities across the length and breadth of India - inadequately serviced and poorly represented, across the spectrum –political, administrative both. The radical Islamists operating from Pakistan/Afghanistan conceive as a proof of Hindu India suppressing Muslims; and it is their religious duty to rescue them. Several terrorist incidents in India (main targets being the Hindus) are said to be handy work of Islamists and retaliatory in nature. If not handled with care can destabilize India. Whenever Afghanistan becomes free-for-all, terrorist activities in India swell – causing palpable alarms in the corridors of power. For India, containing ill-effects of religiously radicalized neighborhood is a long term challenge.

Instability in South Asia

India's prospective preferable pathways to overcome security deficit resulting from NATO's drawdown notwithstanding, South Asia would remain instable and un-peaceful, in the short run. Chiefly because the key states – India and Pakistan - do not at the moment enjoy normal relationship. Their relationship has been on-again-and-off-again affairs producing huge disappointment among regional and global peace seekers. Strictly speaking, New Delhi and Islamabad has been locked in a fierce battle over a territorial dispute of Kashmir. What is more, the global powers aren't actively pursuing peace in the region, owing to self-serving geo-politics and geo-economics. So long as this continues South Asia bound to remain as troubled as ever.

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