
India's Role And Interests In Afghanistan

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Introduction

India and Afghanistan has shared time-tested historical, cultural and political connections. Prior to the partition of Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan was a neighbour of undivided India and had a history of close contacts with Indian people and vice versa. The close relationship dates back to the days of Gandhara civilisation which flourished on the border regions of India and Afghanistan between 6 BC and 11 AD.¹ During the British rule, Afghanistan was made a buffer state between British India and Russian Empire. Conflicts with Pakistan over the Pakhtunistan issue and preference for a non-aligned foreign policy measure brought Afghanistan closer to India during King Zahir Shah and Daoud's regime. However, Indo-Afghan friendship was marred by a number of factors. India maintained silence

over the Pakhtoonistan issue in the international forums where the non-aligned Afghanistan needed its support against a common adversary, Pakistan. India's relationship with Pakistan though strained, both had many common problems to solve. Nehru-Liaquat pact was a step in that direction. Thus, India did not want to estrange Pakistan by supporting Afghanistan on the Pakhtoonistan issue. In response to India's silence over Pakhtoonistan issue, Afghanistan maintained neutrality during the Indo-Chinese border clash and Indo-Pak wars in 1965 and 1971.² This was the larger context of Indo-Afghan relationship on the eve of the Soviet Intervention of Afghanistan in 1979.

India's role in Afghanistan after Soviet intervention

During the Soviet intervention, India's response was shaped more

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by the need to continue good relationship with Soviet Union than to understand the problems and concerns of a neighbour with which it shared historical and cultural ties. During the decade-long stay in Afghanistan on the part of Soviet Union, no serious attempt was made by foreign policy makers in India to explain its policy or even to establish contact with the Mujahideen groups. It was believed that Afghanistan would be pacified by Soviet military forces. India's initial response to the Soviet military and massive intervention in Afghanistan reflected domestic political confusion arising out of the transition from the first non-Congress regime to the re-emergence of Mrs. Gandhi.³ The then Prime Minister Charan Singh strongly opposed the Soviet intervention and therefore India's permanent representative at the United Nations was asked to regret the intervention and seek its withdrawal from Afghanistan. On Indira Gandhi's assumption of power in January 1980, this stance was significantly revised. "Without being critical of the Soviet Union publicly, she supported the Afghan revolutionary leadership and urged them to appreciate the need for Soviet withdrawal over a period of time".⁴ However, such a measured policy was construed by western media and various analysts as pro-Soviet. Being

a leader of the Non-Aligned movement, India was expected to oppose any intervention in another non-aligned country.

Soviet Intervention

Relationship between Soviet Union and India had developed to a point of closeness and cooperation by the end of 1970s that few other major countries of the Third World had achieved. For India, the USSR served as a crucial bulwark against Pakistan and as a counterweight to both China and the US. the USSR could hardly have had a better Third World ally than India to work with against expansionist designs of Chinese or American influence or to represent claims of Soviet global power.⁵

Soviet intervention in Afghanistan came up as a challenge for India to maintain a vital strategic relationship with the USSR while not affecting its credentials as a leader of the Non-Aligned movement. It was a situation repugnant to India's historic foreign policy principles. Though New Delhi opposed outside interference in the internal affairs of one country by another, it was equally alarmed by the danger of arms race in the region. Despite US attempts to persuade the Indians that any new arms for Pakistan was only meant to contain the Soviet intervention along

Pakistan's borders, India saw the move as a threat. The Foreign Office stated that it was "the Government of India's earnest hope that no country or external power would take the steps which might aggravate the situation."⁶

India expressed its displeasure on military intervention to Soviet Union in clear terms through bilateral discussions. Mrs. Gandhi refused to accept any of the explanations forwarded by the Soviet side to justify their intervention and instead asked them to create conditions for early withdrawal. She herself told this to the Soviet leader Brezhnev in Moscow in December 1980 and in September 1982. On the other hand, during the same regime, Indian Ambassador B. C. Mishra remained silent at the United Nations when the issue came before the Security Council at the request of the US and 51 other states, including some from the nonaligned group. India's silence sent a wave of shock particularly among the Western observers who had expected India's support against the Soviet action. That India was not completely supporting Moscow, however, became apparent in the vote on the resolution when India joined 17 other countries in abstaining while the resolution passed was overwhelmingly, 104 to 18. To a considerable extent, the US

side was aware of India's strong reservation on Soviet intervention and continuing presence in Afghanistan. President Carter publicly acknowledged that India's position on the Afghanistan issue was positive and that India was not endorsing the intervention.⁷

The Soviet intervention and presence in Afghanistan had provided a legitimacy for the US and Pakistani interference in Afghanistan which created difficulties in securing Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. It had reinforced military alliance between the US and Pakistan resulting into a massive supply of economic and military support to Pakistan as a frontline state. The hi-tech military weapons supplied to Pakistan, like the F-16 and AWACS, resulted in tilting the regional military balance to Pakistan's advantage. Even China had joined the anti-Soviet front in Afghanistan, resulting into a reinforced Sino-US-Pak alliance. Another important threat to regional security in general and a security threat to India in particular was the emergence and rise of Islamic militant groups propped up by the alliance in its anti-soviet operations. It is a well known fact that the rise of Islamic militancy subsequently vitiated peace in India, particularly in the state of Jammu and Kashmir.⁸

Soviet Union tried to shape India's perception regarding the role of anti-soviet front in a desired direction. The Soviets were quick to point out to the new Indian government headed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi the direct threat the US and China presented to India. "Washington is again providing Pakistan with sophisticated weapons which can be turned against India at any moment, building up its fleet in the Indian Ocean, and expanding its base on Diego Garcia. The United States' Chinese friends continue to train and arm saboteurs recruited from among separatists in the northeastern states of India, seeking to use them to destabilise the political situation in the country and eventually gain control of some Indian regions. Peking has not yet returned the 36, 000 square kilometers of territory it seized from India."⁹

The USSR defended India's stance in the Non-Aligned movement, particularly its compromise position on Afghanistan by warning India of the designs of American "imperialist" and Chinese "hegemonist" forces to split India and the USSR apart. The Soviet rhetoric supporting the movement and India's stance on the Afghan issue in the meeting of the non-aligned foreign ministers in New Delhi in February 1981 was intended

to allay Indian fears of drifting from the "mainstream" of the movement.

Leonid Brezhnev brought with him a number of inducements during his visit to India to get India's support on the issue of Afghanistan. One was the agreement for Soviet assistance in the implementation of a broad range of projects totaling over 40 billion rupees in India's next five-year plan. There were also reports that Brezhnev's delegation had furthered the negotiations on the supply of the MiG-25, and the Indian Air Force would be getting the first lot shortly. The most important inducement that Soviet Union had to offer India was to raise the USSR's crude oil supplies by one million tons per year. For India, which had been scrambling for new sources of oil since the conflict had erupted between Iran and Iraq, who together provided almost 70 per cent of India's oil imports, this was an agreement of tremendous importance. However, the disintegration of the USSR subsequently put India's energy driven policy in jeopardy leading to engagement with a number of politically volatile states.

India's ambiguous response to Afghan issue pushed her in different directions which did not allow India to play a meaningful role in the settlement of the issue. It was seen

identifying with the Soviet Union and pro-soviet Kabul regime though it made its displeasure clear regarding the Soviet intervention in the bilateral discussions. In the multilateral body like the UN, it either abstained or maintained silence. This distanced it from the dominant international anti-soviet front that was more interested in pushing the Soviets out rather than ensuring a stable and politically independent Afghanistan. India, on the other hand, was interested in a neutral and stable Afghanistan. Pakistan, the principal member of the anti-soviet front was extremely active in keeping India out of any important process of negotiations involving Afghanistan. India's role was further curtailed by the fact that it did not share a direct border with Afghanistan. The formula that was generally worked out to select the countries to participate in the process of negotiations included great powers and the close neighbours. India did not fit in either of the categories in the negotiations carried out under the UN auspices. However, it kept in touch with the negotiations through the Afghan regime in Kabul and the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the real parties in the Afghan conflict were the two super powers.

The Geneva Accords

The UN sponsored talks on

Afghanistan initiated in late 1986 eventually led to Geneva accords. These accords were signed by the two super powers with the Afghan regime and Pakistan in 1988. Under these accords, the Soviet military forces were to complete their withdrawal from Afghanistan by February 1989. India kept in touch with the Kabul regime and the USSR on the question of Soviet withdrawal. After the Soviet troops had left Afghanistan with several mujahideen commanders competing to reach the centre-stage of Afghan politics, India, according to J. N. Dixit¹⁰ followed a three-pronged policy course: one, to maintain contact with the leaders of all groups including Sibghatullah Mojadadi, Burhanuddin Rabbani, Gulbuddin Hekmetyar and Rashid Dostam so that eventually it could deal with whosoever came to power; Second to continue to provide assistance in the economic and public health spheres to the extent feasible; and the third, to explore possibilities, in collaboration with states like Russia and Iran, in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan.

Afghan President Najibullah visited India in December 1987 and again in May 1988, to keep Indian leaders informed about important developments. India began to prepare itself to deal with the post-

Soviet developments with the beginning of negotiations on the Geneva accords. It established contacts with the leaders, not only of the Kabul regime, but also with all possible other Afghan groups, including anti-soviet Mujahideen guerrilla leaders. The erstwhile Minister of State for External Affairs, Natwar Singh even went to Paris to talk to the former Afghan King Zahir Shah, assuming that he could have a role to play in uniting various factions in the interest of a stable and neutral Afghanistan.¹¹ In their regular contacts with the Kabul regime, Indian leaders pleaded for the accommodation of some of the guerrilla leaders in the new power sharing arrangement. But the problems that subsequently emerged not only lacked consensus on the issue of sharing power with the guerrilla leaders but also the issue of balanced ethnic representation and the stakes of external forces.

Najibullah Phase

India worked with the Najibullah government to see if a political consensus among all the representative Afghan groups could be evolved to ensure a peaceful and stable transition from the Soviet period. India refused to back any of the warring factions. But due to its ambiguous stance during the Soviet

intervention, its role was increasingly seen as pro-Najibullah regime. For example, Mujaddedi, a leader of the Islamic Interim Council warned India against any intervening role when they were battling the government forces in Jalalabad, near Pakistan's border in March 1989. The new government headed by V. P. Singh toed the same line as the previous governments to maintain neutrality on the Afghan issue and help in the reconciliation process to ensure a stable government in Afghanistan. India's interest in a stable and politically neutral Afghanistan was always at stake as Pakistan consistently supported mujahideen group led by Gulbudin Hekmatyar. India was denied such a role because of its perceived pro-Soviet role during the Soviet intervention. Even after the Soviet withdrawal, India continued its support for the Najibullah government which was characterised by the visit of the latter to New Delhi in August 1990 and signing an agreement on Prevention of Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs.¹² The gradually intensifying conflict in Afghanistan made it difficult for India to maintain its image as a friendly neighbour in the eyes of new forces in Afghanistan. Since 1992, the conflict around Kabul and other major Afghan cities intensified forcing India to frequently close down its

diplomatic mission and aid disbursing agencies. The humanitarian assistance and relief supplies that India provided to Afghanistan had to be routed through the UN Coordinating Agencies. India found it difficult and politically risky to provide any military assistance to the Kabul regime which came under increased pressure with the rise of the Taliban.¹³

Taliban Phase

India's foreign policy received a setback with the Taliban capturing Kabul on 27 September 1996. This marked the dominance of Pakistan in Afghanistan and the rising influence of Islamic extremist forces. India had failed to provide adequate support to the anti-Taliban forces and was not in a position to rescue the former Afghan President Najibullah from being murdered by the Taliban. India was asked by the Taliban to revise its Afghan policy and abstain from interfering in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. Given the quick change in the government in India, it continued to recognise the Rabbani government and deal with it despite the fact that the Taliban were making significant advances in extending their sway in Afghanistan. India, at the same time, tried to establish direct contacts with the Commanders of the Northern Alliance, Ahmed Shah

Masood on the Panjshir valley side and Rashid Dostum on the Mazar-e-Sharif side. India provided the Northern Alliance with humanitarian assistance. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs reports provided the details of humanitarian assistance given to the Northern Alliance and the problems related to their supply.¹⁴ However, New Delhi later revealed that it had supplied the Northern Alliance military hardware worth around 8 million US dollars, and military advisors and helicopter technicians to maintain Soviet-made MI-17 and MI-35 attack helicopters.¹⁵

Indian Response

While it is argued that India's foreign policy moved in the right direction in Afghanistan in terms of recognising the Rabbani government and supporting the Northern Alliance but its response to the rise, expansion and consolidation of Taliban's hold over Afghanistan with direct Pakistani backing remained inadequate. In this context, an analyst asked the Indian policy makers to work with "Russia and the CIS states" in providing substantial material assistance to the forces resisting the Taliban. India, on the other hand, believed that there could be no military solution to the Afghan crisis. The seven point policy outline contained in the Indian Prime

Minister I.K. Gujral's statement clearly said that "we fully support the efforts of the United Nations Secretary General...a cessation of arms supply to Afghanistan is required".¹⁶

India was handicapped by a number of factors to pursue a successful policy in Afghanistan. First, like Pakistan it does not have a contiguous border with Afghanistan. Therefore, it faced the logistic constraint of not having direct access to Afghanistan. Secondly, India believed in the resilience of Northern Alliance and supported it whereas the Taliban were occupying one major city after another. Thirdly, India was getting diplomatically marginalised both in the regional and international context. As the American and Pakistani interests converged in promoting the Taliban as factor of stability to find an outlet for the Central Asian energy resources to the world market through Afghanistan and Pakistan, Pakistan was assured of a better position in the future negotiations by the US and the EU. Pakistani diplomacy succeeded in keeping India out of the UN meetings by insisting on the "major powers and neighbours" formula for participation. This is how India was kept out of the 6+2 group on Afghanistan.¹⁷

Given the overwhelming success of the Taliban in Afghanistan, India showed willingness to adjust with the Taliban only if it could distance itself from Pakistan. The landing of the hijacked Indian plane (IC 814) in Kandahar in December 1999 created a compulsive situation for Indian authorities to establish direct contacts with the Taliban. There were media reports that the erstwhile India's Minister of External Affairs, Jaswant Singh who accompanied the Pakistani militants to be released for the safe return of the hijacked passengers was willing to discuss the establishment of diplomatic ties between India and the Taliban. However, the Taliban never severed their links with the Pakistani establishment and the intelligence and India stopped short of establishing diplomatic ties with the Taliban.¹⁸

Diplomats like M. K. Bhadrakumar argue that India by taking an anti-Taliban stance has hindered its interests in Afghanistan and instead pandered to the western interests. He writes "overlooking the indigenous roots of a homegrown movement was always injudicious".¹⁹ According to him, it was 1997-98 that India probably began sliding into a strategic mistake by regarding Afghanistan as a theatre of India-Pakistan rivalry. This was a reversal

of the Indian policy, which was best evident during the 1992-95 period when despite overtures from the Mujahideen, the Narasimha Rao government stubbornly refused to get involved in any form in Afghanistan's fratricidal strife.²⁰

India's Interests and Role in Afghanistan after the Soviet Disintegration

India and Pakistan, both wanted to exercise influence in Afghanistan. It is argued that just when Indo-Pak relations held promise of improvement, both sacrificed the imperative of permanent good relations with the people of Afghanistan.²¹ The Taliban in 1990s were promoted and strengthened by Pakistan as an instrument to protect and promote its interests in Central Asia. The secular government of Benazir Bhutto found in Taliban the best means to stabilize Afghanistan and exploit the geopolitical situation arising out of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and emergence of landlocked independent Central Asian Republics.

In an interview, the Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told Rahimullah Yusufzai "the Lashkar has no presence in Afghanistan and we have no links with it. Unlike the Lashker which is focussed on Jammu

and Kashmir, the Afghan Taliban concentrate on Afghanistan. We have never taken part in any attack in India, nor do we attack anyone at Pakistan's behest."²² He further said, "whenever we attacked the Indian embassy in Kabul or its consulates, we claimed responsibility. Last month's attack was also carried out by the Taliban fighters after we got intelligence information that RAW agents were holding a meeting there. The Taliban are not in any direct conflict with India. Indian troops are not part of NATO forces, they have not occupied Afghanistan. India and Afghanistan have had historic ties".²³ What Mujahid said, may not be completely true, yet it shows how India's or Pakistan's strategy in Afghanistan and beyond it into Central Asia is not simply outsourcing of their bilateral dispute of Kashmir and they are largely independent strategies very often getting blurred. So far, no Afghan regime in Kabul including the Taliban had taken any particular posture of challenging India's position on the Kashmir issue.²⁴

The disintegration of the USSR came as a shock to India's military and economic security. However, India as a non-aligned and non-Islamic state rejected military alliances and security agreements as tools for promoting stability in

Central Asia and focused instead on bilateral economic programmes.²⁵ India's special relationship with the Soviet Union provided New Delhi with existing economic links and a lively trade with the Central Asian republics. India provided a large, urban, educated elite, fluent in English, a functional Anglo-Saxon judicial system, industry and management based on Western lines with established and vibrant stock market to the Central Asian states who were converting to a market economy. The fact that there exist no overland routes between India and Central Asia as between them lie the Afghan and Pakistani territory and air transit is costly which has hampered trade. India's efforts in Afghanistan to construct a road linking Iran Afghanistan, and Central Asia to bypass Pakistan, would go a long way in improving trade with India. Pakistan never allowed Indian goods to travel into Afghanistan and beyond through its territory.²⁶ Central Asia currently is not only a hub of natural resources but it also provides a market of 200 million people.

The close relationship with the Soviet Union, symbolised by the Treaty of Friendship, Peace and Cooperation signed in August 1971, provided India with privileged access to the region. An observer remarked

that during the Soviet era, Central Asia was "the non-visible farther side of the moon", and that India was "perhaps the only non-communist country which could gain glimpses of this hidden side of the Soviet Union at that time".²⁷ However, the entire scenario changed with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Pakistan, India, Iran, China and the US began to spread their influence in the region through strategies of cooperation and confrontation.

Pakistan's Role

Pakistan viewed the transitional phase in Afghanistan as the most suitable period to expand its influence through the use of Islam. The fact that Central Asian states are predominantly populated by Muslims bordering on Afghanistan makes them susceptible to radical Islamic ideas. India's fear stemmed from instability in Central Asia characterised by border realignment, ethnic disputes, resurgent Islam and civil war. In New Delhi's perception this would allow Pakistan to spread its influence via Afghanistan through Islamic radical groups. Moreover, it would create a network of illegal drug and arms trade which would in turn affect India's interests in Kashmir. Pakistan has also tried to spread its influence through multilateral bodies like Economic Cooperation

Organisation and Organisation of Islamic States²⁸. In order to contain Pakistan's influence in Central Asia, India tried to strengthen relationship with each of the Central Asian states and with Iran. In Afghanistan, it supported the Northern Alliance as an antidote to the Taliban.

Energy resources available in Central Asia have attracted many regional and extra-regional power to invest in production, transfer and consumption of the resources. Central Asia is an alternative destination for energy-seeking countries which depended on unstable Persian Gulf for energy resources. Many countries wanted to reduce their dependence on Persian Gulf because of growing instability and monopoly over production and supply of energy resources.²⁹ India is one country among them. Some of the conservative estimates put the oil reserves at 7 per cent and gas at 8 per cent of global reserves. One of the Indian policy advisors at the Confederation of Indian Industry said, "energy is the most critical imperative, and the most critical link in the strategic linkages that India is trying to build with Central Asia".³⁰

According to the International Energy Outlook, India was the fifth largest oil consumer in 2007 and its demand grew to almost 3 million

barrels per day in 2008. At present, 68 per cent of its oil is imported, and its dependency on oil imports is expected to increase to 92 per cent by 2020. Afghanistan provides access to the vast energy resources and attractive markets of the Central Asian region. India's Central Asian strategy not only aimed at containing Pakistan's growing influence in the region, it has also shown its intention to respond to the great power diplomacy. For example, Phunchok Stobdan, former director of the Indian Cultural Centre, once suggested that the US's growing presence in the region "forms a compelling reason for India's reclaiming its geopolitical rights and responsibilities in Central Asia". India's competition with China for Central Asian resources is echoed by the statement made by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. He says, "China is ahead of us in planning for its energy security. India can no longer be complacent".³¹

India's Concerns

India's energy interests and its interests in Kashmir faced insecurities in the growth of terrorism, drug trafficking, illegal arms and crime syndicates in Afghanistan and Central Asian region. Pakistan tried to promote its geopolitical interests through radical

Islamic groups raising funds from drug trafficking and illegal arms trade whereas these groups have their independent plans to spread their influences in the Central Asian heartland. To consolidate their position there is every possibility that they play on the grievances of their co-religionists in the surrounding regions. Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister, Abdulaziz Kamilov stated that fundamentalist Islamic organisations were training up to 400 young Uzbek and Tajik guerrillas at camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Uzbekistan accused three Pakistani organisations –Harkat-ul-Jihad, Dawt-Ul-Ershad and the Islamic Ulema Society of clandestinely training hundreds of Central Asians at various centres in Pakistan with the task of carrying out terrorist attacks and destabilising the countries by overthrowing the governments.³² Thus, their training in Pakistan and patronage from the Pakistani military and ISI created leverage for Pakistan to use them in Kashmir as well. However, the primary motive of Pakistan behind training these groups was to get a foothold in Central Asia by establishing pro-Pakistan regimes there. Pakistan's promotion of the Taliban was to facilitate its role in Central Asia.

Afghanistan and its northern Central Asian neighbours being

landlocked and without access to the sea incur high transportation costs. Most of the Central Asian states have an extroverted trade, that is, their trade outside the region greatly exceeds trade within the region. Afghanistan and its Central Asian neighbours need access to markets and sea either through Pakistan or Iran. However, Afghanistan's troubled transit and border relations with Pakistan being governed by the Afghan Trade and Transit Agreement of 1965 hinders Afghan trade with countries having huge economy like India. This agreement provides passage to Afghan goods between Afghan borders and seaports of Pakistan. Pakistan as a goodwill measure has allowed Afghanistan to transport some of its exports through the India-Pakistan land borders, but does not permit Indian goods into Afghanistan. Therefore, Indo-Afghan trade potential has been scuttled by the regional geopolitics where Pakistan wants to develop its ties with Afghanistan and its Central Asian neighbours at the cost of India.³³

The success of Afghan fruit and nut exports to India and India's grant of 50-100 per cent tariff concessions for Afghan exports of dried fruits, fresh fruits, seeds, medicinal herbs and precious stones under a preferential trade agreement and Afghanistan's

grant of a 100 per cent margin of preference on eight products including black tea, certain categories of medicines, refined sugar, cement clinkers and white cement bear testimony to the fact of mutual dependence between India and Afghanistan in terms of trade. In addition, Afghanistan has a rich resource base of unexplored minerals like iron, chrome, copper, silver, gold, barite, sulphur, talc, magnesium, mica, marble, lapis lazuli, asbestos, nickel, mercury, lead, zinc, bauxite, lithium and rubies. Exploitation of oil and natural gas reserves in and around Afghanistan also promises huge potential. In the 1970s, Afghanistan's natural gas reserves were estimated at about 150 billion cubic metres. In the early 1980s, natural gas exports were in the range of 2.5 – 2.8 bcm a year, and constituted its main source of export revenues. It is due to the outbreak of civil war and ensuing instability that the upstream development in this sector halted.³⁴ Recently, Indian government has shown its interest in the iron ore blocks in the Hajigak mines in Afghanistan and plans to sponsor the Steel Authority of India proposal to set up a steel plant in that country.³⁵ Stability in Afghanistan is therefore necessary for the regional powers like India and Pakistan for investment in and trade with Afghanistan and to explore the

natural resources. However, the meaning of stability differs in case of both the states. While Pakistan thinks a pro-Pakistan regime like that of the Taliban can bring stability in Afghanistan, India perceives stability in keeping them outside the Afghan government.

India perceives that a democratic and stable Afghanistan would be a key to India's influence in Central Asia. However, being denied an overland route to Afghanistan by Pakistan, India involved itself in building a road in Afghanistan that connects Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. So far, India has been dependent on Iran for its entry into Afghanistan and Central Asia. The 218 Km long Zaranj-Delaram road constructed in the remote southwestern Afghanistan provides Afghanistan access to sea-ports like Chabahar and facilitates its trade with India. It reduces Afghanistan's dependence on the port of Karachi that provided a single entry point into the world. Construction of ports and roads perform dual functions in expanding commercial and military influence. For example, the Gwadar port being constructed with the joint collaboration of China and Pakistan seeks to transfer Central Asia's vast energy resources to world markets. However, this port has been described by Pakistan's Navy Chief

as the country's third naval base after Karachi and Ormara and as an improvement in Pakistan's deep-sea water defence.³⁶ China's interests in the port are to diversify and secure its crude oil import routes and to extend its presence in the Indian Ocean. In response to Pakistani and Chinese strategies in the Indian Ocean, India and Iran signed "Road Map to Strategic Cooperation"³⁷ during President Mohammed Khatami's January 2003 visit to India. India agreed to assist Iran in constructing the Chabahar port and road links between Iran, Afghanistan, and northward to Tajikistan.

To get to the natural resources of Central Asia, major powers developed a continental strategy based on military power projection and use of ideology. Military power projection was required both for minimising the role of other powers and for a secured production and supply of natural resources. Terrorism, ethnic conflicts, civil wars and illegal drug and arms trade required military strategies in the region to put these forces at bay. As part of its intention to increase its military role in Central Asia, India developed military cooperation with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. For example, in 2004, Uzbekistan was commissioned by the Indian Air Force Mid-Air-

Refuelling Squadron to build three giant IL-78 MKI refuellers. Kazakhstan signed a military cooperation agreement with India in 2002 for joint production of military hardware such as torpedoes and heavy machine gun barrels.³⁸ In August 2002, New Delhi announced that it would help train the newly formed Afghan army and contribute to the maintenance of its Russian built military equipment. This prompted General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan to warn India to 'lay off' the region. But New Delhi did not take any notice of it. In May 2001, India had already offered Tajikistan a US \$ 5 million grant. One year later it established its first military base outside Indian territory, in southern Tajikistan.³⁹

India's Contribution

India, in order to expand its influence in Afghanistan and beyond into the Central Asian steppes has become one of the largest bilateral donors to reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. By the end of 2008, India became the fifth largest bilateral donor country after US, Japan, UK and Germany, having pledged US \$750 million, committed US\$701.67 million and disbursed US\$204.26 million in diverse areas, including infrastructure, communications, education, health care, social

welfare, training of officials, including diplomats and policemen, economic development and institution-building. These are the sectors which have been identified by the Afghan government as priority areas of development. India's aid is channeled through the Afghan government or in conjunction with International donor.⁴⁰ Through consultations with local communities, Indian aid projects have generated tremendous goodwill among the Afghans. The augmenting economic growth in Afghanistan is critical to India's overall objective of integrating Afghanistan in the South Asian cooperative framework and reviving its role as a 'land bridge' connecting South Asia with Central Asia.⁴¹

Like the military and intelligence activities to secure influence in Afghanistan and expand it to Central Asia, ideology has merged as an important factor in the post-Cold War era. Pakistan has tried to use Islam as an ideology to gain influence in the Central Asian region which received setback with the initiatives of War on Terror. According to Simon Shen,⁴² the United States works from a platform of liberal democracy and "human rights above sovereignty", Russia offers its own idea of "sovereign democracy" to the Central Asians, and China portrays itself as a non-

interventionist "responsible state" in the region. In his view, India lacks a unique ideology to increase its influence in Central Asia. He is of the opinion that democratic values in the Indian constitution are simply regarded as another manifestation of an American constitutional prototype. And the Central Asian states already inclining towards liberal and democratic ideals would naturally be attracted to the US orbit given the American military and economic power.

India's enormous contribution to the reconstruction process in Afghanistan may be viewed as an attempt to create a different image of India. Though the US has militarily intervened in Afghanistan, it has the ideology of humanitarian intervention and democracy to its side. In the name of democracy and giving representation to various groups in Afghanistan, it has started reconciliation strategy to include the Taliban who are 'reconciliable'. Obama administration specifically mentioned that the American military operation was against Al Qaeda and not against the Taliban.⁴³ As the Taliban were assisting the Al Qaeda operators therefore they had to bear the wrath of US's military operations. Once they stopped assisting Al Qaeda and gave up violence against the US, they would

be legitimate part of any future government.

India, on the other hand, which has so far stayed away from any kind of large military role in Afghanistan and confined itself to reconstruction activities, is opposed to the inclusion of the Taliban and sees the distinction between the *good Taliban* and *bad Taliban* as a flawed exercise.

Conclusion

India's interests in Afghanistan are largely the reflection of its interests in the natural resources and emerging big market in Central Asia. India has also specific interests in Afghanistan's market and in bilateral trade. After the disintegration of the USSR, India was put to a disadvantaged position in Central Asia while Pakistan through the Taliban tried to consolidate its position in Afghanistan. India had to engage with so many independent states instead a single friendly state. Moreover, the fact that the newly emerged states are predominantly Muslim created an urgency in India to stem Pakistan's role in Afghanistan and Central Asia. To contain the Taliban's influence India supported the Northern Alliance with humanitarian and military

assistance. However, with the success of the Taliban taking control over area after area in Afghanistan, India's strategies received a set back. The War on Terror created hope for India that Pakistan's strategies in Afghanistan would fail. India has supported the US policy of maintaining territorial integrity of Pakistan. Pakistan had used Islamist proxies to undermine Afghan governments and undercut Pashtun nationalism even before the *Jihad* in the 1980s. For example, it was in 1973 that the then Prime Minister Zulifikar Ali Bhutto provided sanctuary to Islamist leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar with a view of undermining the established government in Kabul.⁴⁴ Later on, the Taliban were used to defuse Pashtun nationalism and secure an energy corridor from Central Asia. India has not taken a clear position on Pashtunistan issue which carries enormous importance for the Pashtuns. And by maintaining an ambiguous stance during the Soviet intervention, India distanced itself from the Pashtuns. India's humanitarian and military support for the Northern Alliance in the Civil War period in Afghanistan and its anti-Taliban stance invites a fresh thinking in the part of India diplomatically. ■

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