
Afghan Imbrolio Can Overlapping of Interests Fix It

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Introduction

There is a growing anxiety among the policy makers, analysts, and diplomats about the future of Afghanistan's post U.S. and NATO withdrawal. The rise of violence and the capability of Taliban to attack on will has given rise to the palpable sense of pessimism regarding the future of Afghanistan both in the West and its neighbourhood. The capability and capacity of Afghan National Army (ANA) to stem the Taliban expansion is under question. According to one report, ANA has suffered more than 9000 casualties since 2013, which is much higher than total American fatalities in Afghanistan since 2001. The desertion is very high that threatens the force's long term effectiveness. According to media reports, approximately 2 percent of its forces are going absent without leave (AWOL) and are not returning back each month.¹ There are also reports

that ANA units are striking deals with Taliban to "live and let live"². The huge challenge Afghanistan will face is funding for its 300000 forces after withdrawal. It needs annually more than \$7billion for its pay and maintenance. The United States has now other priorities which are going to consume much of its diplomatic oomph such as West Asia, Ukraine, and China. It is hard to predict the future of Afghanistan. Will Afghanistan return back to 90's of civil war? This situation is unlikely to come. Afghanistan over the last one decade has moved on. The new urban centers and all most all the stake holders are on the same page as far as territorial unity and integrity is concerned.

Can the region afford this time to neglect Afghanistan as it did in 90's? The destabilized Afghanistan will drive the whole region into its vortex. The geo-strategic location of Afghanistan makes it very important for the region. It influences or gets

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influenced by the developments in South Asia, Central Asia and West Asia. Therefore, there are so many actors involved in Afghanistan with competing interests that makes Afghanistan a ground for zero-sum game than an opportunity to work together, but in actual terms most of them are having similar interests. This paper will try to explore the areas where overlapping of interests of the region can provide an incentive to work together which in long run can address both security and economic interests of the region in general and Afghanistan in particular.

In past the overlapping of interests in Afghanistan has intensified the security dynamics of the region. Against this background, the paper attempts to outline the areas where the already overlapped interests can be transferred into "*regional security governance*".³ According to Adler and Grave, "*regional security governance is a system of rule conceived by individual and corporate actors aiming at coordinating, managing, and regulating their collective existence in response to threats to their physical and ontological security*".⁴ In short, security governance is a mechanism which comprises "*rules, norms, practices and institutions that coordinate security relations between the actors in the international system*".⁵ The pre-requisite for any such regional

security environment in Afghanistan is that the other regional actors are induced to invest both economically and diplomatically in Afghanistan. Although this process of "overlapping" was initiated by Richard Holbrooke, the then special envoy to the President Obama for Af-Pak region. Holbrooke, a veteran diplomat knew that fixing Afghanistan was not going to be easy. What Holbrooke tried best was to bring the neighbours of Afghanistan on the same table, in which he initially succeeded to a major extent.⁶ However, he was not given a complete autonomy by the White House and even Pentagon perceived him with great disdain⁷. For Holbrooke, all these neighbouring countries of Afghanistan had vital interests in Afghanistan. Bringing Afghan neighbors into alignment was possible, "*He imagined a Venn diagram in which all the circles would intersect; the small area where they all overlapped would be where the agreement would happen*".⁸ The geo-strategic location of Afghanistan unravels both security threat and economic opportunity for the region. These are the areas where most of the countries, interests overlap in Afghanistan.

Security

Although, the International community had succeed in bringing

Afghanistan into an international order but unfortunately it could not bring stability. Taliban are still intact. Over the last one year, the Taliban offensive has increased drastically. They have the ability to launch attacks across the country including the areas which were never under their control before the American intervention in Afghanistan. Kunduz city of the north is completely encircled by the Taliban forces.⁹ It seems that Afghanistan is heavily heading towards another civil war; this time between Taliban and the government backed ANA. What would Taliban control of Afghanistan mean to the neighbours? This precarious situation no country in the region would like to see. On that issue even Pakistan is averse of Taliban controlled Afghanistan. Pakistan did not want to see Afghanistan fully controlled by Taliban because they believe that Thereek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) would get embolden with it. Pakistan would also not like to see an eruption of civil war like situation in Afghanistan that would further see exodus of refugees into Pakistan. Pakistan is already hosting more than 3 million Afghan refugees. Further inflow of refugees into Pakistan will impact their economy. According to Abdul Qadir Baloch, Pakistan would not accept new Afghan refugees. He further said that, "*in case Afghanistan is unstable,*

then the local residents will be left with no choice but to flee to Pakistan, but even then we won't welcome them".¹⁰ It has already cost Pakistan more than \$200 billion¹¹. It also creates demographic and ethnic problems within Pakistan. Pakistan also holds refugees responsible for crimes and terrorism. Terrorists are also recruited from these refugee camps.

The other country which would be greatly affected by Afghan instability is Iran. Iran is also hosting 3 million Afghan refugees. Further influx of refugees will have palpable socio-economic impact on Iran. Iran is already facing strict economic sanctions on its controversial nuclear programme, and she will not be in a position to host more refugees. There were reports that Iranian intelligence agency has recruited thousands of refugees to fight against IS in Iraq. Their return may pose further threat to the peace and stability in Iran.

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS)

The recent rise of IS in Iraq and Syria has further exasperated the security concern in the region. Al-Qaeda and its affiliates are already in Af-Pak region. Even though its top leadership has been decapitated by American drones but nonetheless

they are still intact. IS has quickly captured the imagination in the Muslim world because of its model of state; delivery system in terms of justice, running an economy and governance model. Another difference between al-Qaeda and IS is that the former is sensitive to local and global public opinion and has never prescribed attacks on religious and ethnic minorities. However, the actions of IS in cleansing the ethnic and religious minorities have garnered attention among the various sectarian outfits in the region. There are great chances that the al-Qaeda and its other affiliates in South Asia may offer their allegiance to IS. Several TTP commanders and its spokesperson Shahidullah Shahid have expressed its allegiance to Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi: "*Oh our brothers of (ISIS), we are proud of you*".¹² Not only sectarian outfits but also anti-India outfits will join IS. Kashmir and India had never been a focal point of al-Qaeda. It was only when Baghdadi in his first public speech after appointing himself the Caliph mentioned India three times and announced a revived al-Qaeda presence in South Asia called *Jamat at Qaidatal-Jihad fi- Shihb-al Qarra al Hindiya* (the Organization of the Base of Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent, or AQIS). It was more a desperation to remain relevant. This formation is a reflection of other

developments taking place among terrorist organizations as elucidated by Muhammad Amir Rana, "*at present, al-Qaeda faces some critical challenges to its survival.[...] IS has exposed al-Qaeda's political and operational vulnerabilities which may hurt the latter's ideological appeal to its affiliates. The IS has come up with a new approach and model for building an Islamic state.*"¹³ Thus, the Taliban, TTP, al-Qaeda-IS alliance is a matter of time in the region.

IS and the region

Highly sectarian in its outlook, IS will garner support from various sectarian outfits in the region. The region particularly Afghanistan and Pakistan will see more sectarian conflicts. The region will again become a turf ground for the sectarian proxies. Other external factors will interfere to support their own proxies. In order to stem IS, Iran would likely support Shia outfits in Pakistan. That will take us back to 1980's of sectarian proxies. Therefore, diplomatic relations with Iran may get affected for both Pakistan and Afghanistan. This in long run will affect any chance of cooperation in stabilizing Afghanistan. In Afghanistan the recent attacks against security apparatus and civilians are enough evidence of presence of IS in

Afghanistan. According to Afghan news media, more than 800 members of the IS stormed the Ajristan district of Ghazni province killing 100 people including civilians and ANA personnel.¹⁴ It also established its first headquarters in Ander district where it recruits male and female for suicide attacks.¹⁵ Jandullah group operating in af-Pak region recently splintered from TTP and announced its allegiance to IS. In his statement, the spokesperson of Jandullah, Marwat said that “*they (IS) are our brothers, whatever plan they have we will support them*”.¹⁶ According to a leaked document published by many Pakistani dailies revealed that IS has recruited more than 10,000 to 12,000 fighters in Pakistan. The Red Mosque (Lal Masjid) cleric Maulna Abdul Aziz welcomed IS in Pakistan. The National Counter Terrorism Agency (NACTA) of Pakistan warned the government that IS is spreading like a viral disease across the country. Hafiz Saeed Khan who was considered close to Baitullah Mehsud and Hakeemullah Mehsud is now the *ameer* (Chief) for the Khorasan chapter of al-Baghdadi. Within the militant circles he is known as most vicious and dangerous commander.

The other country which would be also greatly affected by the development of IS in the region is China. The ongoing unrest in

Xinjiang province of China will flare up further if Afghanistan gets destabilized. It will face an increasing national security threat if militant groups continue to find sanctuary in Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to Chinese media, about 300 Chinese fighters are fighting alongside IS in Iraq and Syria. The presence of East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement (ETIM); Uighur Islamic extremists from Xinjiang province are supported by Taliban and al-Qaeda in Pakistan-Afghanistan badlands. ETIM has been accused of various terrorist attacks within China. Same can be said about Central Asian Republics (CARs). Taliban and al-Qaeda has a strong force of Uzbeks and Chechen militants. Both are known for their ruthlessness. If IS gets hold in Afghanistan, the Uzbek based terrorists group Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Chechen militants will join IS, and that would not go well with CARs and Russia either. Taliban has already taken control of the district on Turkmenistan border, it over ran Afghan forces in Khamyab district bordering Turkmenistan.

Thus, security aspect is one area where there is a very candid overlapping of interests. Thus, a consensus can be built that Afghanistan should never constitute

a threat to any of the regional countries and the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan should equally not use Afghanistan a proxy ground in return.

ECONOMIC

Commerce and Trade

The other realm where convergence of interests can happen is trade and investment through and in Afghanistan. The geo-strategic location of Afghanistan offers it viable option to become a transit hub for trade. Increasing trade and assistance, investment and economic cooperation and embedding them in emerging Chinese and American initiatives-Heart of Asia, New Silk Road economic and energy corridors for regional cooperation can transform both Afghanistan and the region. Economic strategy launched by former US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, to transform Afghanistan from hub of terrorism to hub of commerce rolled out a new plan called the New Silk Road Initiative. In the US vision she said, *"Turkmen gas fields could help meet both Pakistan's and India's growing energy needs and provide significant transit revenues for both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Tajik cotton could be turned into Indian linens. Furniture and fruit from*

*Afghanistan could find its way to the markets of Astana or Mumbai and beyond."*¹⁷ Countries in the region know the benefits of working together in Afghanistan. However, they are very skeptical about the continued insecurities and instability in Afghanistan. Central-South Asia is least economically integrated in the world and promoting connectivity is challenging but can be transformative also. With a population of more than 1.6 billion, growing middle class, youth bulge, and the growing economy, the demand for cheap and reliable energy is tremendous. Central Asia which has vast resources of oil, gas and hydropower can direct these resources to the huge market of South Asia through Afghanistan. In this back drop, the projects initiated by the America must be taken to its realization.

Central Asia, South Asia (CASA)

Casa- 1000 project is a strategic project in terms of economic development for Tajikistan. It is also essential for Tajikistan because it would not like to be completely dependent on China's investment or reliability. Tajikistan can have a capability to export up to 7 billion kw of electricity if it gets connected to South Asia.¹⁸ Annually Turkmenistan loses

around \$170-200 million value of water and energy resources due to lack of connectivity. The CASA project is supposed to connect Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan energy systems which will improve reliability of high voltage electricity transmission in the region. It envisages the construction of high voltage power lines connecting Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India (TAPI)

TAPI is expected to carry 90 million metric standard cubic meters of gas daily, of which India and Pakistan would get 38 mmscmd each. Afghanistan's share would be 14 mmscmd. Recently Afghanistan said that it would like to take only 1.5-4 mmscmd, which means Pakistan and India have to share the rest. Annually it will export 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas over a period of 30 years. Recently, the petroleum ministers of the four countries met in Ashgabat, where they agreed to take steps to start the project by 2015. The Indian minister of petroleum Dharmendra Pradhan met his Pakistani counterpart Jam Kamal Khan in a separate meeting. According to the statement issued by Indian petroleum ministry *"The two ministers discussed various issues of*

*mutual interest including expediting the TAPI project and possibility of supply of LNG to Pakistan from India"*¹⁹. TAPI is expected to be functional and reach India at the end of 2017.

However, there is an increasing debate going on about the uncertainty regarding the realization of the projects. All these aforementioned projects are fanciful. Much would depend on security and stability of the region and more importantly would depend on the outcome of new Afghan-Pakistan bonhomie.

New Developments

Recently Afghan President visited Pakistan with business and security delegation. The signs indicated a growing convergence of interests- terrorism and trade- between the two neighbouring countries. It also marked a resumption of military and intelligence cooperation. Both the sides demonstrated willingness to resolve the impediments for the smooth conduct of transit trade. They agreed to setup the streamline facilities of custom clearance at Port Qasim and Gwadar for expeditious movements of goods and services. Ghani also gave his nod to Pakistan's request for trade access to Tajikistan via Afghanistan.²⁰ While commen-

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ting on Ashraf Ghani's visit, Maleeha Lodhi says that, "*The economic engagement, however, went much beyond transit trade. President Ghani brought with him not just a large business delegation but also a number of ideas about how to upgrade economic ties between the two countries. They included the offer to setup special economic zones in Afghanistan for Pakistani investors and collaborators in joint production, especially on textiles*".²¹ Afghan President Ghani and Pakistan's Finance Minister Ishaq Dar agreed to double the bilateral trade from \$2.5 billion to \$5 billion within two years. The regional economic cooperation and connectivity also came into discussion. There was a consensus on strengthening road and rail connectivity and intensifying efforts to key-trans-regional energy projects including CASA 1000 and TAPI.²² On security front both agreed to tackle terrorism together. Pakistan has given assurance to deliver on reconciliation front. Although it's debatable that how much control Pakistan has on Taliban especially on its younger generation. According to reports that Afghanistan made it clear to Pakistan that it needs to make a clear choice between supporting the new government of unity and continuing to actively support the Taliban. Much depends on

Pakistan's concrete action not only against TTP but their strategic assets too.

Chinese have also shown great interest in Afghanistan, although it is much inclined towards security aspects than the trade and development. Earlier it was committed only to a few investments in copper and mining areas. China appointed Sun Yuxi as a special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. In his first appearance on Western media, Sun Yuxi outlined Chinese plans in the region, he said, "*we are ready to do more, we want to play a bigger role. We would welcome the Taliban in any neutral venue such as in China. We will make negotiations happen but the process must be Afghan-owned and Afghan-led- the agenda must be proposed by President Ashraf Ghani*".²³ China has over the last several months vigorously followed the process of bringing in all the neighbours of Afghanistan and other states to support reconciliation in Afghanistan. According to Sun Yuxi, "*one tripod involves talks between China, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the second is a group of regional countries called Six plus. One which involves US, Russia, China, India, Pakistan and Iran and one being Afghanistan. This group has already met twice*".²⁴

However, China's growing interest in playing an interlocutor in Afghan conflict which it hitherto has never done, has much to do with its threat perception emanating from Afghanistan. Apart from security concerns, China is also suffering from cheap opium flooding from Afghanistan.

Therefore, China's growing interests-economic and security, will play a very important role in persuading if not deterring neighbouring countries to cooperate in stabilizing and strengthening Afghanistan. China's good relationship with Pakistan can be utilized to leverage the Pakistani military to deliver on reconciliation front also.

The other important development in the region is the mending of fences between Russia and Pakistan. The recent visit of Russia's Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu's to Pakistan mark an important shift in Pakistan-Russia relations. The defense deal described by Pakistan as a milestone in Pakistan-Russian relations. Russia is supplying Pakistan Mi-35 multi-role helicopters.

In order to fix Afghanistan's cauldron, number of bilateral, trilateral and multilateral dialogues and projects have been started over

the last one decade. In this realm, East West Institute (EWI) also known as Abu Dhabi Process in 2013-14 convened a series of high-level consultations to address regional economic and security issues in Afghanistan post 2014. This process convened high level delegates comprising government officials, parliamentarians, diplomats, businessmen from Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, China, the United Arab Emirates, the United States and Europe as well as from regional and international organizations. The main objective of this process is to identify and promote opportunities for economic growth both in Afghanistan and in the region.²⁵ In the conference, business leaders recognized that Afghanistan has a great potential for business, trade and investment after 2014. They also acknowledged that the growth of regional transit trade will boost private investment and growth in the short-to medium-term and will help to realize the long-term vision for Afghanistan as a trade and transit hub. It equally stressed that government of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Central Asian republics should ensure a more efficient regulatory framework and high quality national institutions.²⁶ The Istanbul process gave the following short, mid and long term recommendations; a) To establish a

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Regional Business Advocacy Council comprised of influential business leaders from Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Central Asian republics. b) Establish two or three model cross border free trade zones on the border of Afghanistan-Pakistan, Pakistan-India Afghanistan-Iran and Afghanistan-Tajikistan, where goods and services could move freely. c) Adopting a generous visa regime to enable business to move around easily in the region. d) Investing in expanding and developing Afghan railways to important sea ports in the region. e) Establishing a regional infrastructure trust fund. India, China, Russia, Pakistan Turkey would invest in designing, developing, and expanding intra-regional transport infrastructure, implementing CASA, TAPI and other projects.²⁷

Therefore, the aforesaid recommendations, if implemented in true spirit, can help Afghanistan to earn billions of dollars from royalties collected from regional trade and investment. In turn it can help Afghan government to bear the expenses of its larger forces which is *sine quo non* for the security and stability of Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The region has much on stake in Afghanistan. Afghanistan, if again

neglected, has a great potential to destabilize the entire region. The neighbours of Afghanistan cannot afford to see Afghanistan going back to 90's of civil war. Terrorism and drugs can easily proliferate to the neighbouring states. Although, fixing Afghanistan is a very complex and lengthy process. It needs political will from the regional actors. Afghanistan is termed to be as a battle ground of a new great game with multiple actors, where everyone tries to influence the post-2014 Afghan politics. There should be some kind of understanding among Afghanistan's neighbours that they would not interfere in Afghanistan, which has suffered immensely from the interference of its neighbours over a long period of time. There is a need of dialogue between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan on the one hand and Pakistan and India on the other. There should be a dialogue between Pakistan and India on peaceful coexistence in Afghanistan. The saner voices should prevail that there is ample opportunity for the two to co-exist, especially in the development sector. Both Pakistan and India can work on joint investment in Afghanistan. This can play the role in confidence building measures for Pakistan- India relations. Last but not the least, Afghanistan should be Pakistan's most sensitive concern. Pakistan has

to play a determining role in the post-America Afghanistan. It has to draw a clear line between its own polity/society and the end game in Afghanistan. It would be the only country which may be greatly affected by any sort of security transition in Afghanistan. ■

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