
Perspective on Afghanistan's Situation: The Regional Implications

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Introduction

The world order is in disarray. Forces of fragmentation are ascending everywhere which have huge security implications. The new identity politics based on antagonistic and irreconcilable primordial values and aspirations are some of these implications. Intra and interstate new fault lines and social and political cleavages have been emerging uninterruptedly in the post-cold war regional and global order. This is engendering the forces of instability and promoting myriad kinds of centrifugal forces and thus threatening not only the new post-cold war order but the very foundation of the state system which emerged after the World War II. A number of developing societies and

their crucial political institutions are imploding because of emerging new contradictions and multiple vulnerabilities. This is happening despite being well interconnected with the global economic, financial and communication system. This is one of the paradoxes of the twenty first century.

There are multiple factors responsible for this complex scenario. The main factor for this situation facing humanity today, especially in the regions of West Asia and North Africa (WANA) and South West Asia is the American policy of using Islam strategically against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in 1980's and the policy of forced regime change in Afghanistan after the 9/11, 2001 event through direct military action. It has hugely destabilized the region

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and has unleashed the gigantic forces of unmanageable chaos with disastrous proportions.

The U.S policy of *using Islam strategically against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan laid down the foundation of the culture and production of non- state actors* with huge spillover potential. The U.S policy of regime change through direct military action which started with the invasion of Afghanistan after the event of 9/11 and is going on uninterruptedly has been creating havoc beyond imagination. These two factors coupled with other factors are engendering the forces of violence leading to shattering down of state systems in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Afghanistan. Every other factor of destabilization working in West Asia and North Africa (hereafter WANA) and in South West Asia is linked overtly or covertly with these two major factors. These have enormous implications on the entire gamut of the regional and international relations of WANA and South West Asia. This paper mainly focuses on the changing aspect of the realm of security dimension of Afghanistan and its broader implications.

The area which has been badly affected is the security aspect. The traditional notion of security has been

fundamentally shattered down and the situation is getting increasingly fuzzy. The last two decades have witnessed huge changes in the security situations because of the rise of non-state actors and militant ideological groups in different parts of the world. The privatization of security sectors by some of powerful states like the US has also played major role in demolishing the traditionally established security system which normally works under state control.

Changes occurring across the globe have their own repercussions and implications. What affects a distant province or any state sends a message – positive or negative – to other parts of the world. Geographical boundaries are unable to stop penetration of ideas and values of both peace and conflict across the borders. Despite casual skirmishes and even wars for territories, no state today is able to have a complete monopoly over production as well as consumption of ideas which are of negative value. It is evident that the ideas which promote negative human values are emanating from everywhere and from every civilizational and cultural setting. This has posed serious challenge to future course of action and it has serious implications on every aspect of international relations including

the security aspect.

It may be noted that spread of positive ideas has positive impact on people and societies and consequently diffusion of negative ideas has a negative impact. Thus, there is a huge challenge before the world leaders, intellectuals and statesmen to stop the impact of negative ideas- ideas that generate conflict and even lead to hybrid kinds of wars and pose new security challenges.

Further, the *rise of non-state militant actors is a reality* today. It has posed serious security challenge to the world.

While states with well-developed security structures and agencies are relatively able to handle the situation to a greater extent, for new and weaker countries the challenge is grave. Not only does it weaken a particular state and its society but also has the potential to function as vortex with its potential of spiraling into different directions and thus embroiling others into its orbit.

Afghanistan Scenario

Afghanistan is one such country with fragile institutions and is facing existential question for more than three decades because of the

entrenched and protracted conflict. The problem gets complicated when one looks at the regions and states around it. Those countries which are advocating transition and change in Afghanistan do not give due consideration to what is unique about Afghanistan as Shanthie D'Souza says that "Most of the discourses on 'transition' in Afghanistan have occurred in the West with little discussion inside Afghanistan on the preparedness for the *Inteqal* process. The net result is the lack of understanding of the perceptions and needs on the ground."¹

Afghanistan is a country surrounded by three Asian regions, each having its own set of problems: social, political and economic, besides the thorny issue of security. To its north lies the newly independent states of Central Asia with ethnic communities straddling over all states, to its south and east are some of the powerful South Asian countries with a history of long conflicts while to its West the Gulf region of West Asia is situated.

Afghanistan's Geostrategic Location

Sandwiched between these three important security complexes, Afghanistan hardly has any choice but to play a careful role to deal with

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its own internal security crisis and at the same time keep its ties intact with its neighbours, both immediate and distant.

However, Afghanistan also offers the biggest incentive to all the three regions for greater economic integrity and security collaboration, if only the latter opportunity can seriously be looked at and negotiated between important units of each block as Kristian Berg Harpviken and Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh suggest:

“Afghanistan is both a source of conflict with potentially contagious effects and possible focus for neighbourly cooperation. Given that stabilization of this unstable ‘core’ is a shared concern; patterns that govern the region would naturally lead more towards amity and cooperation than enmity between states.²

The role that Afghanistan can play is huge, but the strength required for playing such a role can only be gained when the three regions cooperate and collaborate with each other along with Afghanistan. And, that is where the main opportunity or struggle lies.

The main driver for Global Power interest in Afghanistan has been geo-strategy. Major world powers have been so obsessed with Afghanistan's

geo-centrality that they have hardly given any serious thought to other aspects, whereas these aspects could benefit all. Afghanistan's location makes it vulnerable for its internal security and for engaging with outside powers. Glossing over this reality can only be done at the risk of more security challenges.

However, one way of looking at it can be through a paradigm shift in the approach. Internal weaknesses leave no room for Afghanistan to avoid receiving external assistance and external interventions have brought no major gains in terms of peace, stability for taking off the development projects.

India-Pakistan Competitive Rivalry

A third approach therefore can be thought off and worked on with a synthesis of internal and external support and by shifting emphasis from geo-strategy to geo-economic and trade opportunities. It is in this context that relationships between India and Pakistan need to be mended as both states possess considerable power and have stakes in Afghanistan. It is also where Afghanistan's bilateral as well as multilateral relations call for improvement. For example, according to Gordhan, “Bilateral free

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trade agreement account[s] for over 75 percent of all regional trade agreements.”³

India and Pakistan are two powerful countries in South Asia and both want to check each other because of the traditional rivalry. Fortunately or unfortunately, Afghanistan has been made the common venue for this war of competing interests. While this is bad for Afghansitan, at the same time it is hampering the Big Power image of both the countries struggling to pose as the most powerful country to lead the South Asian security complex.

While India has an upper hand over Pakistan on various fronts, Pakistan does not wish to give up its claim among other reasons mainly because of also being a nuclear power. Pakistan also desires to be the champion of the Islamic world because of its self-appropriated historical and ideological role and having superior conventional military power with nuke technology.

The arguments and counter-arguments to prove their supremacy and claim of superiority seem to be never ending. However, none is bereft of the problems which are the greatest obstacles in their way to the claim of their uncontested and undisputed South Asian leadership

making the problem even more complex.

However, one way of finding solution is through cooperation. And, the road to this opportunity passes through Afghanistan. Take for example the case of Afghan Pakistan Transit and Trade Agreement (APTTA). It allows Afghan trucks to carry Afghan products to Indian and Chinese markets as also the rest of the world through the seaports of Karachi and in return, Pakistan will be able to access the markets of Central Asia and Iran through Afghanistan. But before finding the space to cooperate in Afghanistan, another festering crisis needs to be tackled which is the issue of Kashmir which, post-Independence, has been the single most contestable point of disagreement between the two countries.

Ahmed Rashid articulates the importance of this aspect as:

“There can be no peace in Afghanistan until these two neighbours sit down and talk about a common approach to Kabul and Kashmir, rather than negotiating by proxy wars.”⁴

This is crucial in seeking solution for Afghanistan because what is needed for the land-locked country

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is peace and stability before taking off any serious attempts for development. And the road to peace goes through Kashmir over which both India and Pakistan lock horns each blaming the other for the ongoing state of affairs.

Kashmir itself is a vulnerable spot under two jurisdictions: one where India rules, one under Pakistani occupation i.e; so- called Azad Kashmir and Northern areas. This imbroglio has trickle down effects inviting militant outfits from across South Asia, Central Asia and West Asia.

The biggest conflict over Kashmir is due to a psychological war in which both India and Pakistan have claims. Race, religion, democracy, and other legacies come into full play in this claim where the ultimate loser is the people spread over the beautiful mountainous region, also called the greater Kashmir.

If India-Pakistan relations are restored for better, both Kashmir and Afghanistan can have peace and both the countries can make huge economic gains through many joint programmes and projects. This can also bring stability in Afghanistan and expedite the pace of infrastructural development in the country.

However, the task is not as easy on ground as it hypothetically sounds. It is therefore needed that other stake holders in the country including external actors to come in and lend the required support for a sustained approach to peace and stability not just in Afghanistan but across the three contagious regions whose business interests have a merging point in Afghanistan.

Central Asia, the Gulf region of West Asia and South Asia have one of world's best resources in terms of oil, natural gas and other rich minerals and precious materials. The technological expertise of India can be utilized to augment the benefits while security concerns can be tackled through cooperation among the trained security forces of India, Pakistan, Iran and Kazakhstan and other states as Krisitian Berg Harpviken and Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh observe that "Cooperation would not only curb the destructive behavior of non-state actors, but also lead to positive externalities, such as economic dividends to neighbouring countries."⁵

To the south and east of Afghanistan lies Pakistan which shares the longest border with Afghanistan. Further east is India which has long cultural and historical linkages which were disrupted

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primarily because the British India led new political cartography resulting in the birth of the Islamic republic of Pakistan in 1947.

So, whatever happens in Pakistan or India has a direct or indirect impact on Afghanistan. India at present has been carrying many development projects in Afghanistan and is looking to have peace and stability in the country so that its work does not suffer. The growing demand for oil and natural gas in India can be fulfilled by importing them from Iran and Central Asia and Afghanistan serves as a major route for any such project for importing them.

Pakistan provides the easiest route for importing Central Asian goods via road which cannot be possible by bypassing Pakistan.

Indo-Pak relations therefore need to be worked out through peaceful dialogue so that both the countries could benefit from it. This will not only work in the interests of Indian and Pakistan but also in the larger context of regional cooperation. As Rasul Bakhsh Rais observes, "How India and Pakistan develop an understanding on stability, peace and political reconciliation within Afghanistan will be the key to regional peace and security."⁶

Although the two neighbours have fought three wars in the past and there was high possibility of another such a war in September-October 2016 as some media reports suggested, there are some successful agreements between the two traditional rivals of South Asia. The 1960 Indus Water Treaty provides a testimony to that.

But Afghanistan is one country which is being viewed more as a terrain to be used for India-Pakistan rivalry. It is therefore imperative to resolve Indo-Pak rivalry to have a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. As Kristian Berg Harpviken and Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh write:

Pakistan and India engage in Afghanistan in pursuit of their own strategic interests: curbing each other's influence. This makes Afghanistan the terrain for a 'proxy war' between the two (Yusufzai 2006). Some commentators go so far as to argue that the Indo-Pak rivalry 'lies at the heart of the current war in Afghanistan' (Dalrymple 2013).⁷

The improving Indo-Pak relationship therefore holds crucial significance not just for Afghanistan but also for both India and Pakistan as both the countries end up becoming the losers when

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Afghanistan is in turmoil. This weakens the Big Power projection of the South Asian nuclear-power states which together can achieve what they can never do separately.

Pakistan's internal crisis is also a big spoiler for the government which is at war with its neighbours and with itself. The extremist forces and terrorists are using it as safe sanctuary for carrying out destructive activities within and outside Pakistan.

If Pakistan doesn't look at its internal crises, chances are that it will fall to further precarious situation as things are increasingly going out of its control with the youth being induced by extremist ideologies.

In India too, some religious extremist groups are trying to influence the state in more vocal ways now than ever before. The occasional attacks on minorities and unintended policy of keeping them under the situation of utter sense of insecurity add to the growing unrest in different parts of the country. Violation of human rights are increasing and the state is failing to control the forces which are playing havoc with the lives of vulnerable sections within the Indian society who refuse to follow their diktats.

If the situation continues for long,

chances are that there will be more problems which will impede the progress which took off in the early years of the 21st century. The rise in cases of corruption is too serious and the increasing inequality in the lifestyle of citizens presents a volatile situation.

In the present scenario where the world is turning into a multi-polar order in which major powers are trying to maintain their status by looking at what serves their interests best, it will be unrealistic on the part of India and Pakistan to continue with their old rivalry and not to forge a broad-interest-based partnership. K.R. Singh writes that "No one will deny the importance of new South-West Asia and its place vis-à-vis Eurasia as well the emerging world order, because of two interrelated factors. The first is the huge energy reserves, both of oil and natural gas, of the entire region."⁸

Singh then goes on to say that "The second factor, indirectly related to the question of energy, is the ethno-religious continuity of the region."⁹

Although the latter factor may not hold true for Indo-Pak relations, it holds great significance when one looks at the South Asian Complex and how both India and Pakistan can increase their influence in the region

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by allying their interests with the interests of Central Asian Security complex to which both these countries look for energy resources.

Afghanistan once again offers best opportunity to forge business and trade ties for the advantage of the Indian economy and Pakistan's growing need for oil and gas and other resources especially when its another neighbour Iran is on the verge of exerting greater influence in the region after its landmark agreement with the United States of America for developing nuclear energy.

The Gulf region of West Asia can be ignored only at the cost of serious dangers which may hamper any attempt of peace and stability in Afghanistan, for Afghanistan shares its western border i.e. of Helmand Province with Iran and has a considerable Shia population which can pose big risk if it does not take into consideration its sentiments.

The Shia Hazaras share close emotional attachment with the Shia-majority Iran which supports Afghanistan's Shia minority. That a huge number of Afghan refugees live in Iran also poses another risk to the existing security ambiguity of Afghanistan.

Moreover, Iran has cordial relations with most Central Asian republics which also have a good number of ethnic communities who can be instigated to play spoilsport not just in Central Asia but also pose further risk to Afghanistan. Many groups in the weak Central Asian countries have in the past been engaged in Afghanistan and have sided with the neighbouring countries who wish to have a pliant government there.

Singh writes that "Iran has also sought to play a leading role in Central Asia. Much of that area, despite the Turkish ethnicity and Sunni Islam, was at one time closely associated with Persian civilization. Tajikistan was particularly close to Iran."¹⁰

Therefore, looking at just one aspect is not enough. In fact, there are aspects and ignoring them would pose serious risks to the security situation in the region from which neither Afghanistan nor its wider neighbourhood can remain unaffected.

A holistic approach combining the interests of all the regional stakeholders is therefore imperative. It is in this context that the main powers in the Arab-Persian Gulf Regional Security Sub-complex, Saudi Arabia

and Iran must be looked into.

Saudi Arabia And Iran Contest

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran are big economies in the Gulf and claim leadership role for the Muslim *Ummah*. Their confrontation would have repercussions throughout the Muslim world. But there is more to the relationship of the two countries than what is generally understood. In the words of Mohsin Milani the Iran and Saudi Arabia are 'neither natural allies nor natural enemies but natural rivals.'¹¹ This rivalry needs to be addressed for benefit of both leading Muslim countries which enjoy off and on support of the West and especially the American regime.

The issue can be handled through better diplomatic ties, again requiring support from all the regional power blocs in their own interest and in the interest of Afghanistan. Although this sounds hypothetical but it is possible if serious attempts are made in that direction.

It may be noted that like India and Pakistan, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have been trying to gain influence in Afghanistan for their own political reasons. The drivers may be different, but their objective is much similar to

that of India and Pakistan i.e. to seek to increase their influence in Afghanistan in order to have a government which is more supportive to their interest than the interest of the other. However, here once again, what could be best used to serve both the parties' interest are the opportunities which a peaceful Afghanistan can offer. And, a peaceful and stable Afghanistan cannot be achieved if one does not cooperate with the other.

Afghanistan and Central Asia

Afghanistan and its Central Asian neighbours, provide an interesting geo-strategic setting. Three countries of Central Asia have borders with Afghanistan and all the five countries are Muslim countries. All three have mixed ethnic population like Afghanistan. All of them in the past and even now have links with the left-power bastion of Russia as all of them had at some point or other of history been ruled by left-leaning parties.

Most of these countries have a weak government infrastructure and are suffering from religious extremism which sprang from their own soil. And, according to Harpviken and Tadjbakhsh a "Strong government which can provide

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stability is seen as a *sine qua non* in the region."¹² In this connection Afghanistan can be added to the list of all the five Central Asian Republics. These unique problems make them common allies. However, lack of technological advancement and a long history of dependency on other forces, all these countries try to seek outside expertise and various kinds of forces to keep the situation under their control.

While Central Asian republics use their external allies by exploiting some of them against the other, Afghanistan has to side with all and cannot use one against the other for fear of losing the vital support it has been enjoying from each in the supply of goods and development of its fragile state infrastructure.

The one concern which runs across Afghanistan and the entire South Asia is on the security front and the threat of a direct spillover effect of one country's problems over the other so closely linked to each other. These unique problems offer to these regimes the unique option to cooperate with one another in all spheres of their daily lives from state politics to internal security crises emerging out of the cases of rampant corruption, poverty, unemployment and bulging youth population which aspires to see change but when not

seen in sight is receptive to join extremist organizations which has the potential of throwing the whole security arrangement into the hands of non-state actors.

This calls for serious thinking among the ruling elites and their regional allies to partake and ponder over ways and means to keep the situation under control till these states become powerful enough to contain them through more professional security paraphernalia which is missing as of now.

Apart from the regional powers' supporting the peace and stability efforts in Afghanistan, one country which has the largest role to play in it is the US. The off and on engagement of the US will not be sufficient for a weak Afghanistan. It requires a sustained approach and open support by the US to engage, invest, work and monitor the work in Afghanistan for next one to two decades that will enable the security situation to stabilize and development projects to take off.

Changes Inside Afghanistan

Looking at Afghanistan as a mere strategic spot will not serve the purpose unless there is a deep engagement in other areas of mutual

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interest like business and trade which can offer a durable solution to the lingering conflict in the country. Afghanistan, since the fall of Taliban rule has undergone changes and public opinion is not as favourable to the militant powers as it used to be. According to Zalmay Khalilzad, "Many Afghans worry about total disengagement by the U.S. and want to continue a relationship involving military and economic support from the United States."¹³

There is no denying that the US has been a major player in Afghanistan especially in the post 9/11 world. However, of late, there has been fast change taking place and many major power blocs have been rising to counter the US superpower domination and world now has turned into a multi-polar order with the US having almost lost most of its world superpower status.

The one Big Power which has been threatening the US hegemony is China. The rising power of China has made it Asia's biggest power which is fast moving upward in its global image.

China's Role

Initially, China, although contributed to some of the development work was not very

keen in playing a major role in Afghanistan. But of late, it has been increasingly getting into more and more business, infrastructure building and development projects in Afghanistan. Looking at the deep engagement, the Chinese role in peace and stability and in development of Afghanistan cannot be overlooked.

And, given that China as a major ally of Pakistan, its involvement becomes crucial. It may be noted that with the US withdrawal process from Afghanistan, the process of Chinese' engagement is fast becoming a reality with greater implications. Khalilzad opines that:

With an increased stake in Afghanistan, China might play a bigger role in reconstruction efforts and use its influence to promote a settlement between Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹⁴

What Khalilzad is stating can have a huge impact in the bilateral relations of Afghanistan with its most powerful and biggest neighbor with which it has a hot and cold relation due to border dispute which arose at the time when Pakistan came into existence. Although the dispute has not led to any major conflict between the two countries, its resolution can have a significant implication in the

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regional efforts for stability of Afghanistan and its neighbours. It can result in a new era of peace and cooperation for the entire South West Asia.

Conclusion

No landlocked country enjoys such a huge strategic importance as Afghanistan enjoys. Afghanistan has always figured prominently in the strategic imagination of the empires in history and in the nation states of the contemporary period. So far, this reality of Afghanistan has proved a bane for it and for others. The regional and global geostrategic imperatives demand that this status of Afghanistan should be converted into a boon for itself and for others.

Afghanistan is bleeding uninterruptedly for more than three decades. The reasons are numerous, both external and internal, but reality is that Afghans are the main sufferers. On the other hand, the tragic irony is that the dominant narratives on Afghanistan present it as the source of regional instability, battleground for proxy wars and conflicts, object of the geopolitical rivalries between the major regional and global powers, hub of the drug trafficking which are undermining the state system and therefore posing existential problems to many

societies and states, production centre and the sanctuary for non-state actors...etc. These images of Afghanistan have legitimized the unjustified interference of the outside powers in it which instead of resulting in the solution of the problems have in reality become the source and part of problems being faced by Afghanistan and Afghans. These require a revisit approach and strategy as soon as possible for bringing a definite solution to the problems being faced by Afghanistan for more than three decades.

Afghanistan can play a most significant role in forging regional alliances with most power blocs and it also can play a pivotal role in channeling the business and trade links to facilitate easy access between its neighbours through its land area.

With external efforts having failed and Afghanistan being unstable and weak to take any major steps to infrastructural development, the regional attempt to peace and stability holds promise and it maybe tried as Haroun Mir notes:

Countries of the region such as China, India, Pakistan, Turkey, and Russia are keen to invest in Afghanistan. Chinese and Indian

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companies have already won important mining contracts. Similarly, the extensions of Iranian and Uzbek rail road as well extension of their electric grids into Afghanistan are encouraging examples of cooperation.¹⁵

Being most powerful neighbours in the three regional power blocs, the role of India and Pakistan is an unavoidable and most crucial one. Afghanistan also offers opportunities for the two traditional rivals to ameliorate their relationship and carry joint projects which offer great benefits to the only two nuclear powers.

Geostrategic centrality of Afghanistan makes it unavoidable to stay away from major world powers especially the US and China which have significant stakes given the

security complexity. It is therefore imperative that the US and China continue supporting Afghanistan. However, as the biggest stake lies with regional power blocks, the three regional security complexes of South Asia, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf need to extend their support for peace and stability of Afghanistan because a weak and unstable Afghanistan does not only create internal problems for it but also can have spillover impact on its neighbours with which its shares border and, in many cases there is a huge ethnic linkage which poses both promise and risk.

A regional initiative with Afghanistan having its own independent role can generate better results which may be good both for it and its wider neighbourhood and open up new avenues for mutual benefits. ■

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