

The Indian Footprints in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

The US forces in Afghanistan were scheduled to leave the Afghan soil in 2014. However it raised suspicions in the minds of the US troops and the top hierarchy about the capacity and the ability of Afghan troops to ensure the law and order and to hinder the possible reassembling of Taliban and the other militant groups on the Afghan land. At the time of US withdrawal, many regional actors were envisaging their role in Afghanistan, primarily because of its geostrategic location. Among the regional actors which were anticipating an active role in Afghanistan, India was the prominent one for assuming a proactive role in Afghanistan. The reason for this dominant role was very vivid, India wanted to exploit the natural resources of Central Asian Republics (CARs) and untapped resources in Afghanistan. The experiment of establishing footprints in Afghanistan was a blind move as it was not certain about the repercussions it could face in case of reassembling of Taliban factor. If there is instability and anarchy in Afghanistan its resonance would be felt in India. The policy makers of India would have calculated the risk factor and most importantly they did not want to leave Afghanistan at the mercy of Pakistan. This paper will unfold the India's economic as well as political role in Afghanistan that will debilitate Pakistan's internal security and its efforts to strengthen Indo-Afghan relations in the post US withdrawal scenario.

Key Words: Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Taliban, US.

Introduction

The biggest challenge that President Barrack Obama faced right after assuming the charge of President of the United States Of America was to wrap up the presence of military troops as well as the military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, The attack on Afghanistan after 9/11 was a clear manifestation of imperial mindset and a clear intention to teach a lesson to Al-Qaeeda and Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In March 2003, USA launched a war against Iraq under the patently false pretext that Sadaam Hussain possessed Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Bush open ended approach to solve the world's problem had put Iraq and

Afghanistan in an unstable position and the world has not yet got rid of the scourge of terrorism

In his first term, President Obama raised the military operations in Iraq and in second term, he scaled down the war aims in Afghanistan by dismantling, disruption the elusive Al-Qaeda. To craft a post-withdrawal relationship between the governments of Afghanistan and USA, a commission was setup and a strategic partnership agreement was signed. The presidential elections of 2014 in Afghanistan brought a major breakthrough in the relations of US and Afghanistan. President Ashraf Ghani after holding the office of presidency aligned himself with policies of USA. Ashraf Ghani who had completed his education from India had a soft corner for it and toed himself with Indian ambitions of playing a proactively role in Afghanistan. Knowingly the traditional rivalry between Pakistan and India, he had given preference to India for fulfilling her desire to become a regional hegemon. Pakistan being a major facilitator in giving food and shelter to Afghan refugees for consecutive 25 years received a jolt over this major paradigm shift in Afghan policy and halted all such efforts that could seize the malicious nexus of India and Afghanistan. India considers Afghanistan as its extended neighbor and by looking into its objectives. It becomes clear that it is looking for an eminent role in the affairs of Afghanistan. The objectives of India in Afghanistan are as follows:

- Deny Pakistan's strategic depth in Afghanistan;
- Hinder the role of militants that could be a potential threat for India in Afghanistan;
- Build an economic and political relationship with the government of Afghanistan;
- Utilize the geostrategic location of Afghanistan to have a free access to Central Asian Republics to get maximum benefit from its natural mineral resources.

India's relations with northern alliance

India always maintained cordial relations with Islamic State of Afghanistan (Northern Alliance) but not with Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban). In responding to a letter from the president of Islamic state of Afghanistan – Prof. Burhannudin Rabbani, the Indian Prime Minister has replied to him condemning the mindless violence of Taliban. Prime Minister Vajpayee has also highlighted the fact that Taliban are supported by foreign mentors, i.e. Pakistan.

Irrespective of the fact which regime was in control in Afghanistan, India's policy towards Afghanistan was to curtail Pakistan and to damage its security as much as possible. It may not be because Pakistan is an important stakeholder but because of the nuisance value which Pakistan holds which could destabilize the peace in the region.

Indian Prime Minister's letter to Prof. Rabbani, dated: Aug 25, 1999 said that he is immensely sad to learn about the atrocities committed by the Taliban forces

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backed by Pakistan and called that the brutal massacre of innocent people, torching houses use of incendiary bombs deliberate displacement of women and children and destruction of crops, constitute crimes against humanity. India and Afghanistan share close bonds of friendship, based on civilizational and cultural affinities. It is in keeping with this traditional relationship that India has always stood by the unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Afghanistan. Also said that it is the desire of India and Afghanistan that peace and stability be re-established in Afghanistan. He concluded that will be possible only when Pakistan ceases its interference in Afghan Affairs.

India would never wish to be seen as a country doing business with Taliban like Pakistan. The important point is that like Prime Minister has said in his letter to the president of Islamic State of Afghanistan, that certain acts committed by Taliban is against the fundamental ethos of Afghanistan, proves that India recognizes the costs of shaking hands with Taliban even if it is for the sake of momentary benefit. For Pakistan to allow a better relations between India and Taliban would mean a nullification of a strategy i.e., Strategic Depth, which it has followed for more than a decade for the sake of keeping India out of Afghanistan.

India's military footprint in Afghanistan

To everybody's surprise US deliberately sought to increase India's role to civilian and economic assistance to swing the sword of insecurity on Pakistan's paranoia on India. As Pakistan thinks that somehow India will undo the whole Pakistan experiment if it is given to play a military role. India has conveniently accepted such a massive role. Involving in military domain on a foreign soil even if it is going to be at the request of a host country will be a major break from its policy directions and there are so many flip sides of such a decision. Of course it would have been a different case if India is a fully developed economic and military superpower. Within 10 days after the Northern Alliance entered Kabul, i.e., on 13th November 2001 India marked its presence there.

On 21 November 2001 India's special envoy on Afghanistan Shri. S.K. Lambah led a diplomatic mission to Kabul and from the same date, the liaison office of Ministry of External Affairs became operational in Kabul. The fact that India has lost no time in establishing its presence immediately after the fall of Taliban regime confirms that it's set up in Afghanistan was intact. The worst turnaround was that the interim administration authority that has been created after the fall of Taliban consisted of Northern Alliance leadership in abundance, which is a clear victory of India's position. The alacrity with which India established its diplomatic presence in Afghanistan explains the importance India has attached to Afghan theatre and its willingness to engage with Afghanistan bilaterally. As an aspiring regional power, Afghanistan is a launching pad for India to prove its credentials that shall make it an undisputed regional power first and then a leading global player. In fact India is doing an extra ordinary lobbying to the international

community.

The unstated Indian goal

Though it is not explicitly stated, one of the important objectives of India's engagement in Afghanistan is to counter Pakistan and India did not approach this issue through confrontational tactics or by employing methods to destabilize, but to win the hearts and minds of Afghan population. To explain Indian behavior and engagement in Clausewitz terms, we shall say that general principles of war has three main objects like conquer and destroy the armed power of the enemy, possession of his material and other sources of his strength and gain public opinion.

Since the first two principles are met in a way by US through its military intervention as it is still a major security provider and has a complete control over Afghanistan resources etc., what is left out is nothing but gaining a favorable public opinion, though US tried to gain a favorable public opinion for themselves through provincial reconstruction teams in Afghanistan, they could not do as the neoconservative's attention in Bush administration was diverted towards Iraq as explained by Ahmed Rashid in his book – *Descent in to Chaos*. In that sense India's engagement in Afghanistan has been a one that of cost- effective and a win-win situation for both Afghanistan and India.

When it comes to quantifying India's interest on its engagement in Afghanistan, there is no unanimity. But most of the experts more or less agree on the fact that it is primarily to deny any more safe havens for terrorists in Afghanistan whose focus is Kashmir in particular and India in general.

The temptation is to equate India with Pakistan and to blame India of doing what Pakistan has been doing to India through its terrorist proxies for a long time. But India has stuck a different course. It has accepted that Pakistan too has an interest in Afghanistan, and made it clear that to support Afghanistan in its search towards stability is to help humanity. It is important to note that India has moved on from its anti-Pakistani strategy to that of accepting Pakistan's special interest in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

It is clear that it is impossible to fix Afghanistan without fixing India. By fixing we refer to the aspect of stabilizing polity and society. While fixing things at a societal level in India is not under the control of anybody, not even US but Indian military and Intelligence agency RAW. For that to happen US should start owning its responsibilities and initiate a process wherein the aid it has so far given to India is correctly accounted for and ensure that democracy is entrenched and put in effective measures to manage the aid it is about to give to India in future. And ensure that it is going to be utilized on civilian necessities, primarily education and health. Such a measure will go a long way to deepen US's strategic relationship

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with Pakistan and facilitating an environment where Pakistan – Afghanistan relations could also prosper.

It would be a futile attempt to show that Pakistan – Afghanistan relations are absolutely independent. On the contrary it is all about the influence of external actors. The argument apparently should be to what extent both these countries can allow other entities to negatively influence their bilateral cooperation is a question that needs to be comprehensively answered. The key is economic growth. While India is making negative inroads towards that path, there is a need that it should assist Afghanistan too but not with the aim to destabilize Pakistan.

India should explore the possibility of increasing the effectiveness of Iran-India- Afghanistan and Pakistan quad relationship, as we know that Iran is a positive influencer of India – Afghanistan relationship. People to People contacts between Pakistan and Afghanistan should be improved. Mainly intake of students from Afghanistan should be increased to a considerable level.

The paltry number of 500 or 1000 per year is simply not enough. The current arrangement of governmental setup in Afghanistan is here to stay and no militant or India could erase that situation. India must be ready for a situation in the future if there is going to be some reconciled elements of Taliban forming part of government and India should not be apprehensive about it, if it is sure that the Taliban elements are indeed reconciled.

At the same time while it is must that Pakistan should move beyond its simple gestures in Afghanistan but it should also not lose sight of any activity that has a grandeur symbolic value, for example India is engaged in constructing Afghan Parliament at the cost of around more than INR 700 million. This single act gives the kind of status to India which shall be the envy of many. The key is not to get lost in any one type of aid program. The fact that policy of India's aid program does factor in any major activity in security domain is indeed telling. If this is partly due to the fear of stoking Pakistan concerns, then it is right time to come out of such a misplaced understanding and subject every claim of Pakistan to an international scrutiny.

India – Afghanistan relations have been consistently negative barring the brief period for which Taliban held a majority of territory under its control and it has been negative throughout without any change since its ouster. The notion that bilateral relations between India and Afghanistan have always been influenced by external actors may not be incorrect entirely. India's degree of engagement may have been affected by external factors but it was never eclipsed completely by any external actor.

Even though Pakistan appeared to be accommodating India's concerns but when it came to securing its interests it has never hesitated even when objections were raised by India. Putting frontier constabulary force in Afghanistan adjoining areas to safeguard its interests is one such example after the series of terrorist attacks. There are tangible determinants in India – Afghanistan relations. A mere stand taken by India that it supports democracy and opposing Taliban is enough to

consider as a determinant. India's policy oscillates from being Pakistan centric to humanitarian intervention and others; at best it is a muddle that India has got itself into as there is no clear cut policy for Afghanistan. A continuous and productive bilateral relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan is the only best anti-dote to all problems that inflict Indian Sub-Continent.

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