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India & Afghanistan

Charting the Future



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INDIA & AFGHANISTAN

CHARTING THE FUTURE

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An Overview

Challenges facing New Delhi in shaping its Afghan policy have become increasingly sharper as the US and its allies make a volte face in their policy by extending an olive branch to the Taliban and concede that a military victory is likely to remain elusive. Soaring poppy cultivation, Narco-trafficking, lack of development, endemic corruption in the government and a steady rise in civilian deaths has helped the Taliban to effectively channel popular discontent. With a potential return of Taliban in Kabul, New Delhi's options will shrink, for it has made political investments by backing the Karzai government.

Targeting Indian interests in Afghanistan has become a consistent feature; the dastardly car-bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul on 7 July, 2008 was a part of this larger strategy. In particular, two issues are significant in this attack; first, targeting of Brigadier Mehta, who owing to his extensive experience in counter insurgency operations in Kashmir and the Northeast had been selected to coordinate Indian efforts to provide training and logistical support to the Afghan National Army. Second, the involvement of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), that has been covertly supporting Taliban elements, to destabilize the growing Indian profile in Afghanistan.¹

Striking the right balance is an immediate challenge facing New Delhi. The near collapse of Pakistan's state machinery in its frontier region not only accentuates the crisis across the border in Afghanistan but

also drives the extremist threat much closer home. In the Afghan regional matrix, Pakistan remains a key challenge for India.

Should India place its boots on the ground? To what extent can India continue to expand its diplomatic and economic profile in Afghanistan without an appropriate security apparatus in place? The emerging political and military situation makes it imperative for India to evolve a clear policy, to establish a meaningful presence in the region and realize some of its larger interest.

I AFGHANISTAN: INDIA'S INTERESTS

India traditionally had strong links with various governments in Kabul, except between September 1996 and 2001 when Pakistan supported Taliban was ruling Afghanistan.

After the collapse of Taliban in 2001, India moved quickly into Afghanistan, Besides its embassy in Kabul and consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif (both in Northern Afghanistan), India has reopened its consulates in cities of Kandahar (Southern Afghanistan), Herat (Western Afghanistan) and Jalalabad (Eastern Afghanistan). It has also made unprecedented financial, diplomatic and political capital. India supported the Bonn process, which also resulted in brining the Indian educated Hamid Karzai to the political forefront. India is also making efforts to reach Afghan people by emerging as one of the largest regional and the fifth largest international aid donor to Afghanistan.

The primary objectives of India's foreign policy in Afghanistan are:

¹ Mazzetti and Schmitt, "Pakistani's Aided Attack in Kabul, US Officials Say," *New York Times*, 1 August 2008

- Negating the Taliban influence in the region
- Securing Afghanistan as a trade and energy corridor to Central Asia
- Curtail the spread of drug trafficking in the region.

A. Security Interest

India's security interest primarily revolves around denying any political or military space to the ISI backed Taliban and other such fundamentalist groups, given their past record of not just indulging in fierce anti-India rhetoric but also extending logistical and moral support to anti-India militant groups within the Kashmir valley and outside. Indian support to the predominantly Tajik dominated Northern Alliance and its refusal for any negotiations with the Taliban are a part of this objective.

B. Drug Trafficking

Afghanistan's poppy enters the Indian illegal drug market, through Pakistan. Although the supply of Afghan narcotics pushed in through Pakistan has swiftly dwindled from a high of 64 percent in 1996-1997 to 5 per cent by 2002, owing largely to measures such as higher border vigilance in the post-Kargil phase and fencing and electrification along the border, the nexus between Narco-trafficking and terrorism is helping militant movements in the region. For example, in Taliban's case, funds generated such are also used for paying salaries to Taliban soldiers, estimated to be US \$300 as compared to the paltry US \$40 paid to the Afghan National Army soldiers.²

C. Energy Interests

Afghanistan is India's gateway to energy rich Central Asia – a region which is considered an "extended neighborhood." For India, a stable Afghanistan would result in a viable route for transporting Central Asian energy resources to the Indian

market. This will provide alternative energy source routes in the volatile Middle East region. For example, the Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India (TAPI) pipeline that was tipped to carry gas from the Daulatabad fields in Turkmenistan to India and Pakistan via Afghanistan is backed strongly by the US as an alternative to the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline.³

Afghanistan has potential vast reserves of oil and natural gas, as mentioned in a report by the US geological survey in 2002. The US agency pegs estimates for undiscovered gas reserves anywhere between 3.6 to 36.5 trillion cubic feet, while oil reserves are estimated to be between 0.4 to 3.6 billion barrels, eighteen times higher than earlier estimates. Both resources are concentrated in the Amu Darya basin in the West and the Afghan-Tajik basin in the East. These reserves are likely to shape energy competition in the Central Asian region. China is also equally involved in this region and there has been a sudden increase in its economic and military influence. India and China are likely to compete in this arena and the over bidding for Petro – Kazakh is an example.

A stable and friendly Afghanistan would be to India's advantage as an alternative route of fuel supply in order to keep pace with its demand for hydrocarbons that is expected to skyrocket by 2030, with the country projected to import 83 percent of its fuel needs by then.

II

CHALLENGES & THE WAY AHEAD

There three main challenges: diplomatic, governance and narco-trafficking.

A. Diplomatic Challenges

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http://www.senlisouncil.net/modules/media_centtr e/opeds/loosing_war

³ Raghav Sharma, "Afghan Cauldron: Achieving India's Interests," Issue Brief No. 82, September 2008, New Delhi, 2

Challenge: India has identified its interests closely with the Northern Alliance which is primarily dominated by three ethnic groups: the Tajiks who make up 27 per cent of the population and Hazaras and Uzbeks who constitute 9 per cent each of the population. Iran, Russia, Central Asian Republics and Turkey are also against the Taliban, which is comprised of Pushtuns who constitute roughly 42 per cent of the Afghan population. Although India supports President Hamid Karzai, an ethnic Pushtun, it means little for Karzai is perceived as an American stooge.

India will have to ensure that its past support to the Tajik dominated Northern alliance against the Pashtun dominated Taliban does not serve as a convenient propaganda tool against its interests.

First, India must keep up its efforts to support the Afghan government through economic aid, public diplomacy and non-military assistance that will enable the government to build up capacity in order to restore public confidence in it. Second, with potential political reconfiguration in the offing in Kabul, it would be extremely difficult for India to rigidly stick to its traditional stance of ruling out any negotiation with the Taliban. Although the return of Taliban is a key challenge, India needs to initiate its own backchannel dialogue with reconcilable elements in the Taliban and must brace itself for potential changes in Kabul's political climate.

Third, to address the ethnic balance, Indian aided reconstruction programs should take care of the ethnic and geographical divide. Finally, India has to work with the regional neighbours towards the stabilization of Afghanistan and its emergence as a land bridge between South and Central Asia.

B. Strengthening Governance

Today, there is a deep sense frustration in Afghanistan that has gradually replaced the initial enthusiasm and goodwill for the

government. Rampant corruption in the government machinery, especially in the police and judiciary which affects the everyday life of Afghan citizens has become a major factor in propelling the insurgency that is gaining both momentum and a degree of local support. This goes against India's objectives of denying space to extremist elements in Afghanistan and hence builds up a case for a deeper and more sustained involvement in the non-military sphere.

India should strengthen the government capacity and its performance by expanding its aid programme and pursuing an active role in training the Afghan police force and judiciary in particular. First, India should deepen its engagement in reform and capacity building of Afghanistan's judicial sector through organizing training programs and providing expertise on formally incorporating aspects of customary law so widely relied upon by a majority of the Afghans.⁴ Second, India could also share its experience of *Lok Adalats* (People's Courts) that deal with property cases, monetary damages and matrimonial issues, through adopting an approach of conciliation and compromise. Not only do they help provide speedy justice but there is no court fees, no appeal to a higher court and decision is binding on both the parties.

Third, India could also share the experience of its Panchayati Raj system. It is not just the judicial process and policing but also the poor quality of governance that is leading to a swelling anger and frustration. Panchayats are village level bodies that elect representatives who plan and implement schemes for social and economic development of the village and settle small civil disputes within villages. Fourth, India could also share its National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

⁴ Amy Senier, "Rebuilding the Judicial Sector in Afghanistan: The Role of Customary Law," The Fletcher School, Al Nakah and Tufts University, 2006, 3-4

(NREG), which guarantees one hundred days of employment of one adult member of every rural household at a minimum wage for unskilled labor for a public work⁵. The scheme could be implemented on a pilot basis in some Afghan provinces taking into account local social, economic and cultural factors at play in the country. Fifth, India should encourage and support attempts at political reform and affirmative action that gives marginalized groups such as Shia Hazaras for instance a stake in the system by giving them equal access to education and job opportunities and allowing them the freedom to develop their own cultural institutions. Endemic corruption plaguing much of the government machinery is a major impediment for democracy and has undermined credibility of the elected government. India could offer its experience in setting up a-political bodies such as the Central Vigilance Commission for instance to check corruption at the government level. Encouraging and supporting such changes will help in ushering some stability, restore confidence and break the cycle of de-legitimization of governments and prolonged civil conflict.

However, there can not be good governance unless there is peace within. Drawing the Taliban movement into the political mainstream could have a moderating effect given the exigencies of electoral politics, a good case in point being the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) of Tajikistan that has joined the Government and, in fact, supported a Government crackdown on Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which threatened to undercut IRP support base. Thus Ahmed Rashid aptly opines politics pitted 'one radical force against the other'⁶. India has a stake in promoting political reconciliation that would contribute in stabilizing Afghanistan which in turn would facilitate its transition to a

democratic set up, characterized by a healthy exercise of political power.

C. Countering Narco-Trafficking

A steady rise in levels of Narco-Trafficking undermine efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. Narco-Trafficking has emerged as a profitable venture that helps finance arms purchases and payment of salaries for Taliban's foot-soldiers. Breaking this nexus is vital to any strategy aimed at tackling rising levels of insurgency.

India should support the initiative put forward by the Senlis Council on the poppy for medicines program⁷. This programme propose to legalize poppy cultivation through a system of licensing, add value to crop at the village level by converting it into morphine and channeling funds generated for economic development. This would in turn generate incentive for an estimated 14 million Afghans dependant on illegal poppy cultivation to sever links with drug traffickers. India could contribute by sharing its experiences on its model of licensing poppy production, under which the entire village stands to loose its license if a family indulges in an illegal act, thus providing a powerful social deterrent.

In addition, India can complement efforts at curbing Narco-trafficking by not only supporting existing E.U sponsored programs on training border forces and providing necessary technical resources but also sharing its expertise on rehabilitating the country's devastated agricultural sector. This, would empower communities economically, give them a stake in the system and help in weaning them away from illegal poppy cultivation.

India has extended some assistance such as the supply of 67 tons of vegetable seeds

⁵ <http://nrega.nic.in/>

⁶ Ahmad Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, (Yale University Press, 2002), 111

⁷ The SENLIS Council report on *Poppy for Medicine: Licensing Poppy for the production of essential medicines, an integrated counter-narcotics, development and counter-insurgency model for Afghanistan*, London, June 2001, 12.

to the Ministry of Agriculture.⁸ India could play a bigger role in developing the agricultural sector in Afghanistan, given its own experience and expertise developed through the green revolution. There is tremendous scope for expanding and fine-tuning assistance in this sector.

India could also focus on investing in community programmes related to the agricultural sector, thus giving the local population a stake in ensuring its success and sustenance. For example, initiating community based water projects would help Afghanistan, which has been under the spell of a long drought; its water harvesting and irrigation systems have been destroyed by thirty years of war.

The following could be done on this:

- Assist the local community in restoring traditional sources of irrigation like the *Kareze* that have fallen into disrepair and build new ones.
- Develop techniques of irrigation through utilization of indigenous Indian methods, such as the drip irrigation, which has become successful in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya in India's Northeast. They have been using the 'bamboo drip system' for close to 200 years. In this system, water flowing from the mountain streams and springs is canalized through a network of bamboo pipes that carry water to fields several hundred meters away. The bamboo pipes have a carrying capacity of 18-20 liters at a time and it reaches the plants at a rate ranging between 20-80 drops per minute. The pitcher-method drip irrigation found in Orissa can also be developed. The earthen pitchers punctuated with tiny holes at the bottom are filled with water every 4-5 days and are placed under the plants slowly allowing

water to be delivered to the roots.⁹

- Help the local community in setting up dairy cooperatives that not only add value to farmers income but have empowered local communities involved on an unprecedented scale. Consider for instance the case of AMUL (Anand Milk Union Limited), Asia's largest dairy development cooperative. Today the dairy cooperatives have more than 11 million members of which an estimated seventy per cent of milk producers are small and marginal farmers, with low yielding animals and small land holdings; these characteristics offer a striking similarity with the set up in Afghanistan.¹⁰
- The cooperative model could potentially be replicated for fruit cooperatives, as dry and fresh fruits have a good local and international market. Again, SAFAL (full form?), HPMC (Himachal Pradesh Horticultural Produce Marketing and Processing Corporation Limited) are some of the viable models to draw upon for the same.¹¹

D. Creating Infrastructure

⁹ http://www.cseindia.org/dte-supplement/water20031115/dripping_promse.htm

¹⁰ B.M Vyas, "White Revolution a Remarkable Success in Dairy Development," AMUL India, 2-3.

¹¹ A good example of the Cooperative movement taking root in a conflict zone is that of ANT (The Action Northeast Trust) which works as a weaver cooperative in Chirang district in the Bodo Territorial Administered Districts area of Assam. In addition to weaving it helps generate alternative income through cultivation and also takes up social initiatives such as drug control and health awareness campaigns. It has opened stores for marketing in major Indian metros, airports hotel chains and even overseas in the US. For a detailed account refer to <http://new.theant.org/default.aspx>

⁸ <http://www.mea.gov.in/foreignrelation/09fr01.pdf>

Although reconstruction projects have earned a lot of goodwill, India has not been able to realize their full potential. For example, an analysis of the 215 km Zaranj- Delaram road project in Nimroz province, reveals the positive lessons and key impediments. Strategically Nimroz province is important for several reasons: first, demographically the province is dominated by the Balochs and the Pushtuns. Second, it is the only border province that shares a border with both Pakistan and Iran. Third, the project was expected to provide a major impetus to trade links with Afghanistan and extend it to Central Asia as it would not only shorten the trade route, via the port of Chabahar (Iran) and then by road into Afghanistan, by over 1400 kms, but it would also free Indo-afghan trade from being constrained by Pakistan.

Engaging in such road projects, besides the huge investments, also involve a major security risk. During the execution of the project there were several ambushes, IEDs and suicide attacks by the Taliban. With support from Pakistan, which is suspicious of India's developmental projects, the Taliban specifically choose to target Indian projects and personnel.

The real challenge in constructing such roads depends on its maintenance and future security. This road, today, is suspected to be under the control of the Taliban.

Despite problems, India should continue to put emphasis on more such projects, for there are numerous other benefits. For example, the above project, led to other smaller projects on the request of the local population; the villagers requested Border Roads Organization (BRO) to construct feeder roads to small villages, canals for irrigating fields and ponds and water storage tankers. Also as result of project execution, Dah Afghanistan Bank opened a branch in Zaranj, thus providing the region with its first bank,

Also, such development encourages legal trade. 'Iran's experience in building the Heart-Kandahar road was positive for it converted large number of smugglers into traders. The initial economic spin off's of the Zaranj-Delaram road were also positive as land and poppy prices around the project area have increased as has investment in property.'¹²

In addition to these projects, which are spread out over both strategic and humanitarian sectors India has signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) for cooperation in the following sectors: agriculture, tourism, healthcare and small development projects.¹³

The Indian aid programme is considered one of the most effective and responsive ones operating in Afghanistan as "all projects are undertaken in partnership with the Government of Afghanistan, and in alignment with the Afghanistan National Development Strategy and with a focus on local ownership of assets."¹⁴ Thus synchronization of aid projects to local needs and giving the Afghans a stake in the development process has been key to the effectiveness of Indian aid. Further, the Indian government has been conscious to synchronize its reconstruction programs with the Afghanistan National Development Strategy.¹⁵ Moreover unlike US and other Western aid programmes, Indian reconstruction programmes are not sublet to private contractors. Eminent Pakistani analyst Ahmed Rashid aptly puts down the

¹²Authors interview with Amb KC Singh, New Delhi, 16 January 2009

¹³

<http://meakabul.nic.in/intpage/assistancetoafghanistan.pdf>

¹⁴

http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/IMG/pdf/India_s_Assistance_Programme_in_Afghanistan_-_May_2008.pdf

¹⁵ For a detailed outline of the programme please visit <http://www.ands.gov.af/>

essence of the Indian aid programme and its aims in the following words: “India’s reconstruction strategy was designed to win over every sector of Afghan society, give India a high profile with Afghans, gain the maximum political advantage and of course, undercut Pakistani influence.”¹⁶

III RECOMMENDATIONS

India’s Interests

- Denying any political or military space to the ISI backed Taliban and other such related Islamist groups.
- Break the nexus between Narco-trafficking and insurgency which it helps sustain.
- Secure Afghanistan as a trade and transport land bridge into hydrocarbon rich Central Asian Republics.
- Afghanistan has potential for vast reserves of oil and natural gas.

Challenges and the Way Ahead

- With prospective political alignments and realignments in the offing, Indian diplomacy needs to equip itself better to be able to deal with potential elements in the fray who are not favorably disposed towards Indian sensitivities.
- Ensure that its past support to the Tajik dominated Northern alliance against the Pashtun dominated Taliban does not serve as a convenient propaganda tool for interests hostile to India. One way of ensuring this would be to devise Indian aided reconstruction programs in such a manner that they acquire as wide an ethnic and geographical reach as possible.
- India must keep up its efforts to support the Afghan government through economic aid, public

diplomacy, non-military assistance that will enable government to build up capacity in order to restore public confidence in it.

- Take up a more active role in training police force and judiciary in particular – at present both institutions are mired in corruption - both of which are state institutions which effect lives of the common citizen.
- India should deepen its engagement in reform and capacity building of Afghanistan’s judicial sector through organizing training programs and sharing expertise on formally incorporating aspects of customary law widely relied upon by a majority of the Afghans.
- Boost the nascent and weak judicial system in Afghanistan through models such as that of the *Lok Adalats* (People’s Courts) that resolve property suits, monetary damages and matrimonial issues, through adopting an approach of conciliation and compromise. Not only do they help provide speedy justice but there is no court fees, no appeal to a higher court and decision is binding on both the parties.
- Build up state capacity through the adoption of the *Panchyati Raj* model followed in India. *Gram Panchayats* are the basic foundation on which the *Panchyati Raj* system rests. India is in a position to share its experiences in this field with the Afghan government and help build grassroot level government capacity and make governance more responsive to the needs of the people and thereby reinforce the government’s legitimacy.
- Develop schemes such as the NREG to boost government credibility and capacity in rural Afghanistan.
- Engage in backchannel dialogue with reconcilable elements in the Taliban ranks if India is to retain

¹⁶<http://forums.csis.org/gsionline/?p=520>

and build upon its hard won influence in the region. Moreover, drawing the Taliban movement into the political mainstream could have a moderating effect given the exigencies of electoral politics.

- Encourage and support attempts at political reform and affirmative action that gives marginalized groups such as Shia Hazaras a stake in the system.
- A strategy on countering terror will have to address the issue of Narco-trafficking. One such viable policy initiative worth supporting is the poppy for medicines program put forth by the Senlis Council.
- Support existing E.U sponsored programs on training border forces and providing necessary technical.
- Rehabilitate the devastated agrarian sector by sharing technology and low-cost farming solutions, but more significantly share knowledge and experience in setting up dairy cooperatives (like AMUL) that not only add value to a farmers income but have empowered local communities on an unprecedented scale.
- The cooperative model could potentially be replicated for fruit cooperatives, as dry and fresh fruits which have a good local and international market.
- Assist the local community in restoring traditional sources of irrigation like the *Kareze* that have fallen into disrepair and build new ones.
- Develop techniques of irrigation through utilization of indigenous Indian methods, such as the 'bamboo drip system' and the 'pitcher method drip'.
- Continue development projects as it leads to positive spin off's like the creation of irrigation canals, community wells and opening up of banks that will promote licit trade opportunities.