

India's Strategic Challenges: Understanding the Taliban-Afghanistan Dynamics

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Abstract

The Afghan War has entered a critical period in which the U.S. is actively seeking a peace settlement with the Taliban, and doing so in spite of the fact that it is negotiating without the full participation of the Afghan government. Its options now consist of finding some form of peace, leaving the country without any form of victory or security, or fighting indefinitely in a country whose central government has no near or mid-term capability to either defeat its opponents or survive without massive military and civil aid.

Peace is a highly uncertain option. There are no official descriptions of the terms of the peace that the Administration is now seeking to negotiate, but media reports indicate that it may be considering a full withdrawal of its military support within one to two years of a ceasefire, and other reports indicate that it is considering a 50% cut in U.S. military personnel even if a peace is not negotiated.

Key words: Idealism, Pragmatism, Realism, Policymaking

Introduction

Afghanistan has been a key player in Asian geopolitics owing to its geostrategic and geopolitical location. Being situated at the crossroads of the Middle East, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, it has been a transit and transport hub since the ancient Silk route. In the context of global affairs, its central location and borders with six other nations including Iran, Pakistan, China, Turkmenistan have made it a hot-bed for conflict and cooperation. In this regard, the withdrawal of Soviet forces from the Afghan Civil war has considerably changed Afghanistan's role and position in the whole of Asia. Moreover, the emergence of various Mujahidin parties sponsored by neighbouring countries and interference from outside powers has turned Afghanistan into total havoc.

Amidst all the chaos, both the neighbouring countries of India and Pakistan have been vital for Afghanistan in restructuring and changing its political landscape. From providing military, diplomatic and financial support on part of the Indian side, to attempt to hold peace talks between insurgent groups and the government, while at the same time providing a safe haven to these extremist groups on the Pakistani side; the bilateral relationship with each of the two nations have been of prime importance in Afghanistan across various regimes since the late 1990s.

Rule of Law

Reliable data are lacking on the extent to which Afghanistan provides a functioning rule of law. It is clear, however, that many courts and aspects of the legal system are not fully functional. Corruption

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and power brokering have a major impact at every level of law enforcement and court proceedings, and that courts do not function effectively in a number of areas and districts – including those controlled by the Taliban, although no reliable maps or detailed analyses seem to exist of how serious these problems are.

What is clear is that LIG and SIGAR reporting indicate that the Afghan National Police and Afghan Local Police currently suffer from serious problems with corruption and political influence, and a series of reform efforts has not prepared them to be properly effective in either paramilitary operations or law enforcement.

Analytical Study

Analyse the inversely proportional trend in Afghanistan's bilateral relationships with India and Pakistan across different governments. In this respect, the paper will elucidate and describe the evolution of Afghanistan's relationship with both India and Pakistan across three major governments since 1996; starting from the Taliban rule (from 1996 to 2001) followed by the Karzai government (from 2001 to 2014) and finally reaching the current government under Ashraf Ghani (2014 onwards). The paper will carry out this analysis by reviewing various agreements, deals and statements offered by heads of all the three countries in different phases. By doing this the paper will conclude validating the main argument of uniquely contradicting bilateral ties of both the countries with Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's relationship with India and Pakistan can be best described through the metaphor of a see-saw; where an improvement in the relationship with one of them comes with a trade-off with the other. With regards to this when it comes to Afghan's foreign policies with India and Pakistan, looking through the prisms of bilateral relations is not enough. There is always an inherent connection and correlation which deeply influences its policies with the latter two. From the post-Cold War era through modern-day, Kabul has varied in its closeness to India and Pakistan, with gains by one side coming at the expense of the other. It is because of this swinging orientation that Kabul's Indo-Pak policy has been one of the most debatable topics in Afghan foreign policy. Several discussions and dialogues have surfaced within Afghan governments over how to best balance between Delhi-Islamabad. Whether it's more beneficial to tilt towards India or approach Pakistan for peace and security in order to safeguard and cope up with its internal issues. The shifting patterns between the two policy paths have gone through numerous variations with each government. However, in theoretical terms, the Indo-Pak policy can be labelled as a mix of idealism, pragmatism, and realism. This can be illustrated by examining the phases of Afghanistan's domestic politics.

As of late-August 2019, the Taliban continued to reject any formal peace negotiations with the Afghan government, and its military activity and acts of violence while it negotiated with the United States. Terrorist groups like ISIS-K add to the threat, as do the many splits within the Afghani government and political structure. The Taliban has not encouraged further ceasefires, or shown any clear willingness to accept a lasting peace on any terms but its own. It may well see peace negotiations as a means of negotiating a withdrawal of U.S. and other allied forces and a prelude to a peace that it could exploit to win control of Afghanistan.

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At the same time, the other options are no better. They either mean leaving without a peace and the near certain collapse of the Afghan government, or continuing the war indefinitely with no clear timeframe for victory or the emergence of an Afghan government that can fight on its own or act as an effective civil government.

Much of the analysis of these three options has focused on the possible terms of the peace, the immediate progress in the fighting, and/or the coming Afghan election and Afghanistan's immediate political problems. These are all important issues, but they do not address the basic problems in Afghan security forces that will limit its military capabilities indefinitely into the future, or the scale of the civil problems in Afghanistan that have given it failed governance and made it the equivalent of a failed state, and that will shape its future in actually implementing any peace or in attempting to continue the war.

NATO and Afghanistan

NATO remains committed to the enduring partnership with Afghanistan. Following its two missions – the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the Resolute Support Mission (RSM) – NATO Allies and partners continue to stand with Afghanistan, its people and its institutions to promote security and uphold the hard-won gains of the last 20 years.

Indian Scenario

It is to cover Bangladesh and Myanmar in particular. How, since 1947, since post-independence, has India behaved towards these two neighbours and how it balances the sometimes-competing requirements between these two. But also, India's own economic and strategic interests in the wider east as well as the sense of competition that has dawned on India's foreign policymaking as far as the Chinese influence is concerned, including in North East India.

Despite certain similarities of characters and dynamics – a weak centre and fragmented governance and power – there is a very clear sense among the various parties, including the Taliban that they cannot afford to go back to the 1990s moment.

The trauma of that fragmentation did not just affect neighbours; it affected the people of Afghanistan themselves. So what we're seeing is that, whichever party comes to power, there would be a clear sense of having some degree of whatever kind of stability they can get, ugly or not.

Perhaps that is why there are figures within the Afghan government who are much more willing to talk with the Taliban today than they are even with their own sitting president, Afghan Ghani.

So there are structural similarities, but personalities are different.

The key ally India had in the late 1980s and 1990s, President Najibullah, was in a different structural context. He had much more acceptability among sections of the Pashtun community and also the non-Pashtuns. He had political commitment to a nationalist Afghan cause.

India too wanted to have peaceful relations with a democratically elected Government as it helped us to balance Trade and historical cultural relations with Neighbours. Pakistan never likes to see India's Party in Afghanistan because of hostile policies towards us. Afghanistan becomes a colony and

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backyard for illicit trade of Arms, Drugs (Poppy) to finance its Terror organizations. Using Afghan militias in promoting Terrorism to establish rule of Islam in all over world, which is their foreign Policy of Peace, Tolerance, Growth and Development of business.

Even as it struggles to handle India also faces the prospect of a deeply unsettled neighbourhood. In Afghanistan, the impending withdrawal of US troops all but ensures some degree of violence and a bigger role for the Taliban, with Pakistan's support. In Myanmar, the military junta's coup has added to pre-existing tensions, with the country at risk of descending into civil war. India's decision-making processes when it comes to immediate neighbours. In *My Enemy's Enemy*, for example, he tells the story of India's Afghanistan policy over the last few decades through the lens of bureaucrats and politicians who largely either see the country as the staging ground of a proxy battle with Pakistan, or as a neighbour that could serve New Delhi's long-term interests. He is currently researching India's foreign policymaking processes towards Myanmar and Bangladesh.

India-Afghanistan project, there was a competing intellectual dynamic at play. On the one hand, I wanted to step away from bilaterals, which have dominated India's policy scene, and which do not always offer a comprehensive picture of India's international thought and practice. But at the same time I wanted to use those bilateral frameworks, because India has been so invested in bilaterals historically, to tell a wider global story and also be able to analyse the intricacies of India's foreign policy.

Overcome that structural mistrust among wide sections of Bangladeshi society should be and must be the key long-term strategic goal of India. And that is where can learn from Afghanistan, where excessive focus on partisan support to one element instead of a diversified strategy is something that does not yield results in the long term.

Global Trends:

American decision-making has become very clear, now that the withdrawal is actually taking place. We as a country should play a more active part if we get a chance to develop the Army and Air force of Afghanistan so that they defend themselves and avoid their land becoming the target and playground of War games big Boy's love to Play and Ulterior motives of Pakistan. We have done good to generate good will by building dams, training their Army and taking up reconstruction Work. We need the US to pump money and we being close to them develop what was lacking when the US left Afghanistan. A democratic Afghanistan and that too a Peaceful one is a challenge more than being envisaged but we have no other option but to do it to keep ourselves protected and screw Pakistan's nefarious designs at the behest of China.

Major Projects

India has undertaken a range of small-scale development projects. This may well be increased. Hitherto these projects have been concentrated in Pashtun border areas, upsetting Pakistan, which has accused Indian consulates of being fronts for espionage. India also plans to increase its capacity building for the Afghan government, broadening its engagement to issues such as education and health. Some of the smaller projects being undertaken by India are: • Funding for the Afghan Ministry

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of Health to build and maintain medical clinics, • The construction of cold storage food warehouses in Kandahar, • Construction on the Habibia school, • Renovation of the Indira Gandhi hospital, • Establishing an agricultural university and a mining school, • Restoring the Stor Palace, • Training Afghan army officers and policemen, • 1,300 annual college scholarships and training grants for civil servants (a further 200 scholarships for agricultural degrees were provided from 2010), • 20 Indian technical advisors in Afghan ministries under a trilateral agreement with the UNDP, and • Capacity building for Afghan ministers

Educational Era

Thousands of Afghan students' study in India, and Afghanistan is the largest recipient of scholarships provided by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. Given the presence of Western troops in Afghanistan, Western publics understandably view Afghanistan through a military prism. India has a different historical conception of Afghanistan. Along with the current military presence in Afghanistan, for the West Afghanistan is often contextualised through the various Anglo-Afghan wars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, along with the Soviet invasion of 1979–89. As the Western military presence nears an end, this 'graveyard of empires' narrative is becoming louder. India, however, comprised large parts of present-day Afghanistan for most of the Mughal period from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century. At its end the Mughal Empire was confined to Shahjahanabad. Consequently, there is some sense of a shared history, and perhaps a more prevalent sense that Afghanistan is not intrinsically ungovernable. Take more sense and would act to build confidence between India and Pakistan

Recent Trends

Currently transiting through Pakistan would be cheaper, and Pakistan would appear to be taking seriously the financial benefits that could accrue by allowing transit trade. Were relations to improve, the option of transiting through Pakistan could emerge as a further confidence-building measure. While some of SAIL's management were thought to be wary of the deal, it seems clear that the Indian government encouraged the bid (the consortium also comprises NMDC, Jindal Steel and Ispat. While India's firms often encourage the government's 'economic diplomacy', in Afghanistan the government is encouraging its firms to invest. Approximately 100 Indian companies have invested in Afghanistan since 2001. The breakdown in investment by sector is 43 per cent in services, 41 per cent in construction and 16 per cent in industries.⁸ Around 80 joint ventures have been established by Afghan-Indian firms with a total initial capital of \$20 million. Although the bulk of Indian investment in Afghanistan so far has come from public-sector companies, events such as the Delhi Investment Summit on Afghanistan aim to showcase investment opportunities to private investors. Concerns about the turbulent security situation in Afghanistan explain the reticence of private investors up to this point.

Future Trends

Indian engagement India is aware that the situation in Afghanistan could deteriorate markedly. The withdrawal of most Western troops coupled with questions over the 2014 election both give grounds for concern. While India is investing heavily in measures to support the central government, its

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response to the worst-case scenario – the collapse of central government authority and return to full-scale conflict – is relatively easy to gauge. India's is already taking steps to reinvigorate its relationship with Tajikistan. In September 2012 they agreed to the 'continuing expansion of defence cooperation' and to establish a 'friendship hospital'. In the late 1990s India started negotiations with Tajikistan to use the Farkhor Airbase (two miles from the Afghan border) to transport supplies and military advisers to the Northern Alliance. A hospital was also established to treat injured Northern Alliance fighters. While Tajikistan has not yet agreed for India to reopen the overseas airbase, recent moves suggest that in the event of civil war India would readopt its 1990s tactics of shoring up the Northern Alliance. Such a scenario would be predicated on India boosting its government-to-government relations with Central Asia, and in particular with Tajikistan. India's commercial footprint in Central Asia is 9 'But such a scenario also suggests a deterioration of India's relations with Pakistan – the scenario of civil war requires a presumption of increased Pakistani support for the Taliban. India's commercial operations are cautious. The SAIL-led consortium AFISCO (Afghan Iron and Steel Consortium) would appear to be proceeding slowly in operationalizing the Hajigak iron-ore mine. This has led to threats that it risks losing its licence if it fails to meet production targets or to start mining within six months of the licence being granted. AFISCO is the preferred bid for three out of four blocks and is currently negotiating terms of the contract. SAIL opposes the terms given by the Afghan ministry of mines instead wanting the agreement to state that 'if the company has not commenced exploration within 12 months for reasons beyond the control of the company unreasonably reject'. While SAIL argues that its position relates to financing issues seems more likely that it does not plan any significant investments until the trajectory of security within Afghanistan is clearer. Given that SAIL is state-owned these concerns would seem to reflect wider Indian government thinking. If the consortium were to expedite investment, this would provide a fair indication that Indian expectations of civil war are falling.

Conclusion

India's relationship with Afghanistan is multi-layered; there is clearly a military and security angle, under which India aspires for stability within Afghanistan and hanging over which is the shadow of its relationship with Pakistan. While growing, the military relationship with Afghanistan remains relatively low-key, though it has the potential to be significantly ramped up dependent both upon developments in Afghanistan and on the actions taken by Pakistan. More positively, there is a social and economic engagement, including investment by Indian firms and development projects undertaken by the Indian government. India's lead role under the Istanbul Process of regional engagement reflects its attempts to normalize Afghanistan in the eyes of the region.

After a thorough analysis of each phase in Afghan politics since 1996, it can be said with conviction that Afghanistan's policy towards India has always been the antithesis of its approach towards Pakistan. In this regard, this paper has highlighted numerous policies that indicate such a distinctive and interesting trend in Afghan's Indo-Pak policy. India get away from the larger canons of international relations – realism, liberalism, constructivism – to actually look at the mechanics of policymaking. Within foreign policy analysis as a field, I zeroed in on a framework called the advocacy-coalition framework. One of the reasons that can be attributed to this pattern is the

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dynamics of international rivalry between India and Pakistan. In this respect, it can be argued that all the disparate tensions and disputes between the two have led to contradicting and opposing interests in Afghanistan; leading to inversely proportional bilateral relationships with the two nations with a general pattern of India being in the 'good books' and Pakistan juggling between the 'good and the bad'. However, as this paper focused on a historical review of the policies with the two nations from Afghanistan's standpoint, the possible reasons explaining the same can inspire further analytical and in-depth research in Afghanistan's tangled history with India and Pakistan.

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