

INDO-US COOPERATION IN AFGHANISTAN: MOVING TOWARDS CONVERGENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to identify and analyses some of the key areas of convergence of interests of India and US in Afghanistan in the existing international environment. The changed security discourse in post 9/11 period accompanied by significant structural changes in world politics provided an opportunity to both India and US to foster a durable partnership in Afghanistan to their mutual advantage. Though both the countries have taken some important initiatives in this direction, yet these steps so far have not been effectively synergized with the prevailing ground realities and desired policy coordination with other state actors in the region. This lack of coordination with other important stakeholders in Afghanistan can prove costly to both the countries in the long run. So, while responding to Trump administration's call for an enlarged Indian presence in Afghanistan, India needs to convey this message to Washington loud and clear. The extent to which India succeeds in doing so is going to determine her regional and global status as an emerging power.

KEY WORDS: India, Afghanistan, United States, Cooperation, Terrorism

Indo-US cooperation in Afghanistan has undergone a paradigm shift following the fall of the Taliban in 2001. The drawdown of US troops from Afghanistan followed by Pakistan's failure to deliver on its promise of containing the terrorist outfits propelled the United States to opt for a larger Indian role in Afghanistan. It signifies a strategic shift in US thinking with regard to India's presence in Afghanistan. Initially, the US was hesitant to support any Indian military role in Afghanistan. But the results of 16 years of US military engagement and a defied Pakistan seemed to have convinced Washington to look up to India as a reliable partner in Afghanistan. Even the new Afghan policy announced by US President Donald Trump on 20th August, 2017 recognized the important contribution that India has made so far and could make in future to stabilize Afghanistan.

The degrading security environment in Afghanistan following the departure of the international coalition troops remains a cause of concern to both the countries. The new Afghan govt. headed by Mr. Ashraf Ghani is facing a tough challenge in checking a renewed Taliban insurgency on the one hand and maintaining internal law and order on the other. Despite the presence of around 8400 foreign Special Forces to carry out counter-insurgency operations and to train Afghan National Forces following the signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement with US, the Afghan government is hardly able to control 57% of the country according to an estimate of the US military this year. An unstable and

insecure Afghanistan is a threat to both the countries including South Asia as a whole. Therefore, it is high time that US-India relationship should be given a solid footing as far as Afghanistan is concerned. This relationship should be embedded in a regional structural framework to make it more robust and beneficial to one another.

This paper attempts to explore and evolve the prospects of a common strategy by both the countries with regard to Afghanistan. It is structured into three different parts. The first part deals with the US interests and policy in Afghanistan. The second part deals with India's interests and policy in Afghanistan. The third and final part attempts to come out with suggestions for possible areas of cooperation between India and US in Afghanistan and its implications for the future of Afghanistan.

US INTEREST AND POLICY IN AFGHANISTAN

US interests in Afghanistan declined in post-1990 period following the collapse of the former Soviet Union. However, the 9/11 attacks on World Trade Centre brought a great change in US geopolitical calculations in South Asia in general and Afghanistan and Pakistan in particular. (Meharajuddin, 2015,5-12) The American policy makers realized how dangerous and challenging the menace of terrorism could be even for a country enjoying superpower status in world politics. So, the Global War against Terror came to occupy the center stage in US foreign policy.

Henceforth, US reoriented its foreign policy and gave priority to destroy the terrorist safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan to ensure its own security. It realized the folly of extending blind support to Pakistan as it used to do during the Cold War days in view of Pakistan's role in harboring and nurturing the terrorist organizations. In fact, it is universally accepted in wider circles of policy analysts that the Afghan imbroglio cannot be dealt with effectively by ignoring Pakistan. The Afghan President Ashraf Ghani during his address at the sixth Heart of Asia Summit held at Amritsar, accused Pakistan of launching undeclared war on his country through indirect support to terrorist networks. Quoting a top Taliban terrorist he said that without Pakistan's support the Taliban cannot last even a month. (Retrieved from <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/no-amount-of-money-can-help-us-if-pak-supports-terrorists-afghan-president> on December 4, 2016)

The US Intelligence chief Dan Coats in a recent Senate hearing on 17th May, 2017 informed that the security situation in Afghanistan is likely to further deteriorate through 2018 despite a modest increase in military assistance by US and its partners. Even in February this year, the veteran US Army General in Afghanistan, John Nicholson asked for more troops to take on a renewed Taliban insurgency. In order to deal with a resurgent Taliban, US President Donald Trump declared his new Afghan policy. The key elements of this policy include an unspecified troop increase, an open ended commitment to station American forces in Afghanistan, more decision making powers to US commanders on the ground, a warning to Pakistan to stop supporting the terrorist outfits and finally call for an enlarged Indian presence in Afghanistan.

President Trump's new Afghan policy has some marked differences compared to the policy followed by the Obama administration. (Retrieved from <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/full-texts-of-donald-trumps-speech-on-south-asia-policy/article> on August 22, 2017) Some of these policy departures augur well for India. Unlike his predecessor, Trump's Afghan policy unambiguously conveyed the role of India in Afghanistan, ignoring the security concerns of Pakistan. Secondly, by issuing a stern warning to Pakistan in clearer terms, it acknowledged that Pakistan is the key stumbling block to peace in Afghanistan. Thirdly, by not resorting to the temptation of fixing deadlines for troop withdrawal, President Trump foiled the attempts of both the state and non-state actors in Afghanistan to play their games to fill the vacuum in a post-withdrawal phase. Further, an assured US presence

will greatly contribute towards creating an enabling environment in Afghanistan by preventing brain drain, flow of Afghans as refugees to other countries and also check flight of foreign capital. This will boost the confidence of the Afghan government to carry forward the much needed domestic reforms in vital sectors like security, health, election system, education and last but not the least tackling corruption. (Retrieved from <https://thewire.in/65680/the-ins-and-outs-of-the-india-us-afghanistan-trilateral-dialogue> on September 13, 2016) All this can greatly contribute towards political stability in Afghanistan which is the need of the hour.

INDIA'S INTERESTS AND POLICY IN AFGHANISTAN

The events of September 2001 and the resultant change in the geopolitical environment in South Asia presented good opportunities for India to enter into a multi-dimensional relationship with Afghanistan. India seized the opportunity by taking an active part in Afghan reconstruction efforts since the signing of the Bonn Agreement in 2001. This relationship had never been so cordial and prominent in earlier periods. Unlike the Cold War years when India's ability to pursue its interests in Afghanistan were seriously circumscribed by the strategic moves of US in South Asia, post-9/11 period witnessed the absence of those strategic constraints. The US began to see the world through the prism of terror. This led to a perceptible change in the geopolitical calculations of US towards South Asia and in turn paved the way for entering into a strategic partnership with India to fight the Global War on Terror.

India is having significant stakes in Afghanistan. The location of Afghanistan on the gateway of South Asia and Central Asia is of immense strategic importance for India, particularly after the emergence of several independent Central Asian republics. The changed geostrategic landscape in the oil rich Central Asian region could prove to be a boon for India's energy security provided India remains engaged in Afghanistan. Since India is not having direct land route access to Afghanistan and is denied access to Central Asia through Pakistan, so she is making all efforts to seek access to Afghanistan through Iran. In view of this, India is partnering with Iran to develop the strategically important Chabahar port through which it could have access to Afghanistan bypassing Pakistan and onward Central Asia.(Yow,2013,1-4) This will greatly help India in maintaining a healthy trading relationship both with Afghanistan as well as Central Asia. Strategically, India's presence in Afghanistan is also significant because it will not

only enable India to monitor Pakistan, but also influence activities in Pakistan. Moreover, though underappreciated, developments in Pakistan and Afghanistan are important to India as these could have significant domestic implications for India's internal security and social fabric as well.

India's interests in Afghanistan go beyond bilateralism. It should not be viewed as Pakistan-centric because Afghanistan symbolizes a testing case for India's rising as an extra-regional power moving towards great power status. India's massive socio-economic and security assistance put her in the club of top five donor countries to Afghanistan. So far India by successfully projecting her soft power is able to win the heart and minds of the Afghan people. Moreover, historically speaking Kabul is always more closer to New Delhi than to Islamabad. Therefore, India should leverage both her soft power as well as good terms with Afghan leaders to ensure security for its men and material in Afghanistan. This should be of top priority for Indian government keeping in view frequent attacks on Indian consulates and abduction of Indian personnel working in Afghanistan. (Retrieved from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/abducted-indian-engineer-rescued-in-afghanistan/story> on October 8, 2017) So, it would be better if both India and US along with the Afghan government could work out common security policies for securing Indian investments in Afghanistan.

Therefore, growing terrorist activities in the post-withdrawal phase warrants greater coordination between India and US. A renewed Taliban insurgency made it all the more important for all the stakeholders- US, India, Iran the international community in general to coordinate their policies in Afghanistan. A peaceful, strong, stable and democratic dispensation in Afghanistan is of utmost importance for peace and stability in South Asia as well as for India's own security interests. It is the best guarantee to ensure that Afghan soil is not used for launching terror activities against India or elsewhere.

PROSPECTIVE AREAS OF US-INDIA COOPERATION

The growing terror attacks, a weak Afghan National Unity Government (NUG) operating in paralysis mode accompanied by a dubious Pakistani role in negotiations make it more urgent for both India and US to take steps to move forward in developing a common and integrated approach towards Afghanistan. (Retrieved from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/285-afghanistan-future-national-unity-government> on May 10,

2017) Given the shared interests, it is pertinent that both the countries should aim at (a) developing a political consensus in Afghanistan, (b) working towards political and regional integration of Afghanistan, and (c) strengthen Afghan Security Forces.

MAKING EFFORTS TOWARDS DEVELOPING A POLITICAL CONSENSUS IN AFGHANISTAN

- India and the United States should work towards developing some sort of consultative mechanism to restore people's confidence in the Election Commission. In this direction, due efforts should be made to make the election machinery transparent and accountable in a way that fairness of elections conducted by it should not be questioned. They should support civil society initiatives for strengthening public support for credible election.

- India should take initiatives to support the building of the capacity and effectiveness of the Afghan government by encouraging exchange programmes of civil servants in different ministries. A greater portion of the financial assistance being given to Afghan government should be extended through budget and not through outside contractors, so that it can use as leverage by the Indian government to pressurize Afghan government to go for strong anticorruption measures.

- India can play an important role in the reconciliation process between the Afghan government and the Taliban despite reservations from Pakistan. In this context, the recent revival of the India-US-Afghanistan trilateral dialogue at the UNGA should be taken to its logical conclusion. (Retrieved from <https://www.indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india-us-afghanistan-reaffirmshared-interest-against-terror-3043727/> on September 22, 2016) This will greatly supplement India's active participation in the International Contact Group on Afghanistan and the more recently the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

- Both the Indian and the US policy makers should strive towards facilitating a civil-society effort at reconciliation between and among the diverse ethnic groups across the whole of Afghanistan as it will pave the way for a lasting and long term peace. In this context, given India's popularity among the Afghan people, US should support such an initiative as it can prove to be an asset in the reconciliation process.

FOSTERING POLITICAL AND ECONOMICAL REGIONAL INTEGRATION

- Both India and US should encourage the political and economic integration of Afghanistan with South Asia as a whole. In order to achieve this, it becomes necessary that policy makers in New Delhi and Washington should try to come up with proper institutional mechanisms to carry on dialogues to achieve desired outcomes in Afghanistan that are acceptable to both.

- By now, the US has already acknowledged the fact that Pakistani soil is being used to provide a safe haven to terrorists and Pakistan's nascent democratic set up is itself a victim of the terror activities. Both India and US share the common goal of a Pakistan that forgoes its rivalry with India in Afghanistan and is economically better integrated with its neighbors. Better policy coordination between India and US can help in achieving these goals. The Delhi Investment Summit of 2013 and the recently concluded Indo-Afghan trade fair in New Delhi from 27-30th September, 2017 facilitated by US represent a good initiative in this regard.

- Both India and the US should encourage other countries, multilateral forums and private partners to invest in Afghanistan to give a boost to regional trade and thereby facilitate regional economic integration. The October 2012 India-US-Japan trilateral dialogue represents a good start in this direction
- India can play an important bridging role in bringing China and Russia into the negotiating table to expand regional trade to encompass Afghanistan within its ambit. Indian policy makers should also pursue dialogues with Tehran for boosting regional trade. (Retrieved from <https://www.tolnews.com/afghanistan/china-russia-india-agree-cooperate-over-afghanistan> on October 17, 2016)

STRENGTHENING AFGHAN NATIONAL SECURITY FORCES

- While extending any military support to Afghanistan, India should take care to address the Pakistani concerns and sensitivities on security front. India and US should try to avoid duplication of efforts as far as supply of military equipment to Afghanistan is concerned and this can be done only through better policy coordination.

- In the midst of efforts to strengthen the Afghan National Army, the training and capacity building of Afghan National Police has been neglected. In this regard, India and US can help in providing training to Afghan police jointly by developing training modules and supplying modern equipments.

- India and US should come forward in building the military infrastructure within Afghanistan, either jointly or on their own seeing the viability of the concerned project.

- High ranking officials from New Delhi, Washington, Brussels and Kabul should be in touch with regard to the security situation in Afghanistan. For this purpose, a military contact group could be set up as it would ensure better policy coordination and at the same time give a better picture regarding the security needs of Afghanistan.

The ground situation in Afghanistan thus still remains very dynamic and fluid. In view of the commonality of interests on many fronts, there is enough potential for constructive engagement between India and United States in Afghanistan. As far as possible, both the countries should better coordinate to facilitate Afghanistan's economic integration with South Asia and Central Asia. In the meantime, India should remain prepared to take up more leadership role in Afghanistan in future because until recently US was taking up such a role and India used to play a less prominent role. On the whole, India-US cooperation in Afghanistan is having all the potential to outweigh the drawbacks if it is pursued sincerely and transparently.

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