



Afghan Cauldron

Achieving India's Interests

Raghav Sharma

Research Intern, IPCS, New Delhi

The recent joint statement issued after the meeting between Dr. Manmohan Singh and President Hamid Karzai highlighted India's "full support to the goal of sovereign, democratic, peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan, conducive to the peace, security and stability of the region." It reflects New Delhi's seriousness towards stabilizing Afghanistan, which is essential to the regional stability in the South Asia. A stable Afghanistan also augurs well for furthering India's larger regional goals that is both political and economic.

On the political front, India's objectives are twofold; first to counter Pakistan's attempt to destabilize Indian presence through the ISI. Bombing of the Indian mission in Kabul, widely believed to have done on ISI's behest is an example. Second, to deny any political space to extremist groups, such as the Taliban and al Qaeda, which will have larger implications to the regional security. On the economic front, India's primary objective is to transform Afghanistan into a land bridge connecting the energy rich Central Asia.

New Delhi has been working assiduously to realize its strategic objectives in Afghanistan through Indian aided reconstruction programs aimed at nation building that have been received positively by the local populace. India's commitment has been further reiterated with the government announcing a US\$450 million aid package on the eve of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's visit to New Delhi in August, 2008, in addition to the US\$ 750 million already pledged placing India amongst the top five donor countries.

Such efforts assume greater significance with a

resurgent Taliban, which controls between 10 (US estimate) to 54 percent (British estimate) of Afghan territory. These developments make it imperative to reinvigorate efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. The increasing 'Islamic terrorism' pose a threat not only to India's national security but also has the potential to undermine the social fabric of the India by providing cannon fodder to extremist forces. Both factors make it imperative that India's engagement with Kabul is of paramount significance to the political, social and economic stability in Afghanistan.

INDIA'S INTERESTS IN AFGHANISTAN

India's primary interests in Afghanistan include the following: negating Taliban's influence, securing a road and energy corridor to Central Asia and preventing the spread of drug and weapons proliferation.

Negating the Influence of Taliban and al Qaeda

It is vital for New Delhi to act in conjunction with others to thwart attempts by the Taliban to recapture power. While Indian efforts at aiding the Bonn process following the fall of the Taliban to bring out a semblance of relative political stability were well received, India should reach out to the various ethnic groups, especially the Pushtuns who largely constitute the Taliban. The popular perception today is - India an ally of the Tajik dominated Northern alliance. India should hence encourage a broad based multi-ethnic political formation to stem instability that have rocked Afghanistan for the last two and a half decades.

How could India help Afghanistan in arresting the growth of Taliban? Indian funded aid programs

aimed at long term development initiatives in fields ranging from telecommunications, electricity generation, building of vital road links to training of teachers, diplomats, army and police officials have created immense goodwill amongst the common man in Afghanistan and will supplement initiatives being taken to stabilize the country. However, India needs to engage more intensely in sectors like health, education and agriculture. Indian aided reconstruction efforts allow adequate local participation by giving Afghans a stake in development process and thus bolstering its own standing amongst the populace.

The goodwill thus generated needs to be more effectively capitalized by building up India's soft power. For example, by actively promoting Indian cinema which has for many decades acquired a cult status amongst ordinary Afghans. Also by encouraging people to people contacts in the fields of education

Energy Security

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have brought it into conflict with China, seen for instance in a bitter spat between the two over bidding for Petro-Kazakh. Today, China has a clear edge. India has to be careful to not antagonize Beijing if it is to pursue its dream of alternative pipeline routes. Afghanistan would be an important entry point on this issue. Second, investment of resources to create a stable Afghanistan could in the long run help the country emerge as a viable route for transporting Central Asian energy resources to the Indian market. This

will provide alternatives to energy sources to the existing ones in the volatile Middle East region. One such proposal mooted was 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. This pipeline is backed strongly by the US as an alternative to the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline.

Third, a report by the US geological survey in 2002, expanded on earlier studies of Soviet and Afghan geologists have established that Afghanistan has potential for vast reserves of oil and natural gas. The US agency pegs the estimates for undiscovered gas reserves to be 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 to the East. These reserves are likely to shape the competition for energy resources in the Central Asian region.

A stable and friendly Afghanistan would be to India's advantage as an alternative route of fuel supply to keep pace with its demand for hydrocarbons that is expected to skyrocket by 2030 with the country expected to import 83 percent of its fuel needs to help its economy. This requires India to reconceptualize its strategic perspective.

Afghanistan also sits on a substantial reserves of gold, copper and gemstones for all of which India has a huge demand, is a net importer and needs to diversify its sources for the same. Although the hostile security environment will not allow for any immediate achievements, the potential economic benefits and its contribution towards 'energy security' should play a major role in India's Afghan policy.

Weapons Proliferation and Drug Trafficking

Afghanistan can serve as a strategic base to keep an eye on the potential proliferation of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons in the region. Central Asian Republics like Kazakhstan has large quantities of Highly Enriched Uranium (between 10,590-10,940kgs); and the region played host to the Soviet weapons program. With little effective mechanisms and political will to control the activities of non-state actors like the Islamic

Movement of Uzbekistan that have links with Al-Qaeda, there exists a potential security risk.

Drug trafficking is another important area where India needs to concentrate. Afghanistan's poppy enter 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 percent by 2002 owing largely to measures such as higher border vigilance in the post-Kargil phase and fencing and electrification along the border. However an increase in illegal cultivation of opium in Afghanistan has indirect but adverse effects that India needs to address. Much of the money generated from this clandestine trade is used to fund the activities of extremist Islamist terror networks that possess the ability to foment trouble for India.

Indian policy on tackling drug trafficking should focus on reducing opium cultivation by sponsoring extensive education programs for farmers on mineral and soil depletion that the crop causes. However education and sensitization by themselves are not enough, providing farmers with quality raw materials, machines and alternative high value crops is also crucial.

This effort could possibly be further strengthened by helping them set up cooperative ventures along lines of AMUL India that would enable farmers switch from dependence on aid to greater independence and sustainability in the long run. Thus, substantially reducing the possibility of the farmer reverting to poppy cultivation once aid dries up.

II ACHIEVING INDIA'S INTERESTS: CHALLENGES AHEAD

Courting Kabul will by no means be an easy task for the Indian establishment and several challenges need to be surmounted for New Delhi that would then enable it to carry out a mutually conducive courtship with Kabul. In particular there are three key challenges India will inescapably have to confront if it aspires to harness the full benefits of cultivating a friendly and stable Afghanistan.

First, India will have to tactfully deal with Pakistan's attempts to destabilize Indian presence in the region, demonstrated by attack on Indian workers

engaged in a cross section of reconstruction projects in Afghanistan as also targeting of its diplomatic missions in Afghanistan. Most recent of them being in Kabul following which the National Security Advisor MK Narayanan opined "We not only suspect but we have a fair amount of intelligence... We have no doubt that the ISI is behind this..."

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Second, China is also making steady inroads into Afghanistan; with the recent discovery of potentially large reserves of hydrocarbons, Beijing is likely to be aggressive in its initiatives to secure its energy requirements. This was clearly visible when China secured mining rights for the Aynak copper field, tipped to be the largest in the world.

China outbid other serious and established international players from Britain, US, Russia and Canada- clearly reflecting the political will in Beijing to aggressively pursue Chinese interests. Indian policy response to Chinese overtures in other regions such as Africa and Central Asia has been reactive and devoid of any future roadmap that would place India firmly in the saddle on the international stage.

Third, given the vast ethnic diversity of Afghanistan and the fragile authority of the Hamid Karzai's government. New Delhi's engagement becomes a challenging task in ensuring the success of Indian policy initiatives. 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 for interests hostile to India. One way of ensuring this would be to devise Indian aided reconstruction programs such a manner that they acquire as wide a possible ethnic and geographical reach.

III CONCLUSIONS

India needs a multi-pronged and dynamic approach to safeguard its strategic interests in the region and to respond effectively in the extremely challenging and volatile conditions. While the larger thrust of Indian policy is on a sound footing, efforts to deepen and widen the scope of engagement will go a long way in aiding India assiduously guard its vital interests at stake in the South/ Central- Asian region at large.

At a time when the Taliban is resurgent and hopes of effective stabilization look rather bleak, there are instances of sporadic protests that question the logic of investing human, financial and logistical capital in Afghanistan. However it is now perhaps than ever before that the need of the hour is to reaffirm and deepen engagement with Kabul to be able to respond effectively to the challenges. India has much at stake in Afghanistan, while the challenges to be surmounted are by no means easy, however if successfully overcome, in the long run the bounty of opportunities that are likely to follow will propel India into an altogether different league of players in this region.

First, India should make effective and powerful use of its diplomatic channels with Islamabad to put across the message that India's larger goals in the region rather than hedging in Pakistan revolve around bringing stability to the South Asian region which in turn would prepare ground for both energy deficit nations to tap into the energy reserves of Afghanistan as well as Central Asia.

The Indian establishment should also convey to Pakistan its own vulnerability from restive Pushtuns as also use the dramatic rise of the Taliban in Pakistan to strongly reiterate the danger such elements pose to the current political dispensation within Pakistan. In the long run the Indian establishment would need to alter its policy to ensure that its Afghan policy is not held hostage to Pakistan if New Delhi aims to play a larger role on the regional and global stage.

Second, with regard to China Indian policy needs to be more pro-active, yet pragmatic in order to keep alive our desire for alternative pipeline routes as also where possible collaborating in tapping in on the mineral resource base of the country. Third, India must make its engagement with Afghanistan

as ethnically and socially broad based as possible in order to give the country widest possible social reach and acceptability. India by bowing out or even moving to the periphery would have more to lose than gain at this juncture. Thus, the need is greater than ever to sustain and intensify engagement with Afghanistan in order to surmount the challenges and realize the opportunities that beckon.

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B-7/3, Safdarjung Enclave, New
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