

India's 'Look North' policy and Afghanistan as a Front

Abhay Kumar
(Ph.D)

International Studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi-110067.

Email - abhaykumar959@gmail.com

Abstract: *The end of the Cold War has brought profound impacts on Indian foreign policies and, so, Afghanistan has moved from a distant marginal issue to an inevitable near-abroad front. However, the re-emergence of Taliban has hampered Indian efforts to realise its objectives in Afghanistan. Recognising this harsh reality, India has devised a three-pillar approach to pursue its 'Look North' policy in Afghanistan in a seamless manner. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part deals with the basics of post-Cold War politics played out in the region. The second one focuses on the empirical situation in Afghanistan and the threat posed by Taliban, particularly. And, at last, the paper evaluates India's three-pillars policy towards Afghanistan.*

Key Words: *post-Cold War, regional politics, regionalization, economization, Taliban, geopolitics, three-pillars*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Historically and geopolitically, Afghanistan and the surrounding region has been India's near abroad and, so, over the decade India has hastened its approach to connect with the region under the framework of 'Look North Policy'. The region is inextricably linked to the Indian history, demographic texture, and power-game making its stability as the precursor to the prosperity of India long term. Nowadays, there have been hectic efforts for regional cooperation in the region by placing Afghanistan at its centre and engaging the surrounding countries in a sincere and result-oriented approach for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a state between three distinct regions of South Asia, Central Asia and West Asia which have been, historically, the centres of powerful state-building and great empire-formation. Its geographical position between these three centres of powers makes it not only a buffer state vis-a-vis another but also a crossroad from one region to another. Recognizing its geographical importance these powers have always tried to intervene in internal affairs of Afghanistan to secure their interests. In the medieval age, with the demise of Timurid Empire in Central Asia, the Mughal Empire of South Asia and the Safavid Empire of West Asia became the main contenders while in the modern age it was interlocked between Russian Empire, British Empire, and Persian kingdom. During the whole Cold War era, Afghanistan remained just one local bastion of the tussle between two Superpowers, the US and the USSR. With the end of the Cold War, the region witnessed the diminished strategic value but the emergence of independent republics of Central Asia with huge energy reserves gives the international politics of the region new lease of life. But it was the rise of Taliban in Afghanistan which decided the almost whole discourse of regional politics in Afghanistan. Taliban was such a dominant force in the region that it played the most significant role in deciding the objectives as well as modalities of Afghan politics. However, before we go for the empirical analysis of regional texture of the Taliban menace it would be prudent to discuss the two major impacts of the end of Cold War on the inter-state conduct under i.e.: a) 'regionalization' of the international politics and b) 'economization' of international relation. These two features give Taliban-oriented Afghan politics a distinguished character.

2. POST-COLD WAR INTERNATIONAL POLITICS:

The very first characteristic which accounts for the current form of Afghan politics was the 'regionalization' of international politics after the demise of USSR (Rosecrance, 1991) The bipolarity of the Cold War which had kept the superpowers in check ended up and the world became unipolar under the leadership of the United States. The United States has now become the sole 'system maker and privilege taker'¹. Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan itself signalled the bygone days of the bipolarity and led the unconstrained way forward for the US. All these had far-reaching impacts on the post-Cold War international conduct. The strategic significance of the regions like the Gulf, South Asia and West Asia diminished in the eyes of superpowers. Superpowers were no more concerned about the happenings in these regions (Hunter, 2010: 7). Massive inflows of military and financial assistance into the region of were suspended. Local issues were left to be dealt with locally. Iron hands of superpowers were no more to constrain the actions of the regional powers as there was no fear of escalation. If the end of the Cold War lessened the value of regional powers in the eyes of superpowers, it also made them free to decide their own agendas and actions independently. They decided their goals and interests from their own views and not from a global perspective. The two 'mega-state'² system of the Cold War period which emerged after the end of World-War lost its significance and world, now, got divided among a number of regions. Afghanistan emerged as one of such areas and Iran, Pakistan,

India, Russia and China were given free hand in deciding their course of action for it. But the global change brought different repercussions for the different powers in the region. The US has now emerged as the only superpower. Its massive military and economic disparity with the rest of the world makes its reach global in the true sense (Huntington, 1999: 35). Its massive military and economic strength give it a coercive power against any target. The Soviet collapse has also affected the very nature of traditional co-ordinated inter-state relation in the region. The common fear of communism acting as a mitigating factor during the Cold War era is no more today and this has led to a new intra-regional conflict and rivalry. This global change has complicated the regional politics as it has brought both the advantages as well as disadvantages for them depending on which sides they are. This new reality worked against Iran as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have come to see it as their rival in hegemonising Afghan politics (Constable, 1998). Today there is no more fear of possible inroads of Soviets in the region and thus they have adopted a hostile posture towards it as far their interests in the region concern. They have further used Iran's estrangement with the West to enhance their clout in the eyes of the West. The same is also true for Russia. Due to its worsening economic condition, it can't compete with the US in supporting its allies in the region to make a concerted effort in Afghanistan. The improvement of the positions of pro-Western countries in the region and the worsening of anti-Western states, in the absence of a counterweight to the West, has enhanced the problem for Iran and Russia as their rivals have been able to act more harshly without any counter consequences. The second characteristic of the current Taliban matrix is also very much linked to the wider post-Cold War politics. The paradigm shift in the international orientation of a country was the growing economic rationale in the post-Cold War era (Karapinar, 2017). In a unipolar world when the international conduct has been largely shaped by the economic stimuli, foreign policies have been moving towards the de-idealised and reciprocal in orientation. The collapse of USSR and the end of Cold War were projected as the 'end of history'³ with the capitalism and Western model of democracy, under the leadership of US, left as the only model of socio-political development without any up and down.

With the demise of the communist bloc, the socio-economic path of the whole world got compelled to move towards a capitalist and liberalized direction. Also, the long experience of the controlled model of economic development failed to produce the desired result for the majority of socialist and third-world countries. This calculation forced the developing countries to reorient their economic model and go for liberalization, privatization and globalization in a big way. The compulsion of this new change demanded an emphasis on economic consideration while conducting inter-state affairs. Foreign policies of the new age were mainly concerned with the material gain. The oil-politics of the Central Asian region and the spilling effects across Afghanistan can be seen in this context (Tarock, 1999). The era of the radical and reactionary ideology is over and so the countries which shared ideological divide in the past were seen cooperating for economic interest in the region. However, the rivalry and conflict in international relations did not witness an end. Only the causes of and the means to deal with it have changed (King, 2001). The galvanization and polarization among nations along the economic agenda marks the change in regional politics. Diplomacy has replaced the overt militarism as a means to secure the national interest in the region. Despite so much stiff over the Afghan issue, the absence of any major military adventure in the region after the end of Cold War proves that diplomacy is the only viable tool to secure one's interest in the region. The co-operation between arch-rival Iran and Russia on the issue of Taliban can be sighted here.

3. GEOPOLITICS OF AFGHANISTAN AND THE TALIBAN THREAT:

After the disintegration of the USSR, the strategic importance of Afghanistan has changed from being a mere buffer state to the gateway to the Central Asian energy reserves (Goodson, 2001: 21). The emergence of Central Asian republics with lucrative energy reserves has intensified the struggle in the region. The main complexity and rivalry for this energy come from the geopolitical position of the region itself. The geopolitical position of Afghanistan makes it one of the priority-based destinations in the foreign policies of the regional powers. While the countries surrounding Afghanistan have been successful in projecting themselves as natural contenders, only because of their location and vast size, Afghanistan fell prey to the regional dominance only because of its land-locked position.

Most of the Central Asian countries are land-locked and are inherently dependent on the regional powers to reach the international market. As there are several possible routes for this energy conduit and Afghanistan could be one of those, these regional powers lock horn with each other in Afghanistan in the hope of multibillion dollars transit fee. During the Taliban-regime, Pakistan with some American companies had been successful in projecting Af-Pak route as a safer one for this energy flow. Pakistan made all efforts to make a stronghold bringing it in direct confrontation with Iran which also wants to maintain its traditional influence in Afghanistan at any cost. The fresh proxy wars between Iran and Pakistan in Afghanistan is the expression of the economic dimension of international politics (Tarock, 1999: 801-819). The US' campaign against Taliban after the lethal attack on World Trade Center (WTC) in 2001 provided an opportunity to the regional powers to re-orient their anti-Taliban strategy. Iranians, without any 'secret' agenda, were the most active and close to the US' policy in Afghanistan as far as the regional cooperation was concerned (Koepke, 2013). India and Russia offered geopolitical access to land-locked Afghanistan. Central Asian republics' cooperation was quite significant as it could be alternative to the vulnerable Pakistani route.

In way of the 'War on Terror', the regional victims of Taliban saw an opportunity to get rid of Taliban.

However, the campaign against Taliban soon got entangled with uncertainty and became a tool to pursue narrow national interest and to set score with the traditional adversaries in the region. Strong rhetoric and the possibility of Afghanistan being used as a launching pad against Iran have turned it against the US in Afghanistan. Intelligence details show that Iran is now providing 'measured'⁴ aid to Taliban, its traditional adversary to confuse NATO forces. Today, Iran's main concern in Afghanistan is prolonged US presence, not Taliban. It does not want Afghanistan to become another American bastion in the region. Countries like India and Russia do not feel comfortable with the 'good Taliban-bad Taliban' approach (Nadim, 2017). Iran, along with Russia and India, looks with scepticism on any proposal to include Taliban in the future Afghan government in any way of political settlement. These powers see any such proposal, not as a broader peace process but rather the US returning to the policy of sub-contracting Afghan policy to Pakistan. The politic of Taliban and Afghanistan has been traditionally linked to the 'troubled triangle'⁵ of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan ("Troubled Triangle"). Iran shares more than 500 miles of border with each of Afghanistan and Pakistan. As the only Shi'ite country, Iran is bound to react to the events affecting the Shiite population as Shias are the soft target of Taliban and other linked terror activities in Afghanistan. However, Pakistan's close ties with the US creates a lot of problem for Iran which finds its fallout on its Afghan policy. Pak interlocutors often try to invoke the Iranian threat to convince Americans to expel Northern Alliance from the Afghan government and make a deal with the Taliban insurgents. Iran also accuses US and Pakistan of using the territory of Afghanistan to instigate Baluch insurgency and Sunni extremism in Iran.⁶ The US levels Iran always as the main sponsor of the terror while FATA (Federally Administrated Tribal Area) of Pakistan which is the main breeding house as well as a safe haven for Taliban and Al-Qaeda whereon it is not pressurizing Pakistan. All these triangular dynamics affect the regional politics of Afghanistan.

Regional politics of Taliban in Afghanistan can be also seen beyond this 'troubled triangle' in the context of a hexagonal relationship of Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, US, and Russia (Siddiqi, 2005). Bilateral relation between any two of the 'troubled triangle' has never been independent of their relations with the other three. The presence of the US in the region and the close relation with it gives Pakistan leverage in dealing with Afghan issue. Rivalry with India makes it alarmed and intensifies its engagement in Afghanistan which adds extra rift in Afghanistan. This forces India to the Iranian side on Afghan policy where both are concerned to curb Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. China also comes with Pakistan as far the growing influence of India in Afghanistan concern as it sees India as the main hindrance in acquiring a hegemonic position in Asia. Similarly, traditional rivalry with the US and the efforts to check its growing influence in Central Asia through Afghan route makes Russia with Iran on Afghan issue where both are concerned about growing the US' influence in the region.

Challenges of Taliban can be also analyzed from another regional perspective where volatile political transition and the fear of the return of extremism in Afghanistan has put common concern. The dissolution of the central government in Afghanistan raises the spectre of partitioning the country out of existence- What Eden Naby referred to as the "dismemberment" of Afghanistan ("The Future of Afghanistan"). The regions of the country, due to the ethnic distribution, fall into the integral influence of the neighbouring countries -Shia communities to Iran, Pushtun to Pakistan, Uzbeks to Uzbekistan and Tajiks to Tajikistan. With the demise of the paramount ideology of communism in Central Asia, the religious fervour of theirs is very much bound to come out vigorously. The rulers of Central Asian countries, who represent the continuum of earlier communist rulers, fear that religious fundamentalism in Afghanistan may escalate religious extremism in their own countries which would ultimately threaten their regimes. Islamist militant groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Jihad Union, are active in Afghanistan and have been a constant threat to Central Asian republics (Nichol, 2010: 8). Recognizing the regional nature of Taliban threat, a concerted effort is sought to be taken to counter Taliban's attempts to resurface in Afghanistan. Taliban has been a traditional adversary of Russia which sees a linkage between the Taliban hosted extremism and the disturbance in its Chechnya region. China is another major regional power whose Afghan policy is significant for curbing Taliban. China is concerned with its restive Xinjiang province and the risk of spillover from an insurgency in Afghanistan. There has been institutionalized cooperation among Iran, Russia and India on Afghan issue as these three realize that their campaign against Taliban can't succeed unilaterally. Iran sees Russia's geographic leverage over Central Asian states as beneficial in curbing prolonged US presence in the region for Russian pressure, in 2009, led Kyrgyzstan to revoke US' right to Manas Air Base which has been the key conduit of logistic supply to NATO forces since 2001 (Schwartz, 2009). Similarly, Iranian and Indian concern regarding 'good Taliban-bad Taliban' was supported by Russians when Russia laid down 'red lines' for Taliban's political integration- notably renunciation of violence, acceptance of Afghanistan's constitution and complete break up with Al-Qaeda (Radyuhin, 2010). However, this is just one side of the picture of concerted regional efforts in Afghanistan. Iran vehemently opposes any possible strategic framework between the US and Afghanistan to counter Taliban but the road is not so smooth in case of Russia and India. While Russia wants phased pullout of foreign troops, Indian diplomacy does not favour withdrawal of NATO forces for it fears possible come back of Taliban that is quite against the Iranian stand of Iran which wants the immediate and complete withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan (Nordland (2011). India's

vote against Iran on its nuclear program at IAEA led to the chilling of bilateral relation between Iran and India. Similarly, China has been traditionally on Pakistan's side on the Afghan issue. China's relation with Pakistan mainly aimed against the growing influence of India and Russia in the region. Similarly, none of the key regional players in Central Asia, except Tajikistan, shares such strong interest in Afghanistan in changing scenario, nor are they likely to have one in near future. Their different economic and political concerns in Afghanistan- complicate the approaches to make a concerted effort on Taliban issue.

4. INDIA'S APPROACH TOWARDS AFGHANISTAN

India had devised the three-pillars approach to secure its interest in the region. The first pillar of the Indian approach has been Afghanistan itself. There is the growing understanding between India and Iran of installing a non-hostile, if not friendly, regime in Afghanistan which would not be under the influence of Pakistan. Strategic partnership agreement of 2011 gave an extra boost to the relations between India and Afghanistan ("India, Russia and China"), India by investing in social and humanitarian sectors of Afghanistan has also secured the goodwill of Afghan people. India has built over 200 public and private schools, sponsors over 1,000 scholarships, hosts over 16,000 Afghan students ("Donald Trump's"). India has also invested heavily to develop Afghanistan's economic hotspots. This includes setting up Iron ore mines, steel plant, hydro-electric power projects, transmission lines, roads etc. India helped Afghans in the reconstruction of Salma Dam in the Herat province which is the much-talked in people-to-people relations. The second pillar of the Indian approach is Iran as India is totally dependent on the Iranian bridge to access Afghanistan. So, a lot has been staked in Iran's policy towards the region. Given the troubled relations with Pakistan, the supply route through Afghanistan-Pakistan would not be safe and ultimately makes Afghanistan vulnerable to the diplomatic manoeuvre of Pakistan. Iran's vast geographical stretch around the region gives it natural leverage in access to Afghanistan compared to any other regional powers. So, Iran is the sole route to Afghanistan as well as 'gateway' to India's grand design for Central Asia and recognizing this India has invested heavily in a concerted effort with Iran. India's investment in Chahabar port and Zaranj-Delaram Highway hopes to lessen its land-locked effects and also to compete with China in the region (Kauk, 2009). India, Iran and Afghanistan have signed an agreement to give Indian goods, heading for Afghanistan and Central Asia, preferential treatment and the tariff reductions at Chahabar. The third pillar of the Indian approach lies in Central Asia which India sees as the extension of the Afghan front. India has been constantly trying to deepen its economic as well as strategic ties with these nations. Indian by encouraging road and trade connectivity between Afghanistan and Central Asian countries tries to develop Afghanistan with Central Asia in a seamless manner to reduce its dependence on Pakistan and China. This would give Central Asian countries an outdoor to the world economy, while, for Afghan goods a secure and exclusive market of Central Asia. Afghanistan can be developed as a permanent bridge for Central Asian energy to the wider outside world.

5. CONCLUSION:

However, despite such grave a threat and concerted efforts, the outcome is far short of the desired ones In the recent times Taliban has resurged in Afghanistan making regional powers once again concerned about it. The rise of Taliban cannot be seen in isolation and the ideological base behind this lethal group has global appeal. The ideology behind it is not just religious that can be rejected as mere reductionist. Islamism has, despite its religious fervour, has its own ideas of authority, citizenry entitlements and even international politics. The ideas which nurture the global extremism claim to resist domination and exploitation of capitalism and Westernization. The pre-eminence of a single power which is keen to impose its own value all over the world led to the counter-coalitions to counter its influence at the local level. The claim of 'end of history' with the demise of the communist bloc is seriously flawed as the staunchest challenges posed by the 'localism' against the 'globalism' proves that human society is still not without contradictions. Violent experience of Serbia, Yugoslavia, and Afghanistan have questioned the legitimacy of the post-World War state and inter-state institutions. In fact, the projection of the western model of democracy and capitalism as the sole mode of development and its rude imposition throughout the world has led to further alienation among local ethnic and cultural groups. This led to the re-emergence of authenticist cultural and political movements at the local level which has been used by violent groups like Taliban to propagate extremism. So, to counter terrorism in Afghanistan we must address the root cause of such chronic civil and military conflict as it has been the main breeding ground for terrorism and extremism. Another reason which makes the menace of Taliban indomitable is the very nature of fight employed by these groups. Mountainous terrain cut by valleys and narrow ravines in Afghanistan gives the ideal platform for guerrilla warfare with invincible hit-run-hide tactics. The modern warfare which is characterized by the weapon-tank and the bureaucratic hierarchy of the general-staff system cannot win over through this harsh terrain with their heavy armoury. Guerrilla warriors with their hit and run tactics don't have any concept of combat and non-combat, nor have any bastion to defend which are the main targets and the line of conducts of modern warfare in the battlefields. All these factors make any war in Afghanistan chronic and prolonged. Both the superpowers have tested their fate but they could not defeat the harsh reality of Afghanistan and, in result, Taliban still does not seem out of context in the near future.

Endnotes

¹Mastanduno, M.(2009), "System Maker and Privilege Taker: U.S. Power and the International Political Economy", *World Politics*, Vol 61, No. 1, Jan 2009, pp. 121-154.

²After the WWII the world of nation-states virtually got divided between two sphere of dominance and influence under capitalist US and communist UUSR.

³Fukuyama in his *The End of History and the last Man* termed the disintegration of USSR as end of history. As history is created out of contradiction and conflict of interests and groups, with the end of communism, capitalism is the sole model of socio-economic development. Here onwards world is without contradiction and hence no history further.

⁴Aid provided to Taliban by Iran has just symbolic meaning and is not capable to change the military balance significantly.

⁵for detail see, "Troubled Triangle", Middle East Program, Spring 2005.

⁶Seymour Hersh's article in *The New Yorker* came out during the second round of this paper's edits, and further supports claims of US support for Sunni minority groups and dissident organizations that target Iran. The article is available here:

http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/07/07/080707fa_fact_hersh

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