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Indo- US Strategic Objectives in Afghanistan: Security Calculus of Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Washington and New Delhi have converged interests in Afghanistan. US aspires a greater Indian role in Afghanistan in the wake of its withdrawal from Afghanistan and India, in order to pose itself an international power, seeks in Afghanistan a deeper involvement. Although both of the states, India and the US, have devised a commonality of interests since 9/11, yet since the current US Administration bilateral ties have been intensified to the extent where Pakistan have severe implications. US President Trump's verdict of regionalization of Afghan issue has implied concerns for Islamabad. Pakistani authorities relate the terrorist activities in the country, particularly insurgency in Baluchistan with the role of various powers' role in Afghanistan. Strategic and security related objectives and concerns would be discussed in this article.

Key Words: **Buffer Zone, Turkmenistan- Afghanistan- Pakistan- India, BRICS, Post- Taliban Era, 9/11, Bonn Conference, Indo- US Strategic Ambitions, Baluchistan, US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Indo-Afghan ties, Pak, Afghan relations.**

Introduction

Geo- political and geo- strategic location of Afghanistan makes it the center- stage of quest for influence of major international powers. It links the heartland of Eurasia to the Indian Ocean, and appealed the attention of outside invaders in order to achieve their strategic, economic and land based interests. Having a location to be a gateway to Central Asia, Afghanistan provides the entrance to the areas rich in gas and oil reserves. The country has been remained a buffer zone between British India and Russia, later on the country witnessed intervention of the Soviet Union which eventually led to the disintegration of Soviet Union and Afghanistan fell to the civil war in the entire country by local warlords in early 1990s. Later on incident of 9/11 compelled US to invade the country which shifted the strategic patterns of the region (Karim, 2017: 252).

Being indulged into war for more than one and a half decade, Donald Trump, President of the US and James Mattis, Secretary of Defence of the US decided to lessen the number of fighting troops in Afghanistan in December 2018. But despite giving the equal opportunity to New Delhi and Islamabad in the wake of the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, Washington opted for an increased

Indian role in Afghanistan. Deeper apprehensions of Pakistan have remained a challenge for the US, particularly Islamabad's threat perception regarding the role of New Delhi in Afghan issue. US Ambassador to India stated that Washington would not endorse any idea or development that could jeopardize Indo- US bilateral relations (Hameed, 2012: 2).

US objectives in post withdrawal Afghanistan

On August 2017, President of the US, Donald Trump, devised a new Afghan strategy. Various officials, observers and scholars were of the view that current US Administration would rise the number of forces, sufficient to ensure the peace and stability of the war torn country, and enhanced pressure on Pakistan too was speculated. In July 2018, Trump Administration embarked direct peace talks with Taliban, which prior was considered unlikely as US had the claim of Afghan led and Afghan owned negotiations (Thomas, 2019: 2).

In the wake of US withdrawal from Afghanistan, country is seemed to face three interconnected problems, one; weaker nation state, second; rise of fundamentalism and third; zero- sum regional power equation, particularly in the context of Islamabad and New Delhi. In order to eradicate these likely challenges, Washington is seeing New Delhi to be its substitute after its withdrawal. For that reason enhanced Indian role in Afghanistan is a pre requisite for the US, therefore, to increase the soft image and interests of New Delhi, Washington is creating space for more Indian role in diplomatic, economic, societal and political fronts. Washington and New Delhi are anticipated to achieve three pronged objectives one; as both of the states, India and the US, have common strategic objectives in Afghanistan so Washington would be able to exert its influence in Afghanistan after the drawdown, two; they could make Afghanistan stable according to their own intent, three; it will help US to monitor China's engagement in Afghanistan. It looks unlikely that US would leave Afghanistan unattended as it did in the end of first Afghan war. Efforts of the US regarding installing democracy and strengthening institutions have not so far proved to be fruitful and in the wake of US drawdown the task is speculated to be assigned to the India (Tadjbaksh, 2011: 34).

US signed a bilateral agreement with Afghanistan, The Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2012, which was aimed that Washington would ensure stability of Afghanistan. Both states converged to

a. Enhance the regional security environment.
b. Economic and social development.
c. Good governance and strengthening of institutions.
d. Protection and promotion of democracy.
e. Enhancement of long- term security (Javaid and Javaid, 2016: 6).

Scholars of RAND Corporation, Peter Chalk and Larry Hanauer (2012) argued that Washington must endorse more Indian role in Afghanistan because its ambitions of anti- fundamentalism in Afghanistan, achieving new energy and trade

routes to and through Afghanistan and projection of power are compatible to the US objectives as compared to Pakistan. Islamabad and New Delhi are one of the key actors of Afghan issue. Although various other actors too have vital standing in the issue, yet future of Kabul would be designed in accordance to the role played by India and Pakistan.

Three pillars of Trump's Afghanistan policy

Although peace negotiations between Taliban and the US have been failed, yet withdrawal of US forces was expected as was evident from the statements of President Donald Trump. But various officials of the US were of the view that no such decision of withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan is so far made by the authorities (Hanlon, 2019: 5).

Senior US officials were the advocates of the argument that a full scale US drawdown from Afghanistan would inflict harmful impacts on US interests in Afghanistan as disintegration of the Afghan Government or the worst case of revival of Taliban in Afghanistan. First pillar of Donald Trump's, President of the US, Afghan strategy was that his administration would integrate all the available options and instruments of power, such as economic to military to diplomatic, to reach a meaningful result in Afghanistan. This statement revealed his intention and desire of direct peace talks with the Taliban. Former President of the US, Obama too, at the of his office, became willing to direct negotiations with Taliban but current US Administration has focused on sequential framework. According to the US President Trump, he would not indulge into micro level issues like 'nation building' rather Washington would play the role of a facilitator (Panade, 2017: 3).

Shifting of US policy from following the time bound approach, devised by the Obama Administration, to the condition based approach is the second pillar of the Trump Administration. Time bound approach was criticized for the reason that the strategy much US up- coming plans to the Taliban and they declared it as their triumph and US defeat. President Trump revised the strategy while arguing that "a shift from a time based approach to one based on conditions". He expressed further that "US would act according to the conditions on the ground rather than the arbitrary timetable. Enemies of the US must not be aware of our plans" (Dobbins, Campbell, & Mann, 2019: 2).

Third pillar of the Afghan policy of the current US Administrations is the introduction of regional dimension of the Afghan problem. That is speculated to be revolved around Pakistan as President Trump has some reservations regarding the role of Pakistan in US policy. Trump called the role of Pakistan in war against fundamentalism as 'duplicity'. Former President Obama too had the strict stance towards Pakistan as Pakistan is playing 'double game'. He said that US would not offer blank cheque to Pakistan rather aid to Pakistan was conditional to the meaningful role in war against fundamentalism. President Trump has taken a step forward in this regard and has offered India a deeper role in Afghanistan and for that reason India too has devised its own 'Af- Pak strategy' in accordance with the

US objectives in Afghanistan. Pre- Trump Administrations have considered Pakistani apprehensions, to a certain extent, while assigning India in Afghanistan and avoided to appease New Delhi to the level where Islamabad could take the matter in its own hands entirely. However current Administration has abandoned the policy and is permitting India more leverage in the war torn country (Karim, 2017: 259).

Indian ambitions in Afghanistan

Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, at the BRICS[1] Summit expressed Indian commitments in Afghanistan that New Delhi would remain consistent to support Afghanistan in governance, economic development and capacity building (Akhtar & Sarkar, 2015: 5). But all the Indian assistance and involvement in Afghanistan is subject to the US presence in Afghanistan and if US withdraws its forces leaving Afghanistan unattended, that would not only give birth to the rise of Taliban rather New Delhi would have to face severe infiltration of militants in Indian Occupied Kashmir (Hussain & Jahanzaib, 2015: 14).

Jaswant Singh, Former Minister for External Affairs of India (1998- 2002), in his visit to the US, in the wake of US intervention in Afghanistan, said that India has never endorsed Taliban regime as legitimate and always supported the government of President Rabbani. He appealed the international community to support the Northern Alliance against Taliban. A renowned Indian analyst, Ramtanu Maitra, argued that India condemns the Pakistan- Taliban 'nexus' and US intervention in Afghanistan is welcomed in India. He further argues that India would expect more US efforts to persuade Pakistan to stop its assistance to Taliban and New Delhi supports Washington in its efforts of regime change in Afghanistan (Iqbal, 2013: 49).

Role of India in Afghanistan in post 9/11 era can be divided into three phases.

a. **Phase 1-** New Delhi had managed to attain sufficient influence in Afghanistan in the post- Taliban era. Before that India had a mere liaison office in Afghanistan but after the Taliban New Delhi upgraded that office to a full fledge embassy and posed itself a major regional player regarding the Afghan issue i.e. in Bonn Conference[2] (Srivastava, 2007: 189). In the aftermath of the Bonn Agreement Abdullah Abdullah, Foreign Minister of Afghanistan, Muhammad Faheem, Defence Minister of Afghanistan and Hamid Karzai, President of Afghanistan (2001-2014), sought enhanced Indian role in the country and embarked a series of frequent visits to India in order to seek economic assistance, military

[1] Acronym of BRICS is used for association, formatted in 2006, of Brazil Russia India China South Africa. Association was named as BRIC before the inclusion of South Africa in 2010. The forum is utilized for commercial, economic and political support for the member as well as non- member states.

[2] Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re- Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, generally known as Bonn Agreement was signed in Bonn Conference in Germany in 2001. Conference was intended to install a permanent de jure government in Afghanistan.

support and anti- Taliban structure of Afghanistan (Yadav & Barwa, 2011: 108).

New Delhi made top level engagements with Kabul in the fields of humanitarian assistance, economic support, financial cooperation, project assistance along with active participation on various regional and international negotiations and reconciliation rounds. In each visit of the President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, to India both of the states signed a series of bilateral agreements and MoUs i.e. Preferential Trade Agreement and Civil Aviation Agreement. Despite the New Delhi claims to balance of Indian engagement with various ethnic groups of Afghanistan, it is evident that India had a more tilt towards Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, and avoid Pashtoons to a certain extent (probably for the reason of ethnic origin of Taliban is predominantly Pashtoon.) (Javaid & Javaid, 2016: 8).

b. Phase 2- New Delhi had to suffer a marginalized role in Afghanistan in the post 2007 era. India witnessed a series of attacks on its consulates and embassy e.g. Indian Embassy attack of 2008 and car bomb attack of 2009. Islamabad conveyed its anxieties regarding the increasing Indian role in Afghanistan, the area on which Pakistan has a sensitive stance, to Washington and other concerned regional and international actors and remained successful to persuade US to consider Pakistan's apprehensions (Khan, 2014: 58). It was because a wave of terrorist and suicide attacks hit Pakistan since 2006-07 and Islamabad correlated theses subversive activities to the Indian involvement in Afghanistan and showed the proofs of Indian link to terrorist groups operating in Pakistan many-times. Although terrorism remained uncontrolled for Pakistan for next few years, yet, Pakistan's stance of claim of Indian hands behind these incidents worked and India had to suffer a loss of substantial influence in Afghanistan. In 2010, 60 states participated in the London Conference on Afghanistan and called for the demarcation of good Taliban and bad Taliban, which jolted India, because India was the state which was anticipated to be the most effected in the consequence of demarcation of good and bad Taliban. Efforts of integration of some of the Taliban fractions in power sharing compelled India at the back- foot and shrinking diplomatic role in Afghanistan (Soherwordi, 2012: 131).

Indian decision makers came to the point that US led alliance has picked up that question 'if' rather 'when' and 'how' to withdraw the forces is under discussion. Foreseeing the Taliban coming to power and Islamabad recovering its influence in Afghanistan, New Delhi unwillingly calculated its centrality in Afghan reconciliation. Exclusion of India from International Conference on Afghanistan held in Istanbul in 2010 reinforced the reduced Indian involvement in Afghanistan (Panade, 2017:7).

c. **Phase 3-** Current decade brought India with more leverage in Afghanistan. On October 4 2011, Hamid Karzai, President of Afghanistan, visited India and both of the states agreed upon to sign bilateral Strategic Partnership Agreement. The agreement offer the structural framework for collaboration in the fields of education, commerce, trade, economic cooperation and defence, military and security related issues. Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh (2004-2014) made a hasty visit to Kabul soon after the death of Osama Bin Laden and announced an economic package of worth US $ 500 million for Kabul apart from the previous Indian assistance to Afghanistan worth US $ 1.5 billion. He, Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, in his address to the Afghanistan Parliament focused on the more close Indo-Afghan ties with the objective to curb extremism in the country, Afghanistan. India became more confident and outspoken of its commitments in Afghanistan, while making its objectives compatible with those of the US, concerning Pakistan. India decided to invest in minerals and hydrocarbon sector of Afghanistan. India organized a Delhi Investment Summit in which private investors of India were encouraged to invest in Afghanistan (Pant, 2012" 19).

Due to the increased Indo- Afghan ties, Pak- Afghan relations started shrinking, particularly when Afghan President Hamid Karzai synced his stance to that of Indian regarding no Taliban influence in Afghanistan at all. He said that no negotiations with Taliban would give meaningful results until Islamabad stop assisting them. US kept on signaling Pakistan that soft handed treatment of Taliban and other radicals would not be tolerated. Mike Mullen, Joint Chief of Staff of the US (2007- 2011), argued termed Haqqani Network as the 'veritable arm' of Pakistan. India found it exactly compatible to its own objectives in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's leverage in Afghanistan vis-a-vis India

New Delhi's attempts to prevent Afghanistan from being Taliban dominated is the other angle of the same picture of its Pakistan centric policy. Containment of Pakistan on its both, Eastern and Western fronts, sides is one of the major Indian objectives in Afghanistan. New Delhi friendly Kabul regime would oblige the Indian aim of keeping an eye on Pakistan, and if necessary, embark covert terrorist operations in Pakistan, particularly in Baluchistan (Akbar, 2015: 1111). Related fear of India is the hasty withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan which could lead Pakistan to adopt a more coercive policy in Afghanistan. Mint, an Indian newspaper wrote that once Pakistan is confident of a friendly regime of Afghanistan, it could unleash the radicals to India. That would result into more unrest in Jammu and Kashmir.

Access to central Asia

Following the hijacking of Indian plane in 1999, New Delhi built a military base in Tajikistan in order to avert any similar incident again. While considering the current strategic patterns in the region, it looks more likely that any further Indian move to enhance its strategic influence in Central Asia would be interpreted by Russia as intervention in its sphere of influence. Although New Delhi and Moscow had enjoyed warm strategic relations for decades, yet a US backed India would be a matter of concern for not only Russia but also for China. It is considered that Indo- US ties are compatible with each other to the extent that it is in the interest of the US to encourage New Delhi to exert more influence in Central Asia to keep the check not only on Russia but also on China (Akhtar & Malik, 2016: 290).

Pak – US divergence on Afghanistan

Quest of Islamabad to attain and maintain leverage in Afghanistan has remained a concern in Washington. Despite sharing pooled strategic interests in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US diverge on certain issues such as Pakistan is concerned regarding the US intent for increased Indian role in Afghanistan and US has reservations about the insufficient Pakistan's efforts to exterminate the rise of extremism and fundamentalism in Pakistan and Afghanistan. A strong Indian backed Afghan Government is interpreted by Pakistan as its encirclement whereas those who believe that Pakistan has not made full scale efforts to diminish radicalism encourage President Trump's coercive attempts to convince Pakistan for its support on anti- terrorism campaign (Brown, 2017: 8).

Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, in his visit to US sought to exploit the anti- terrorism stance of President Donald Trump and to persuade the Administration against Pakistan. In the wake of the visit, National Security Strategy of Trump Administration reinforced the policy of Indian exceptionalism and US tilt towards New Delhi (Ahmad & Hussain, 2018: 115).

In his statement on August 2017, President Donald Trump declared that US would not spare hideouts of Taliban and various other groups which are considered to be a threat for regional order and Washington would exert more pressure on Pakistan to act in accordance with the US efforts in Afghanistan and in its own territorial jurisdiction. Following that, being unsatisfied of Islamabad's efforts to eliminate terrorism, President Donald Trump made a decision to suspend its security and military related support to Pakistan, however in the next half of the same year, Washington transformed its policy towards Islamabad and decided to increase the role of Pakistan, which was marginalized to the considerable extent before that, regarding negotiations between Taliban and the US. An important move in this context was the release of Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Bradar by Pakistan. Zalmay Khalilzad argued that his, Mullah Bradar's, release was made on his, Khalilzad's, request (Thomas, 2019: 9).

Suspension of economic support, along with the military assistance on permanent basis from US to Pakistan might have been considered to be an option by the US authorities. Washington has already ended the Coalition Support Fund to Pakistan, conditional for the efforts of Islamabad to destroy the hideouts of Haqqani Network and Taliban in Pakistan. Washington has already reduced its security related assistance to Islamabad to almost 60 % and decrease in economic support too cannot be precluded. But to relegate the setbacks of reduced or suspended US assistance to Pakistan can compel the latter to seek closer ties with Russia and China, and this Islamabad's tilt towards Moscow and Beijing would enable Pakistan to ride out the damages which would be anticipated to inflict on Pakistan (Panade, 2017: 3).

The extent to which US should decrease the economic and military support to Pakistan is a matter of confusion for Washington and suspension of military and economic assistance at all to Pakistan would jeopardize US interests in South Asian region. It is because Afghanistan is not the only issue upon which US strategy in the region is confined, rather it has a vast range of objective in South Asia apart from Afghanistan. Assurance of dependable control of nuclear weapons program and dissuading Islamabad from development of tactical nuclear weapons and to prevent any escalation between India and Pakistan are some major issues of US concerns in this regard. Thus while responding to a severe US pressure, Pakistan could withdraw its cooperation on its nuclear program which would have a detrimental impact on not only New Delhi, rather for the US as well (Brown, 2017: 7).

Leon Panetta, former Secretary of the Defence of the US (2011- 2013), criticized Islamabad for not collaborating with Washington on Afghan issue stating that "(Washington is) reaching the limits of patience". He, further, admired the role of New Delhi for its economic and Security related assistance (trainings and capacity building measures of Afghan Security Forces by India) for Afghanistan. His affirmation of the increased Indian role in Afghanistan, without considering the apprehensions of Pakistan, characterizes the continuation of de-hyphenation by the US. According to the Council on Foreign Relations "instead of a true partnership the bilateral (Pakistan- US) relationship has degenerated into occasionally positive rhetoric overlaying a transactional relationship in which Pakistan lease access to bases and land routes in Afghanistan in exchange of massive quantities of US aid" (Hanauer & Chalk, 2012: 6).

As far as US withdrawal from Afghanistan is concerned, US dilemma does not lay in the lack of alternative reverse transit routes for the US forces besides through Pakistan in the case if later ceases the transit rights to US. Washington has signed various agreements with Russia and Central Asian Republics for transit and reverse transit for US forces, although it would cost many times higher than that of Pakistan. Rather vital US concern is the over- dependence of major Indian installations and Indian presence in Afghanistan on the US. And in the wake of the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, Indian stakes in Afghanistan would be at the mercy of Islamabad and Taliban. It is because Narendra Modi has made

efforts to persuade US to avoid any hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan as it could lead to the situation where Indo- US interests would be at stake in Afghanistan (Bose, 2014: 11).

A reduced or abandoned presence of the US in Afghanistan would need a balance of involvement of Pakistan and India in Afghan affairs but regarding the Indo- Pak engagement there is not anticipated to work as there exists no balance. It is because although India had managed to obtain a substantial say in Afghanistan yet, India has an economic superiority whereas Pakistan is said to have the hard power advantage. It is evident that in case of confrontation soft image could not surpass the hard power in the country like Afghanistan (Dasgupta, 2013: 9).

According to a report to the RAND Organization, bilateral trust deficit between the US and Pakistan could led to the situation where Washington would expect from Islamabad even more worse as

- Islamabad could deny Indian access to Turkmenistan- Afghanistan- Pakistan- India gas pipe line.
- Pakistan could opt to enhance its strategic depth in Afghanistan.
- Retaliation from Pakistan cannot be precluded responding any US operation against fundamentalists.
- Escalation of rift between Pakistan and India.
- Pakistan could terminate the exports of Afghanistan to India which require transit through Pakistan.
- Blockage of transit of supply line of US forces in Afghanistan cannot be precluded as Pakistan has already done that many times earlier (Hanauer & Chalk, 2012: 7- 8).

Security concerns of Pakistan

Pakistan's concerns regarding Afghanistan are primarily India centric. Pakistan's anxieties will keep on increasing with the same proportionate as Indian involvement in Afghanistan would enhance. Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Shah Mehmood Qureshi while talking about Indian presence in Afghanistan said that if any one expects Pakistan to have more focus on its Western border, our Eastern front should be secured. He further said to Bruce Wallace that no massive reconstruction is observed, no long queues can be seen in in New Delhi waiting for visas For Afghanistan, then why India has huge presence in Afghanistan. It concerns us (Javaid & Javaid, 2016: 8).

According to a leaked US Embassy cable Pakistan asked US that New Delhi will have to reduce its footprints in Afghanistan and stop operating subversive activities in Baluchistan. Pakistani officials are of the view that the issue of Baluchistan is linked to the Afghan issue. Any terrorist attack in Baluchistan is, in most of the cases, planned in Afghanistan. Various US officials have time and again expressed their arguments of re- demarcation of borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan and have overtly offered the idea that an independent Baluchistan is in US interest. Director of Asia Program, Selig Harrison gave the idea in 2011 that

independent Baluchistan would be in the interest of the US. He not only introduced the idea of independent Baluchistan, rather gave the course of action plan too and stated that Pakistan free Baluchistan would not only reduce the issues US is facing in the region but anarchy and regional instability also will come to an end. That would provide US with the "safe playground" for overt as well covert operations to achieve its national interest. A US military strategist, former Lt. Co. Ralph Peter's in his article "blood borders" argues that borders of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan needs to be revised again and claimed that the division of boundaries is not natural and their revision is in the long- term interest of the US (Hilali, 2014).

Selig Harrison further stated that US would have to play "hard ball" while supporting the separatist movements in Baluchistan to keep check the China's activities in Pakistan. Strong US backed Baluch separatists would demotivate China in the region which would eventually serve key US interests. Writings and statements of responsible US officials show that it is probable that Washington would not only have a lack of objection for Mosad and RAW's intelligence actions in Baluchistan to jeopardize national integrity of Pakistan rather even US support for these actions cannot be precluded. A hardliner Indian security analyst, Amarjit Singh too has the similar views in this regard (Hilali, 2014). This convergence of Indo- US strategic ambitions in the region makes it evident that growing Indian role in Afghanistan has a matter of severe concern for Pakistan.

Conclusion

Although India and Pakistan are considered as two of the most significant regional actors regarding the Afghan issue yet, Pakistan not only has strong ethnic bonds and adjacency to Afghanistan but Islamabad has more security concerns in Afghanistan as compared to New Delhi. Being a major international actor and superpower, US, since its intervention, tilted towards India during the entire course of its intervention in the war torn country. Containment of China is one of the prime US strategic objectives, which is not plausible without the support of Pakistan and latter is not seemed to back it. Besides it, according to the decision makers of the US, Washington and Islamabad have divergent views on Afghan security issues. India too has Pakistan centric policy in Afghanistan coupled with discomfort with China. The convergence of objectives of New Delhi and Washington has compelled both of the states closer to each other, particularly in the Trump Administration. On the other hand, growing Indian involvement in Afghanistan is seen in Pakistan as its encirclement as well as Islamabad finds the roots of insurgency in Baluchistan in foreign hands operating in Afghanistan.

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