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**INDIA'S CHALLENGE IN AFGHANISTAN:
WITH POWER COMES RESPONSIBILITY**

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ABSTRACT

India's Challenge in Afghanistan: With Power Comes Responsibility

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When a suicide bomber struck the Indian Embassy in Kabul in July 2008 it not only killed more than forty people in one of the deadliest attacks in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, it also challenged the very fundamentals of India's Afghanistan policy, a policy that many in India see as a test case of India's rising regional and global prominence. In being one of the worst attacks on an Indian target outside the country, it laid bare to the Indians the costs that come with increasing global weight. This feat was repeated again in October 2008 when a suicide bomber attempted another attack on the Indian Embassy's compound. With each such attack India is being alerted to the fact that as its influence has grown in Afghanistan and as India-Afghanistan ties have gathered momentum, it has changed the regional power configuration with some long-term implications. In a sign of Afghanistan's deepening ties with India in the last few years, political interaction at the highest levels has increased significantly with Hamid Karzai visiting India every year since assuming the helm of affairs in Kabul, first as chairman of the Afghan Interim Administration and later as the President of Afghanistan.

India has taken a lead role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan and enjoys tremendous amount of goodwill in the country. Its role is seen as crucial for the long-term stability of Afghanistan and India realizes that a stable, prosperous and democratic Afghanistan is also in its strategic interests. This paper examines the trends in India's ties with Afghanistan in the last few years and argues that driven by its growing regional and global ambitions, India is following a multi-pronged strategy in Afghanistan. This paper underlines the structural factors that are the most important ones in determining India's response to the changing strategic environment in Afghanistan. India's rise in the global inter-state hierarchy over the last decade has led India to define its regional foreign policy in more ambitious terms than before and the success of India's Afghanistan policy will go a long way in determining if India will be able to emerge as a provider of regional security in South Asia. A very brief historical overview of India-Afghanistan relations is followed by the delineation of trends in this bilateral relationship. Subsequently, an analysis of Indian strategic interests in Afghanistan are examined and placed in the broader regional strategic context.

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Historical and Theoretical Context

Bilateral ties between India and Afghanistan span over centuries, given Afghanistan's close links to the South Asian civilization historically. India has traditionally maintained strong cultural ties with Afghanistan, resulting in stable relations between the two states. Of course, imperial powers such as Great Britain and Russia used Afghanistan as a pawn in their "great game" of colonization and given the contested boundary between British India and Afghanistan, the ties between the two remained frayed (Gregorian 1969; 91-128). But after independence, as the problem of the Durand line got transferred to Pakistan, India had no reason not to enjoy good ties with Afghanistan, especially given the adversarial nature of India-Pakistan relations.

The Cold War also forced the two states to assume roughly similar foreign policy postures. While India was one of the founding members of the Non Aligned Movement, Afghanistan also tried to follow an independent foreign policy and for some time at least was able to effectively play one superpower against the other, thereby garnering economic assistance from both sides. But given America's close ties with Pakistan and Soviet Unions' generosity in providing extensive military and economic aid, Afghanistan gradually fell into the Soviet orbit of influence, resulting in the Soviet invasion in 1979. The Non-Aligned Movement was divided on this issue and India was one of the few nations to support the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, thereby damaging severely its prestige and credibility in the international community (Ghosh and Panda 1983). Because Pakistan was causing trouble for India in Jammu and Kashmir, India decided to support Pakistan's adversaries and ended up supporting whoever was in power in Kabul till the victory of Pakistan-based mujahideen in 1992 (Swami 2008).

The chaos that resulted in Afghanistan following Soviet occupation and their ultimate withdrawal in 1989 had far-reaching implications for global politics as well as Indian foreign policy. As the Cold War ended in the early 1990s, India was as disoriented as the rest of the world with the rapidity of events and faced a plethora of challenges on economic and foreign policy fronts. It had little time or inclination to assess what was happening in Afghanistan and so when the Taliban, spawned by the chaos and corruption that dominated the post-Soviet Afghanistan, came to power in 1996, India was at a loss to evolve a coherent foreign policy response. India's ties with Afghanistan hit their nadir through the Taliban's seven year rule when India continued to support the Northern Alliance by providing money and materiel (Coll 2004; 463, 513). Also, after the Taliban took control of Kabul, the deposed Afghan communist leader and former President, Mohammad Najibullah, made unsuccessful attempts to escape to India. Though he was killed by the Taliban, his family managed to get away to India (Maitra 2002).

However, ever since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, India has pursued a pro-active Afghanistan policy and a broad-based interaction is taking place between the two states. This is also a time when Indian capabilities – political, economic, and military – have increased markedly and India has become increasingly ambitious in defining its foreign policy agenda. According to the realist tradition in International Relations, it is the international systemic constraints that determine the foreign policy behaviour of states. While individual or domestic political variables may influence foreign policy at the margins, it is structure of the international system that sets the terms of conduct of foreign policy across time and space. Realists contend that “the pressures of [international] competition weigh more heavily than ideological preferences or internal political pressures” (Waltz 1986: 329). In his seminal work on structural realism, Kenneth Waltz has argued that his is a theory of International Politics, not a theory of foreign policy because structural realism

tries to explain the outcomes of state interactions. Theories of foreign policy would seek to explain the behaviour of individual states in the external realm (Waltz 1979: 71-72). According to Waltz, foreign policy does not constitute an autonomous realm because it is driven by both external and internal factors and so there is no point in trying to find a theoretical explanation for foreign policy. A theory of international politics shows how the interaction of states generates a structure which then constrains states, rewarding or punishing them for taking certain actions. A theory of international politics thus explains why states similarly placed in the system behave similar despite the differences among them. For Waltz, to explain how any single state will respond to the constraints imposed by the international structure requires a theory of foreign policy. A theory of foreign policy, therefore, explains why states similarly placed in the international system do not behave similarly, thereby underlining the differences in the internal make-up of states as explanations for the differences (Waltz 1996: 54-55).

Structural constraints, in other words, force states towards a particular set of foreign policies in line with their relative position in the international system. And as that position undergoes a change, so will change the foreign policy of that state. As Robert Gilpin explains, “a more wealthy and a more powerful state...will select a larger bundle of security and welfare goals than a less wealthy and less powerful state,” thereby trying to use the tools at its disposal to gain control over its strategic environment (Gilpin 1981: 22-23, 94-95). A state, therefore, will become more ambitious in defining the scale and scope of its foreign policy as its relative material power capabilities increase and vice versa. According to Hans Morgenthau, the interests of a state are shaped by its power (Morgenthau 1973: 75). An increase in a state’s relative power capabilities will result in a concomitant increase in its interests in the realm of foreign policy. And as it will rise in inter-state hierarchy, it will “try to expand its economic, political, and territorial control; it will try to change the

international system in accordance with its own interests” (Gilpin 1981: 94-95). Rising powers in the international system will try to change the status-quo and establish new institutions and arrangements that more accurately reflect their own conception of their place in the world. Rising powers seek to enhance their security by increasing their capabilities and their control over the external environment. As a rising power India has also sought to make its presence felt by adopting a more pro-active role in its extended neighbourhood and forging economic, military and institutional linkages. In many ways, Afghanistan has become emblematic of such an ambitious course that India seems to be charting in its foreign policy.

Contemporary Trends in India-Afghanistan Relations

India’s engagement with Afghanistan readily became multi-dimensional after the defeat of the Taliban and the installation of an Interim Authority in 2001 (Basu 2007: 90-98). This was reflected in an immediate upgradation of Indian representation in Afghanistan from Liaison Office to a full-fledged Embassy in 2002. India actively participated in the Bonn Conference and was instrumental in the emergence of post-Taliban governing and political authority in Afghanistan. Since then, India’s main focus has been to support the Afghan government and the political process in the country as mandated under the Bonn agreement of 2001.¹ It has continued to pursue a policy of high-level engagement with Afghanistan through extensive and wide-ranging humanitarian, financial and project assistance as well as participation in international efforts aimed at political reconciliation and economic rebuilding of Afghanistan.

¹ Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, Bonn Agreement, United Nations, Bonn, Ger., Dec. 5, 2001, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3f48f4754.html>

India's relations with Afghanistan have steadily improved for a number of reasons. Unlike Pakistan, ties between India and Afghanistan are not hampered by the existence of a contiguous, and contested, border. Its support for the Northern Alliance against the Pakistan-backed Taliban in the 1990s, strengthened its position in Kabul after 2001. Many members of the Alliance are members of the government or hold influential provincial posts. India has also done its best to restore the balance in its engagement with a range of different ethnic groups and political affiliations in Afghanistan. The balance was tilted towards the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance during the 1990s as a counter to Pakistan-controlled hard-line Pashtun factions, led by the Taliban. India has used its vocal support for Karzai, an ethnic Pashtun educated in India, to demonstrate its keenness to revive its close ties with Pashtuns.

During each of the visits to India by Afghanistan's President, several important bilateral initiatives have been announced by the two sides. This includes a \$70 million dollar financial commitment by India for the construction of Zaranj-Delaram road in Afghanistan; a Preferential Trade agreement between the two states; memoranda of understanding of cooperation in the fields of civil aviation, media and information, rural development, standardization, and education; and the establishment of a Joint Committee at the level of Commerce Ministers to conclude an EXIM Bank Line of Credit to the tune of \$50 million dollars to promote business-to-business relations. Afghanistan has also sought Indian aid in agri-technology that would halt desertification, deforestation, and water wastage in Afghanistan (Press Trust of India 2006). Afghanistan was self-sufficient in food till the 1970s, but since then the vagaries of war, drought, and mismanagement has wreaked havoc with the nation's agricultural system.

The Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, visited Afghanistan in 2005, the first by an Indian head of government in twenty-nine years. Indira Gandhi was the last Indian Prime Minister to visit Kabul in 1976. In an act of significant symbolism, Singh's visit was also the first by a foreign head of state or government to last for more than a day since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001 as Singh brushed aside concerns for his security and demonstrated India's special commitment to Afghanistan. This visit was aimed at reaffirming the commitment of both sides to reinvigorate the past ties and develop a new partnership as well as to mark the consolidation of traditional bonds between the two which were severed during the rule of the Taliban.

In consonance with the priorities laid down by the Afghanistan's government, Indian assistance has focused on building human capital and physical infrastructure, improving security and helping the agricultural and other important sectors of the country's economy. India is apparently willing to even provide military assistance to Afghanistan but the U.S. has been unwilling to support this move, given Pakistan's sensitivities. As a result, India's support in this realm is limited to supplying Afghanistan with defensive military equipment, such as armoured checkpoints and watch-towers.

India and Afghanistan have a long-standing record of technical and economic cooperation in various fields as prior to 1979 Afghanistan was the largest partner in India's technical and economic cooperation program (Baruah 2002). India has launched an extensive assistance program in Afghanistan since 2001 where it has pledged \$750 million dollars toward reconstruction efforts (Sen 2007) most of which is unconditional. Out of this, around \$270 million dollars have already been utilized and the projects range from humanitarian and infrastructure to health and rural development, training of diplomats

and bureaucrats. Delhi has emerged as one of Afghanistan's top six donors, having extended a \$500 million dollar aid package in 2001 and gradually increasing it ever since.

Among the most high-profile of infrastructure projects undertaken by India was the reconstruction of the 220 kilometres long Zaranj-Delaram road, which will enable Afghanistan to have access to sea via Iran and will provide a shorter route for Indian goods to reach Afghanistan. This project was completed in 2008 despite stiff resistance from the Taliban by India's Border Roads Organization. The security of the Indian workers working on this project was provided by a three hundred-strong paramilitary force provided by India itself because of which the project overshot time and monetary deadlines.

India is also investing in the rebuilding of institutional capacity in Afghanistan by providing training to more than seven hundred Afghans in various professions, including diplomats, lawyers, judges, doctors, paramedics, women entrepreneurs, teachers, officials in various departments of Afghanistan's government, public officials, and cartographers. Afghanistan's budding public transport system relies on Indian support as India is not only providing buses but also training to traffic operators and other personnel related to transport.

India's commitment of one million tons of wheat aid to Afghanistan has been operationalized by converting part of it in the form of high protein biscuits for school feeding program in Afghanistan through the channels of the World food Program. India is also funding and executing the Salma Dam Power Project in Heart province involving a commitment of around \$80 million dollars as well as the double circuit transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul (Nambiar 2004). Afghanistan's new parliament building is also being constructed by India. India has agreed to adopt one hundred villages in

Afghanistan to promote rural development by introducing solar electrification and rain water harvesting technologies.

India has a fundamental interest in ensuring that Afghanistan emerges as a stable and economically integrated state in the region. Though Afghanistan's economy has recovered significantly since the fall of the Taliban, with the real GDP growth rate exceeding 7 percent in 2008 (Central Intelligence Agency 2009), it remains highly dependent on foreign aid and trade with neighboring countries. The only way in which the flailing Karzai government can retain and enhance its legitimacy is by bringing the Afghan economy back on track. For this it largely depends on other states and India is playing an important role by laying the foundations for sustainable economic development in its neighbour. The Preferential trade agreement signed by India and Afghanistan gives substantial duty concessions to certain categories of Afghan dry fruits when entering India with Afghanistan allowing reciprocal concessions to Indian products such as sugar, tea, and pharmaceuticals. Kabul wants Indian businesses to take advantage of the low tax regime to help develop a manufacturing hub in areas such as cement, oil and gas, electricity, and in services including hotels, banking and communications.

India also piloted the move to make Afghanistan a member of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) with the hope that with the entry of Afghanistan into the SAARC, issues relating to the transit and free flow of goods across borders in the region can be addressed, thereby leading to greater economic development of Afghanistan and the region as a whole. Moreover, South Asia will be able to reach out to Central and West Asia more meaningfully with Afghanistan as a member of the SAARC. It has been estimated that given Afghanistan's low trade linkages with other states in the region, its participation in the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) would result in trade

gains of \$2 billion dollars to the region with as much as \$606 million dollars accruing to Afghanistan (Srinivasan 2007).

Indian Interests in Afghanistan

Given that a politically and economically stable Afghanistan is a strategic priority for India, India maintains that the ongoing effort to help Afghanistan emerge from war, strife and privation is its responsibility as a regional power. Moreover, the consolidation of hard won gains since the fall of the Taliban is also a strategic objective for Indian foreign policy. India has a range of interests in Afghanistan that it would like to preserve and enhance and it is towards this end that it has expended its diplomatic energy in recent years.

Countering Pakistan

To a great extent, India's approach towards Afghanistan is a function of its Pakistan policy. It is important for India that Pakistan does not get a foothold in Afghanistan and so historically India has attempted to prevent Pakistan from dominating Afghanistan. India would like to minimize Pakistan's involvement in the affairs of Afghanistan and to ensure that a fundamentalist regime of the Taliban variety does not take root again. Pakistan, on the other hand, has viewed Afghanistan as a good means of balancing out India's preponderance in South Asia (Weinbaum 1991; 498-99). Good India-Afghanistan ties are seen by Pakistan as detrimental to its national security interests as the two states flank the two sides of Pakistan's borders. A friendly political dispensation in Kabul is viewed by Pakistan as essential to escape the strategic dilemma of being caught between a powerful adversary in India in the east and an irredentist Afghanistan with claims on the Pashtun dominated areas in the west (Hussain 2002). Given its Pashtun-ethnic linkage with Afghanistan, Pakistan considers its role to be a privileged one in the affairs of Afghanistan. Given these conflicting imperatives, both India and Pakistan have tried to neutralize the

influence of each other in the affairs of Afghanistan. Both are stuck in a classic security dilemma in so far as their policy towards Afghanistan is concerned (Herz 1951). Any measure by either Pakistan or India to increase its own security causes the other to act in response, thereby causing a deterioration in the overall regional security environment.

While Pakistan, along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, was the main supporter of the Taliban, India, along with Russia and Iran, threw its weight behind the Northern Alliance. As a consequence, Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan peaked with the coming to power of the Taliban in 1996. It viewed Taliban as a means of controlling Afghanistan and undercutting India's influence. Pakistan has long believed that it can gain "strategic depth" vis-à-vis India by influencing the domestic politics of Afghanistan, something Islamabad felt it achieved during the 1980s and the 1990s. It is now keen to prevent its "strategic encirclement" as a result of closer Delhi-Kabul ties.

The perceived gains of the last two decades have come under threat since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001. After the terrorist attacks in the United States, President Pervez Musharraf had to choose between support for the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan and its "war on terrorism" or isolation as a backer of radical Islamist extremism.

Musharraf promptly signed Pakistan up as an ally of Washington. This committed Pakistan to supporting efforts to stabilise Afghanistan and to strengthen the administration of President Hamid Karzai. Considerable doubts remain about Islamabad's capacity, and commitment, to crack down on militants. Kabul remains deeply suspicious of Pakistan, on whom its security is largely dependent. Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency is linked to the resurgence of the Taliban, whose leadership is thought to be operating from tribal border regions. The rejuvenation of the Taliban does allow the Pakistani military to

underline their nation's role as a frontline state in the war on terrorism, thereby securing engagement from the United States. Musharraf and his successor Zardari have been unable to dismantle the infrastructure that has provided funding, training and arms for the Taliban though the ISI has been brought under more direct control since 2001. The security problems in Afghanistan can be linked to military's continuing position as the predominant force in Pakistan, an institution that has, since the 1990s, viewed the Taliban as a means of controlling Afghanistan and undercutting India's influence there (Haqqani 2005; 238-260). Having focused exclusively on the Taliban, it is struggling to abandon it now and the tendency in the higher echelons of the Pakistani government and military to turn a blind eye to jihadist violence if that violence is focused outward on Afghanistan, Kashmir or other parts of India remains as potent as ever.

The costs of such a policy to the Pakistani polity and society are evident with the growing hold of Taliban in Pakistan itself. As Pakistanis themselves are arguing, "the common belief in Pakistan that Islam's radicalism is a problem only in FATA and the madrassas are the only institutions serving as jihad factories. This is a serious misconception." This mindset, it is suggested "may eventually lead to Pakistan's demise as a nation-state" (Hoodboy 2009). Until recently, the Islamist militant groups nurtured by Pakistan's military and intelligence apparatus were focused on external conflicts, especially the dispute over Indian Kashmir, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s and the presence of U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in late 2001. In the past few years, however, extremist groups along the Afghan border have turned inward, spreading violence and religious fanaticism among the ethnic Pashtun populace in Pakistan's northwest. The increasing pattern of insurgent assaults against high-profile government and civilian targets in other regions of the country – especially in Punjab, the

traditional home of Pakistan's armed forces – suggests that militancy has spun out of the government's control.

Kabul has repeatedly blamed Islamabad for a resurgence of the Taliban over the past four years. Karzai has warned that a failure to bring peace to Afghanistan would be disastrous for the whole region, and accused Pakistan of trying to “enslave” the Afghan people. He has threatened to send troops across the border into Pakistan to fight militant groups operating in border areas to attack Afghanistan (Gall 2008). The deterioration in relations has also manifested itself in a dispute over suggestions from Pakistan that it will seal its 1,510-mile long border with fences and mines. Afghanistan, which does not recognise the border, reacted strongly against the plan, arguing that it will divide families and will not end cross-border terrorism. Islamabad has insisted that three million Afghan refugees should return home, as one way to prevent Pakistan being used as a haven by extremists. Pakistan also suggested that drug traffickers from Afghanistan (which produces 90 percent of the world's heroin supply) are using their influence to campaign against the border plan. As the casualties have mounted with the Taliban regaining lost ground, Pakistan's role has come under a scanner over a range of activities from helping to plot a prison break in Kandahar to even aiding an assassination attempt against Karzai (Rondeaux 2008).

Pakistan's frustration at the loss of political influence in Afghanistan after the ouster of the Taliban has been compounded by the welcoming attitude of the Karzai government towards India. Karzai may not be deliberately crafting a Delhi-Kabul alliance against Islamabad but he is certainly hoping to push Pakistan into taking his concerns seriously. In a sign of its growing influence in Afghanistan, India has opened consulates in Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kandahar and Jalalabad, in addition to its embassy in Kabul. Pakistan has accused

India's Kabul embassy of spreading anti-Pakistani propaganda and views the establishment of the consulates as a way for Delhi to improve intelligence-gathering against it. Islamabad is also wary of Afghanistan or India exerting influence on restive populations in its border regions such as Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Pakistan claims that much of the funding and arms for the Baluch tribal leaders, grouped under the umbrella of the Baluchistan Liberation Army, are funnelled through the Indian consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar.

Pakistan has worked hard to limit India's involvement in Afghanistan. It made transit rights to Afghanistan conditional upon a resolution of the Kashmir issue. By not allowing India transit rights to Afghanistan through its territory, Pakistan has sought to leverage Afghanistan's reliance on the Karachi port as its only gateway to the world. But Kabul has pushed back and has used Iran and India to find an alternative route so as to reduce its historic dependence on Pakistan for transit trade. Though it has failed to achieve its objectives in the economic realm, it has been successful in limiting India's military involvement in Afghanistan. It did not even allow India to send a few hundred military transport vehicles to Kabul which India had to ultimately route through Iran (Mohan 2003).

Despite Pakistan's objections, however, Afghanistan has sought Indian assistance in the defence sector. The Afghan Air Force's fleet of MiG 21 fighters and other defence equipment, mostly of the Russian and Soviet origin, has been serviced by Indian technicians. India also played an important role in the reorganisation of the Afghan National Army and hopes that it will help in the long-term evolution of Indo-Afghan military ties (Bedi 2003). India has now stationed the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) commandos in Afghanistan for the protection of its personnel employed by the Border

Roads Organization (BRO). This is the first time since its independence that India has its military personnel deployed in Afghanistan, something that has obviously not gone down well with Pakistan (Cherian 2006). But with the Taliban openly threatening Indians working in various projects in Afghanistan and after the death of a few of its nationals, India had little choice as around three thousand Indian nationals are engaged in infrastructure construction, capacity building and developments projects in Afghanistan. Faced with a resurgent and resilient Taliban aided by Pakistan, India and Afghanistan are also cooperating extensively on intelligence gathering. The Afghanistan authorities have hinted at the role of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in the bombing of the Indian Embassy in Kabul which the Pakistan's government was quick to deny. The message of the bombing though seemed clear to India: it should get out of Afghanistan.

Despite the public pronouncements of the U.S. government in support of Pakistan, the sharply rising western casualty rates in Afghanistan have not only generated scepticism in the West about Pakistan's efforts to rein in the Taliban but have also encouraged a rethink about Pakistan's relationship with the West and its role in the global war on terror (Jones 2007). As the U.S. turned up the pressure on Pakistan to crack down in its tribal areas with the realization that Pakistan remains a major source of Islamic extremism and Al Qaeda leaders have found a sanctuary in secure Pakistani hideouts (Negroponte 2007), India was also forced to confront this challenge. This despite the fact that the West, sensitive to Pakistani concerns, have been pressuring India to scale down its diplomatic presence in Afghanistan. The Obama Administration has indicated that it considers Afghanistan as the central front in the "war on terror" and has tried to make Pakistan accountable for ensuring security in the South Asian region as the turmoil in Afghanistan cannot be contained without addressing the sources of support for extremism and terrorism in Pakistan.

Under pressure from the U.S. that got alarmed by the growing hold of radicals in Pakistan, the Pakistani military was forced to undertake major operation in the Swat Valley and South Waziristan, retaking these regions from the Taliban insurgents who were extending their reach toward the heartland of the country with great speed. The Taliban mostly melted away without a major fight, possibly to return when the military withdraw or to fight elsewhere. Yet the reassertion of control over Swat has at least temporarily denied the militants a haven they coveted inside Pakistan. Initially Pakistani military was only willing to take on the Pakistani Taliban which had challenged the Pakistani state directly. But it came under immense pressure from the Obama Administration to take action against all elements of the extremist forces, including Al Qaeda, Afghan Taliban, Pakistani Taliban, Lashkar—Toiba (LeT) and the Haqqani network that have been identified by the U.S. as adversaries needed to be disrupted, dismantled and defeated. This has led to a changed Pakistani policy of greater cooperation with U.S. intelligence and military. Notwithstanding the short success of the Pakistani military however, the long term struggle against the Taliban remains complicated, thereby endangering the future prospects for any regional cooperative endeavour in tackling regional security challenges.

While some have suggested that increasing trade and transit between India and Pakistan can reduce their sense of political rivalry in Afghanistan (Mohan 2004), it is not clear if the two sides would be willing to give up their power struggle so easily. After all, it was as far back as 1979 that India had proposed that India and Pakistan should cooperate on Afghanistan to stabilize the South Asian security environment but the global political realities soon took over with Pakistan emerging as a frontline state in the U.S.-led struggle against Soviet expansionism and India gravitating towards the other side. Pakistan which has long viewed itself as the ultimate arbiter of power in Afghanistan is finding it difficult to reconcile itself to a situation where the balance of power seems to have shifted in favor of

India even though India cannot neutralize Pakistan's geographical advantage in Afghanistan – an open frontier that runs 2,500 km long. The Cold War may have ended in 1991 but the security dilemma between India and Pakistan continues and this will continue to shape India's attitudes towards Afghanistan.

Containing Islamist Extremism

India's other major interest is to make sure that Islamist extremism remains under control in its neighbourhood and its struggle against Islamist extremism is also closely intertwined with the rise of extremism in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan has long backed separatists in Jammu and Kashmir in the name of self-determination and India has over the years been a major victim of the radicalization of Islamist forces in Kashmir which have been successful in expanding their network across India. Any breeding ground of radical Islamists under the aegis of Pakistan has a direct impact on the security of India, resulting in a rise in infiltration of terrorists across borders as well attacks. It is vital for both India and Afghanistan that the latter would never again emerge as a safe haven for terrorism and extremism.

Ever since the withdrawal of the former Soviet Union from Afghanistan, there has been a gradual growth of the Salafists around the globe and India has been no exception where this movement has made use of the nation's liberal environment to preach and operate a radical version of Islam to sections of the 170-million strong Indian Muslim populace at a time when they have been particularly vulnerable due to the rise of Hindu nationalism. The Salafist ideology has been nurtured in the ultra-conservative environs of Saudi Arabia and has been exported to the rest of the world ever since the boom in Saudi oil revenues in the 1970s.

The founder of the Saudi Kingdom, King Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud, based his rule on the Salafi doctrine and this remains the ideology of Saudi Arabia today (Haykel 2001). A combination of factors in the 1970s made it possible for the Saudis to promote their radical version of Islam around the world. This included the hike in oil prices that provided the resources necessary to penetrate globally, the coming to power in Pakistan of General Zia-ul-Haq, who put his weight behind the Islamist political parties and their madrassas, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which brought thousands of volunteers into the country to fight the “infidels.” By the time the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan, there was an army of young radicals who had been converted to the cause of the jihadist movement (Allen 2006). An ideology of violence predicated on the distortion of Islamic tenets spread insidiously across the crescent from West Asia through Afghanistan-Pakistan and was remarkably successful in attracting converts.

A friendly Afghanistan where religious extremism continues to flourish is seen by Pakistan as essential to keep the pressure on India in Kashmir by providing a base where militants could be trained for fighting against the Indian forces. The mujahideen fighting in Kashmir have not only drawn inspiration from the Afghan resistance against the Soviets but has also drawn resources and materiel support from Pakistan (Rashid 2001; 183-187). Kashmiri militants were among the thousands of “volunteers” from various Islamic countries that participated in the war against the Soviet forces. They went back indoctrinated in a version of Islam that destined their victory over the “infidels” as well as with important knowledge of guerrilla warfare (Rais 1993; 915-16). India rightly perceived that the victors of mujahideen against the Soviet Union would fundamentally alter the direction of Islamic extremism as Afghanistan would end up playing a crucial role in the shaping of an Islamic geopolitics sitting as it does astride the Islamic heartland involving South and Central Asia as well as Middle East.

While India would like to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a springboard for terrorism directed against India once again, the recent resurgence of the Taliban and Pakistan's ambivalent approach towards this growing menace remains a major headache for India. In recent times, the pattern of medieval Islamist ideology challenging the writ of the state is more evident along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border where the resurgence of Afghanistan is manifest in myriad ways. The Taliban forces have attacked Indian nationals working in reconstruction and development projects in different parts of Afghanistan in an effort to intimidate the Indian government. With the leadership of Al Qaeda and the Taliban operating from Baluchistan, the NWFP, and the Waziristan area of Pakistan, these attacks can only be expected to increase, especially as they continue to enjoy Pakistan's tacit support due to its concerns about the growing Indian influence in Afghanistan. Despite his status as a western ally in the "war on terror," Musharraf refused to unequivocally renounce the terrorist option as far as Kashmir and Afghanistan were concerned (Baabar 2006) and his successor has given no indications yet that he intends to change that policy. There is significant evidence that training camps of various militant groups continue to operate in different parts of Pakistan (Press Trust of India 2006). The terror strikes in Mumbai in November 2008, and Pakistan's failure in bringing the masterminds of these attacks to justice despite credible evidence, has further confirmed Indian suspicions that sections of Pakistani political and military establishment have no interest in renouncing terrorism as an instrument of their foreign policy.

The political-military establishment in Pakistan are yet to clear the cobwebs in their minds — in thinking through, and operationalizing, a policy of no tolerance towards the jihadis (Weaver 2002; 249-272). As the operatives and partisans of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban move about with ease and propagate their ideology even in those parts of Pakistan where the federal government exercises real control, these organisations face little difficulty

in recruiting cadres or raising funds. The resurgence of the Taliban is being supported by Pakistan's intelligence agencies not only because they are under the spell of the forces of radical Islam but also because of their entrenched opinion that the jihadist movement allows them to assert greater influence on Pakistan's vulnerable western flank. As Dennis Blair, the U.S. Director of National Intelligence has underlined: "Islamabad's conviction that militant groups are an important part of its strategic arsenal to counter India's military and economic advantages will continue to limit Pakistan's incentive to pursue an across-the-board effort against extremism...Islamabad has maintained relationships with other Taliban-associated groups that support and conduct operations against U.S. and ISAF forces in Afghanistan...It has continued to provide support to its militant proxies, such as Haqqani Taliban, Gul Bahadur group, and Commander Nazir group."

Pakistan has yet to deliver meaningfully on its promise of reforming madrassas so that none of them can function as training schools for jihadis. From the beginning of the U.S.-led war on Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, it has been clear that Islamabad would not be able to compartmentalise the jihadi groups. The strategy of keeping the Kashmir terrorist groups active while clamping down on outfits operating in Afghanistan was never going to work, for the simple reason there was no question of those who believed they were fighting a holy war of terror accepting a diktat that they should cross only one national border or fight only one enemy (Haqqani 2005; 301-309). India will be forced to respond more aggressively if the Islamist forces continue to gain momentum in and around Afghanistan because the last time similar developments took place, India had to pay a heavy price for its nonchalance.

Evidence is clear now that the terrorists who attacked Mumbai got training in Pakistan and were members of Lashkar-e-Toiba, a militant Islamist organisation that

operates from the tribal areas of Pakistan and has perpetrated a series of attacks on India. However, the disarray in Pakistan poses challenges for India. If the Pakistani security establishment was involved in these attacks, then it underlines Pakistan's unwillingness to desist from using terror as an instrument of state policy. If however, these attacks happened without the knowledge of Pakistani establishment, then it underlines the inability of the Pakistani government to control the groups that they created in the first place. The crisis after Mumbai attacks has allowed India to once again underline to the world that it cannot expect to win in Afghanistan by ignoring Pakistan's eastern frontier. The objectives of terror groups operating in Afghanistan and India are similar and unless a holistic view is taken of the region, neither Afghanistan will stabilise nor India will get a respite from these constant attacks. India has built diplomatic pressure on the U.S. and the international community so that the Zardari government in Islamabad is forced to take substantive verifiable actions against terror groups operating from their territories. India's case is couched in a language that makes it clear to the world that if collective pressure can be brought to bear on Islamabad, it will not only benefit India but the global community's efforts in stabilising Afghanistan. India has started demanding a fundamental restructuring of Pakistan's security organisations given their culpability in the mess that is unfolding in Afghanistan and in the continuing menace of terrorism confronting India. It remains unclear if the West has the capability and the willingness to undertake the policies that India is demanding vis-à-vis Pakistan.

The Pakistani Army has been successful in rebuilding its image as the guarantor of nation's security against the Taliban as well as India over the last few months. When General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani took over as the Army chief from the former President, Prevez Musharraf, at the end of 2007, the Army had lost all credibility and public anger against the military was at its peak. Among Kayani's first moves to retrieve lost ground was

to reduce the visibility of the Army in Pakistan's governance. Meanwhile, the Mumbai terror attacks, which saw the Pakistani establishment whip up fears of an imminent military strike by India, led to the public rallying behind the Army preparations for what was viewed as an imminent war. The recent operation in Swat and South Waziristan to flush the Taliban militants has presented an image of the military to the people that is sincere in maintaining the security of the homeland in a purely professional manner.

The Pakistani military and the civilian government have conveyed an impression that they are united in viewing the Taliban as the real threat to Pakistan and that it is important to mend relations with India. Yet, the terms of India-Pakistan dialogue have reverted back to the old days and President Zardari's earlier ideas about more trade, less Kashmir and no first use of nuclear weapons no longer enjoy wide currency. The Pakistani discourse on engagement with India now seeks to balance New Delhi's demand for action against the Mumbai terror attack perpetrators with the reciprocal demand that India must stop, as charged, funding and arming terrorists operating in Pakistan. Public opinion wants the Pakistan government to act against extremism and militancy but these twin menaces have come to be only and completely identified with the Taliban. Despite acknowledging at the very highest levels that militants and extremists were deliberately created and nurtured by the Pakistani security establishment for short-term tactical gains, there is little appetite for action against the jihadi groups that target India or Kashmir, even though these have radicalised entire towns and villages in the Punjab province (Subramanian 2009). In such a context, it is unlikely that India will be able to have a positive view of domestic developments in Pakistan and so any movement in India-Pakistan dialogue will remain tentative.

A Bridge to Central Asia

Afghanistan is also viewed as a gateway to the Central Asian region where India hopes to expand its influence. Central Asia is crucial for India not only because of its oil and gas reserves that India wishes to tap for its energy security but also because other major powers such as the US, Russia and China have already started competing for influence in the region. The regional actors view Afghanistan as a potential source of instability even as their geopolitical rivalry remains a major cause of Afghanistan's troubles (Rashid 2001; 207-216).

India was forced to increase its military profile in Central Asia after the diplomatic humiliation it had to endure in 1999 when an Indian Airlines flight from Kathmandu was hijacked by Pakistan-backed terrorists to Kandahar in southern Afghanistan. India had to negotiate a deal with the Taliban that involved the release of the aircraft in exchange for three hardened terrorists held by India. India then decided to set up its first military base abroad in Farkhor in Tajikistan, close to the Afghan border, that was used to provide assistance to the Northern Alliance fighters and later to provide assistance to the post-Taliban government in Kabul (Bedi 2002).

India has used Tajikistan as a base for ferrying humanitarian and reconstruction aid to Afghanistan. India's military airfield reconstruction project at Ayni in Tajikistan, also described as a "base at times," represents a major element in India's effort to promote stability in Afghanistan and to enhance New Delhi's ability to contain Islamic terrorism both in South Asia and Central Asia. Afghanistan's leaders have also expressed an interest in acting as a "land bridge" between India and Central Asia. India's interest in Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline is also predicated upon stability

and security in Afghanistan. Moreover, India has to keep an eye on various other states that have started expanding their own influence in and around Afghanistan.

Iran has also been increasing its influence in Afghanistan, using its oil money to realize its self-image as an ascendant regional power. Iran's strategy towards Afghanistan seems geared towards hastening the withdrawal of American forces, preventing the Taliban from gaining power, and trying to keep Afghanistan under Tehran's sway. It played a major role in re-starting the post-Taliban political process in Afghanistan and has pledged \$560 million dollars in aid and loans to Afghanistan (Rohde 2006). But Iran's role has become more complicated in Afghanistan more recently. As its relations with the U.S. have become more confrontational, there have been some indications that certain sections of the Iranian military, especially the Revolutionary Guards, may be arming the Taliban so as to weaken the American military in Afghanistan. The coalition forces in Afghanistan have captured some shipments of Iranian made weapons that were being supplied to the Taliban (Gordon 2007).

Historically, Iran has also competed with Pakistan for influence in Afghanistan. Iran has not taken kindly to Pakistan's close ties with the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. It had also been suspicious about Pakistan's intentions in establishing and supporting a fundamentalist Sunni regime in Kabul. Shia-Sunni strife in Pakistan has also provoked Iran to provide clandestine support to its co-religionists, the Shias, in Pakistan. Though the A.Q. Khan network also helped Iran in its drive towards nuclear weaponization (Braun and Chyba 2004), Iran has not been very comfortable with the Idea of Pakistan being the sole Islamic state with nuclear weapons.

Pakistan remains concerned about deepening India-Iran ties (Pant 2008) and Afghanistan's gravitation towards such an axis. There was also a perception shared by India

and Iran that Pakistan's control of Afghanistan via the fundamentalist Taliban regime was not in the strategic interests of either state and was a threat to the regional stability of the entire region. As opposed to Pakistan that promptly recognized the Taliban regime, India and Iran did not establish diplomatic contacts with the Taliban. India and Iran, together with Russia, were the main supporters of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance that routed the hard-line Islamic regime with U.S. help in Afghanistan in November 2001. India and Iran have signed an agreement to set up a joint working group on terrorism and security, the main purpose of which is to share intelligence on al-Qaeda activities in Afghanistan. Both countries have a shared interest in a stable Afghanistan with a regime that not only is fully representative of the ethnic and cultural diversity of Afghanistan but also is capable of taking the country on the path of economic development and social stability, thereby enhancing the security of the entire region. India is cooperating with Iran in the development of a new port complex at Chah Bahar on the coast of Iran, which could become India's gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia. There is also another project that involves linking Chah Bahar port to the Iranian rail network that is also well connected to Central Asia and Europe. What is significant about these projects is that Pakistan will become marginal to India's relationship with the Central Asian region. As a result, India's relations with Central Asia will no longer be hostage to Islamabad's policies. Notwithstanding some tentative recent attempts by Pakistan and Iran to improve their bilateral ties, the two countries' relationship remains strained. Rather than bringing the two states together, the situation in Afghanistan has provided a stage where their rivalry is once again played out. Though the vacuum resulting from the fall of the Taliban government is the main factor behind the rising turmoil in Afghanistan, the problem there also remains a regional one. The more the United States and its NATO allies fail to secure Afghanistan, the more neighboring states will revive their ties to ethnic and ideological proxies, creating a dynamic that will further undermine Afghanistan. While both Pakistan and Iran seem to have

concluded that a stable, independent, and economically strong Afghan state is preferable to a weak and troubled one, they remain very sensitive to their relative gains vis-à-vis each other.

Regardless of who runs Afghanistan, Tehran's and Islamabad's conflicting interests over Afghanistan have played a pivotal role in the formation of their foreign policies toward each other (Pant 2009). Afghanistan's predicament is a difficult one. The country may like to enhance its links with its neighboring states, yet, peace and stability will continue to elude it so long as its neighbors view it through the lenses of their regional rivalries and as a chessboard on which to play out the game of their regional power and influence. In many ways, it is a paradox. The situation in Afghanistan can only improve if Tehran and Islamabad revise their attitudes, but any deterioration in Afghanistan's security situation will instead compound suspicions and force them to prioritize their own security interests in a way which intensifies regional rivalries. Iran will only play a positive role in Afghanistan if it feels its vital interests are not under threat, and a deteriorating security environment in Afghanistan will only make Iran feel more vulnerable, forcing it to take steps to safeguard its interests, letting the conflict spiral further. Pakistan, meanwhile, is reluctant to cede the preeminent position it has enjoyed for the last several decades in determining Afghanistan's political trajectory. And as the security environment in Afghanistan deteriorates further, Islamabad will view this as an opportunity to maintain its presence in its neighbor's territory in order to secure its larger strategic interests.

For many in Pakistan, India is pursuing a well-crafted strategy of encircling Pakistan and keeping it out of Afghanistan and Central Asia altogether. India's building of roads in Afghanistan is seen as particularly worrisome as it will increase the influence of India and Iran and boost Afghanistan's connectivity to the outside world. India also hopes that the

road link through Afghanistan and Iran will open up markets for its goods in Afghanistan and beyond in Central Asia.

As the geopolitical importance of Central Asia has increased in recent years, all the major powers have been keen to expand their influence in the region and India is no exception. It shares many of the interests of other major powers such as the US, Russia and China vis-à-vis Central Asia, including access to Central Asian energy resources, controlling the spread of radical Islam, ensuring political stability, and strengthening of regional economies. But unlike China and Russia, its interests converge with that of the U.S. in Central Asia and some have even suggested that it is in the U.S. interests to have a greater Indian presence in Central Asia to counter growing Chinese or Russian involvement (Blank 2007; 31-32). China and Russia are not only competing among themselves for influence in the region but are also trying to minimize U.S. presence. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is seen by them as an instrument to control the expanding U.S. influence in the region. The SCO is now planning to increase its profile in Afghanistan given the impact on regional security of the threats emanating from Afghanistan.

While Russia might be sympathetic to Indian concerns in Central Asia, China will be reluctant to see India emerge as a major player in the region. Given China's close ties with Pakistan, China would not be too pleased with growing Indian influence in Afghanistan and broader Central Asia. China has not engaged as meaningfully in a post-Taliban Afghanistan as it can, given its resource capabilities and as it should, given that it faces a restive Uighur populace in Xinjiang. A radicalized Afghanistan is not in China's interests especially as some Uighurs were involved with Taliban and Al Qaeda. For India, Central Asia is crucial in so far as its strategic capabilities vis-à-vis China are concerned and India's aggressive foreign policy in Central Asia is an attempt to outflank growing Chinese influence in South

Asia. Some see India's attempt to build roads linking Afghanistan and Central Asia and Iranian ports as a response to China's building up of a deep-water port in Gwadar as a gateway to global markets for Central Asian resources (MacDonald 2003; 25). The Obama Administration has decided to raise the level of political consultation with Beijing in its Af-Pak strategy so as to be able to mobilize Chinese commercial and political strengths in the region to stabilize the region. This poses problems for India not because of a larger Chinese involvement in Afghanistan per se but because of the possibility that because of its special ties to Islamabad, Beijing might try to undercut Indian influence in Central Asia and Afghanistan. However, while coordinating with the U.S. in Afghanistan, India also intends to maintain cooperation with its traditional allies in the region such as Russia and Iran. India is trying to revive the trilateral cooperation with Russia, Iran, hoping to develop a countervailing force to the Pakistan-based Taliban and Pashtun leadership. This will force some tough diplomatic choices on India as U.S.-Iran ties get tense and competition increases between Russia and the U.S. to increase their influence in the region in the coming years. The Obama Administration's decision to take Russian help in Afghanistan is, therefore, a welcome development from India's standpoint. Russia has agreed to open its airspace for the transport of American troops and supplies into Afghanistan which has been acknowledged by the U.S. as a substantial contribution to American efforts at building a new international coalition to stabilize the Af-Pak region. Indian interests are best served if the U.S. and Russia work together to stabilize the region and so the U.S. attempt to decrease its near complete logistical dependence on Pakistan by diversifying has been welcomed by India.

Expanding Regional Influence

A major factor behind India's pro-active Afghanistan agenda has been India's attempt to carve out for itself a greater role in regional affairs, more in consonance with its

rising economic and military profile. India wants to establish its credentials as a major power in the region that is willing to take responsibility for ensuring stability around its periphery. By emerging as a major donor for Afghanistan, India is trying to project itself as a significant economic power that can provide necessary aid to the needy states in its neighborhood. Moreover, India's long-term ambition to emerge as a "great power" will be assessed by the international community in terms of its strategic capacity to deal with the instability in its own backyard.

It has been contended that India's "pro-active foreign policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan has been predicated upon New Delhi's keenness to be of use to American regional policy" to the detriment of a traditional "independent" Indian approach towards its neighbors (Bhadrakumar 2005). It is not clear, however, what alternative policy India can pursue given that America's "war on terror" – its strategic priority – has at its center the goal of achieving Afghanistan's stabilization. No doubt, India's interests are best served in helping the U.S. achieve that aim. In the long term, though, India will have to make some difficult choices especially if the U.S. commitment to create an enduring environment in Afghanistan wanes and it leaves before achieving its long-term objectives. India will find the going tough if the U.S. decides to revert back to its policy of the 1990s when despite convergent security interests, it failed to develop an effective counter-terrorism partnership with India (Coll 2004; 571). Some have explained the U.S. policy of continuing to tolerate Pakistan's complicity with the Taliban by virtue of the fact that the U.S. does not consider the surviving elements of the Taliban as a threat to its homeland but just a menace to the peace and stability of Afghanistan (Raman 2004). If the U.S. refuses to put pressure on Pakistan adequately so as to force it to take a more responsible stand vis-à-vis Afghanistan, India might be forced to take a more independent approach that relies less on the US.

The new Af-Pak strategy unveiled by the Obama Administration has not gone down well in New Delhi. Describing the situation as “increasingly perilous,” Obama announced plans to send an additional four thousand troops, bringing the U.S. deployment to more than six thousand and to increase economic aid to Pakistan to \$1.5 billion dollars a year for five years. Progress will be monitored with a series of benchmarks and metrics imposed on Pakistan, Afghanistan and U.S. efforts. There will be no “blank cheques” and Afghanistan and Pakistan will be expected to demonstrate their commitment by ramping up their governance and rooting out extremists. Obama underlined the reasons behind this risky and costly strategy by suggesting – much like his predecessor George W. Bush – that Al Qaeda continues to actively plan attacks on U.S. homeland from its safe haven in Pakistan. And therefore, the U.S. goal remains one of disrupting, dismantling, and defeating Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan and preventing their return to either country in the future (De Young 2009).

The new approach involves exploiting the fissures in the Taliban and negotiating with those elements who can be reconciled to the broader objective of supporting the Afghan government in some form. Obama has opined that such a reconciliation in Afghanistan “could be comparable” to the successful U.S. effort to reconcile with Sunni militias in Iraq. The idea that the Taliban can be divided into “good” and “bad” categories might look appealing to outsiders desperate to make an exit but to India such an approach is an anathema. Those elements of the Taliban who might be willing to strike a deal with the West just to see the western forces leave the region will haunt the security of India long after the western forces would have left as they had done in the past. While the United States may have no vital interest in determining who actually governs in Afghanistan, so long as the Afghan territory is not being used to launch attacks on U.S. soil, India does and it would be loath to see any form of Taliban gaining power in Kabul. The Taliban – good or

bad – are opposed to India in fundamental ways. Taliban leader Jalaluddin Haqqani, for instance, is viewed by some in the West as a “moderate” Taliban. Yet, Haqqani is said to be responsible for the bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul in July 2008 (Sharma 2009).

There is a convergence between India and the Obama Administration in viewing Pakistan as the source of Afghanistan’s insecurity and the suggestion that the world must act together to cure Islamabad of its political malaise. In recognising that the borderlands between Pakistan and Afghanistan constitute the single most important threat to global peace and security, arguing that Islamabad is part of the problem rather than the solution, and asking India to join an international concert in managing the Af-Pak region, the U.S. has made some departures from the American policy towards South Asia since September 11, 2001. India, however, remains concerned about the lack of a fundamental change in the operational dynamic of the U.S. strategy towards Pakistan. For India, Obama’s approach is no different from that of George W. Bush. Obama continues to rely on the Pakistan army to deliver on American and international goals in Afghanistan. Moreover, the U.S. seems to have bought into the argument that Pakistan is unable to act against extremism and terrorism on its western borders because of the tensions with India on its eastern frontiers. India’s problem with the new strategy is that the Obama administration seems to have given the Pakistan army the perfect alibi for not complying with American demands for credible cooperation in the war against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. As it extracts more from the US, the Pakistan army now has every incentive to raise tensions with India. The consequence of abandoning the goal to establish a functioning Afghan state and a moderate Pakistan will be greater pressure on Indian security. The brunt of escalating terrorism will be borne by India, which already has been described as “the sponge that protects” the West (Tellis 2009).

Indian diplomacy faced a major setback at the Afghanistan Conference in London earlier this year where Indian concerns were summarily ignored. In one stroke, Pakistan rendered New Delhi irrelevant in the evolving security dynamic in Afghanistan. When Indian External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna underscored the folly of making a distinction "between good Taliban and bad Taliban," he was completely out of sync with the larger mood at the conference. The West has made up its mind that it is not a question of if, but when and how to exit from Afghanistan, which is rapidly becoming a quagmire for the leaders in Washington and London. Days before this much-hyped conference, senior U.S. military commanders were suggesting that peace talks with the Taliban may be imminent and that Taliban members might even be invited to join the government in Kabul. It is not without significance that British Foreign Secretary David Miliband emphasized in London that the war in Afghanistan had already gone on longer than World War II.

So, instead of devising plans to "win" this war, conference leaders decided that the time had come to woo the "moderate" section of the Taliban to share power in Kabul. Pakistan seems to have convinced the West that it can play the role of mediator in negotiations with the Taliban. Pakistan is attempting to preserve its rapidly diminishing influence in Afghanistan and to force the West into taking its concerns vis-à-vis India more seriously. And after the military success of the Marja offensive, the Obama Administration is considering when to commence talks with the disaffected Taliban from a position of strength. On the other hand, the Indian diplomatic debacle at the London conference is reportedly forcing a major rethink of Delhi's Af-Pak policy. To preserve its interests in such a strategic milieu, India is likely to step up the training of Afghan forces, coordinate with states like Russia and Iran, and reach out to all sections of the Afghan society. Though problematic for the West, India is also being asked to take a more militarily active role in

Afghanistan, if only to support its developmental activities. More significantly, New Delhi has indicated that it might be willing to reach out to the Taliban itself (Gupta 2010). How this re-orientation in India's Afghanistan policy will play out over the next few months remains unclear, but there is little doubt that India's strategic space for diplomatic maneuvering is shrinking by the day.

Conclusion

The situation in Afghanistan remains grim with the U.S. even warning that Afghanistan risked becoming a "failed state" if the security situation is not handled more seriously by the West. The failure of the European states to provide the NATO with adequate number of soldiers to carry out the expanded Afghan security mission it has taken on does not augur well for the credibility of the western alliance against a highly tenacious adversary. But military is just one of the means that is needed to tackle the menace of a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan. The pace of reconstruction and development also needs to pick up significantly if the international community wants the ordinary citizens of Afghanistan to have some faith in its endeavour to transform social and economic structures on the ground. The political institutions also need to connect better with the demands of the ordinary citizens and reforms in the security apparatus of the country need some serious attention. Hamid Karzai is straining to hold his country together but is increasingly losing popular support because of growing violence, corruption, mal-governance and an inability to demonstrate tangible progress since the fall of the Taliban. The U.S. and allies are unfortunately too bogged down in the day-to-day struggle for security that any long-term reforms will only have to take a backseat. And this does not augur well for a nation that is so crucial for winning the "war against terror."

Though U.S. troop levels have gone up and major military offensives have been undertaken, only a comprehensive approach that includes a constructive engagement of the key regional players such as Iran and India along with Pakistan is key to improving the ground realities. While the collapse of governance after the overthrow of the Taliban regime has been rightly identified as the main factor behind the rising turmoil in Afghanistan (Seth 2008), the problem in Afghanistan remains a regional one as throughout its history Afghanistan has been a battleground for its neighbours who have exported their conflicts to the Afghan territory and even today all the regional countries are interfering in Afghanistan by backing their proxies and hedging their bets as they see the U.S. effort failing. It is clearly in the interest of the regional states to have a stable Afghanistan. The opportunities offered by trade and transit, energy market integration and road and rail infrastructure should dominate bilateral and multilateral agendas, along with cooperation to combat terrorism and the illegal narcotics trade. This may lay the basis for regional cooperation over the long term which is vital for Afghanistan's sustainable recovery (Rubin and Armstrong 2003).

Structural factors are propelling India to re-define its foreign policy priorities in its neighbourhood. As India's economic and military prowess have increased in recent years, it has tried to use them to gain greater control over its strategic environment. It has become more ambitious in defining the scale and scope of its foreign policy with an increase in its relative material power capabilities. As India has risen in the global inter-state hierarchy, it has tried to expand its economic, political and territorial control and has made an attempt to reshape the regional strategic environment in accordance with its own interests. India's Afghanistan policy is a function of India's regional and global rise and is therefore seen as a test case for Indian ambitions.

The present turmoil in Afghanistan is not good news for India that views a stable, democratic, and prosperous Afghanistan as necessary for its own as well as region's security. Progress towards stabilisation and development in Afghanistan is being heavily influenced by India and Pakistan and the rivalry between them. India has an interest in a stable Afghanistan ruled by a regime that is not only fully representative of the ethnic and cultural diversity of the country but is also capable of leading it down the path of economic development and social stability, thereby enhancing regional stability. Afghanistan faces major developmental challenges and India has promised to support it in the path toward prosperity and development. The rich legacy of India-Afghanistan relations goes back to the earliest times, to well before Christ. Therefore, for India, stability and development in Afghanistan will have to be based on a revival of the age-old commercial, social, cultural and political ties that made Afghanistan the crossroads of East and West Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia. The Taliban militants who have been repeatedly targeting Indian nationals and interests are sending a strong signal that India is an integral part of the evolving security dynamic in Afghanistan despite its reluctance to take on a more active role in the military operations. After targeting personnel involved in developmental projects and emboldened by India's non-response, the terrorist have now trained their guns directly at the Indian State. There are growing voices in India that India should support its economic and diplomatic activities in Afghanistan with an increase in its military presence there. It is unlikely though that India would be willing to use hard power to advance its interests at this juncture. How long this restrained posture will last, however, is anybody's guess.

India is following an ambitious foreign policy agenda vis-à-vis Afghanistan as it tries to shed its inward-looking strategic insularity to carve out a larger regional role for itself. Its success, or lack thereof, will have serious consequences for India's stature in the region and the international system at large.

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