

India's Interests in Afghanistan Since 9/11

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Abstract:

The paper will analyse the India's interests in Afghanistan since 9/11. India is working for a stable, secure and prosperous neighborhood and Afghanistan is a road for such design. Afghanistan holds the political and economic significance for India. The country is helping Afghanistan to preserve security and strengthening strategic-partnership, but it faces the problems from others like, Pakistan who does not want to see the good and stable relations between the two. Since 9/11 Afghanistan's Foreign Policy towards New Delhi is quite receptive. India's activities in Afghanistan had a geo- strategic flavour though, which not only confine to Afghanistan but travel deep into Central Asia. It is now widely accepted that India's afghan policy seeks access to energy resources of the region, and elimination of anti Indian terrorism.

Keywords:

Political and Economic development of Afghanistan, Expanding regional influence, A Bridge to central Asia, Elimination of anti- India terrorism, Countering Pakistan, Maintain Presence in Afghanistan, Economic Interests

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INTRODUCTION

India's interests in Afghanistan cover a wide range of issue to include trade, commerce and security and to ensure a stable government in Afghanistan. Countering Pakistan influence in Afghanistan and its attempts to install a weak and pliable regime is one of the objectives. However, this is not the only and primary motive for India seeking a large role. India seeks to project itself as a regional power beyond the confines of South Asia and sees the building of stable, long- term relations with the central Asian Republics (CARs) and Afghanistan as crucial to its economic, trade and security interests. The country is helping Afghanistan to preserve security and strengthening strategic partnership. Thus, the country has considerable interests in Afghanistan. Taking into consideration the changing circumstances and the overall analysis of her Afghan policy aspirations, some vital interests are evident under the following headings,

Political and Economic Development of Afghanistan

The object of a democratic Afghanistan constitutes the base of „India's Afghan Policy“. The country wants the independent, united and peaceful Afghanistan capable of standing on her own feet. The country has a strong security interest in ensuring that this war torn nation remains a sovereign, stable, united and free from external influence.¹ The country wants to build her into a peaceful, secure and democratic nation. A strong and stable civil government at Kabul is her interest. The country also wants to boost the Afghan economy and has the market potential to stimulate Afghan economy in several ways. Afghanistan too provides a space for her companies currently engaged in the reconstruction process. This country has repeatedly expressed her will to enhance Indian business while developing the manufacturing hubs in different sectors as cement, oil, gas, electricity, banking, and communications etc.² India's efforts are to gain strong foothold in the South, West and Central Asia by strengthening trade ties with Afghanistan. In order to avail these opportunities, a democratic and a peaceful Afghanistan is a prerequisite.

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 neighbourhood. 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 neighbours.³ It is not clear, however, what alternative policy India can pursue given that America's "war on terror" \

– its strategic priority – has at its centre the goal of achieving Afghanistan's stabilization. Though India's interests are best served in helping the US achieve that aim, India will have to make some difficult choices now that the US commitment to create an enduring environment in Afghanistan has waned and it plans to leave before achieving its long-term objectives. India will find the going tough if the US 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.

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 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. 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 US in Central Asia and some have even suggested that it is in the US interests to have a greater Indian presence in Central Asia to counter growing Chinese or Russian involvement.⁴

Elimination of anti- India terrorism:

Pakistan has a declared policy of using its terror assets to extract leverage over countries it considers inimical to its interests.⁵ Consistent with that policy, Pakistan has repeatedly launched anti- India, non-attributable terror attacks on Indian soil and on India's Interests in Afghanistan. When presented with evidence proving its involvement in the terror attacks, Pakistan has consistently resorted to denial and lies. The 26/11 Mumbai attacks and the attacks on the Indian embassy in Afghanistan have strengthened the Indian resolve to prevent further attacks, by military means if necessary. Although imposition of sharia is the stated goal of terror organisations like the Haqqani Network, Hizb- i- Islami Gulbuddin (HIG), let, Quetta shura Taliban (QST) and HM, these groups have over time and with absolute power in their domains evolved as commercial mafias with self- sustaining financial enterprises, including drug traffic king, Kidnappings for ransom and smugglings to name a few, and successive Pakistani governments have been unable to check these activities effectively on either side of the Durand Line.⁶ Groups like the Afghan, Taliban and Haqqani Network, if required can take a course of action which may be unacceptable to Pakistan. The activities of these groups can be effectively neutralised only if Pakistan, their principal benefactor, is made accountable to the international community. Hence, rooting out terrorism and weakening its sponsors would be the primary aim of Indian involvement in Afghanistan.

Countering Pakistan

To a large extent, India's approach towards Afghanistan has been a function of its Pakistan policy. It is important for India that Pakistan does not get a foot hold 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 route again. Pakistan, on the other hand, has viewed Afghanistan as a good means of balancing out India's preponderance in South Asia.⁷ 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 in irredentist Afghanistan with claims on the Pashtun dominated areas in the west.⁸ Given its Pashtun-ethnic linkage with Afghanistan, Pakistan considers its rule 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 or as their policies towards Afghanistan are concerned. Any measure by either Pakistan or India to increase its own security causes the other to act in response, thereby causing

deterioration in the overall regional security environment.

Maintain presence in Afghanistan

India wants to consolidate her presence, as it is effective in preventing the “Islamic (extremist) belt allied to Pakistan. The strategic agreement signed between the two nations immediately after the US announcement of troop’s withdrawal justifies that India does not want Kabul to fall prey to extremist ideology.⁹ For maintain her presence and securing a strong foothold, the country has to generate support from the local population and the major aim of her Afghan policy is to build goodwill with the Afghan people. The country has succeeded in this respect with her support in the infrastructure projects, capacity-building measures and skill development programmes. Strategically, her presence in Afghanistan will also reduce the dominance of China and the United States in central as well as South Asia.¹⁰

Economic Interests in Afghanistan

Indian economic interests in Afghanistan continue to expand beyond government sponsored programmes and investments. India’s large private and public sector companies are becoming aware of the Potential Afghanistan presents as a destination for goods and services, as well as a source of valuable raw materials and resources. Bilateral trade stands at US \$368 billion and could potentially be double of that in five years according to FICCI.¹¹ Afghanistan, currently a net agricultural exported to India, is also seen as a potential food security resources. A number of private Indian firms are involved in a number of restricting and construction sub- contract projects across Afghanistan and private and public Indian steel firms are considering the creation of a unified Indian steel consortium for a joint bid for exploration rights of the Hajigak iron ore mines in the Bamiyan province. This could be amongst the most coveted iron ore resources in the world due to the size of the find and its high ferrous content¹², and therefore could offer great benefits to India’s economic muscle.

Conclusion

India has a range of interests in Afghanistan that it would like to preserve and enhance. Apart From countering Pakistan, these include containing Islamist extremism, using Afghanistan as a gateway to the energy-rich and strategically important Central Asian region, and asserting its regional pre-dominance. Yet the most important goal for New Delhi remains one of ensuring that Pakistan does not regain its central role in Afghan state structures. The last time Pakistan was dictating terms in Afghanistan were in the 1990s and Indian security interests suffered to an unprecedented degree. But then India was a weaker state, marginal in the strategic equations of major global powers and so could be easily ignored. Today India is widely viewed as a rising global power with many more cards to play in Afghanistan than before. Yet India remains marginal to the emerging ground realities in Afghanistan.

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