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INDIA IN AFGHANISTAN: CHALLENGES TO ACTIVE MILITARY ENGAGEMENTS

Abstract

Despite the Government of India's repeated rejections of a demand for having Indian military boots in Afghanistan, there is an ongoing debate across the world, especially within India, over this issue. Whether India's position secures its strategic interests or not, only future will tell. Historically, Afghanistan is known as a "graveyard of empires" where whosoever interfered has faced destruction — the last one was the erstwhile Soviet Union (1979-1989). At present, the United States (US) and Pakistan are bearing the brunt of their misadventures in 1980s. In this paper, after critically looking into the history and present situation in Afghanistan, the author examines the pitfalls of any form of military engagement by India in Afghanistan.

1. Introduction

On 21 August 2017, the President of the United States of America (USA), Donald Trump, unveiling his government's "new" policy on Afghanistan and South Asia, said that "Another critical part of the South Asia strategy for America is to further develop its strategic partnership with India — the world's largest democracy and a key security and economic partner of the USA. We appreciate India's important contributions to stability in Afghanistan, but India makes billions of dollars in trade with the United States, and we want them to help us more with Afghanistan, especially in the area of economic assistance and development".¹ This marks a strategic shift in the US policy, which, unlike the past, calls India to be its partner in Afghanistan while pushing aside its erstwhile ally, Pakistan.

This shift in the US position has been welcomed by many security analysts in India. A few of them have even implicitly or explicitly supported the idea of having Indian boots in Afghanistan. C. Raja Mohan, a leading strategic affairs analyst from India, writes that "India has traditionally been risk averse when it came to strategic commitments beyond its borders".² More clearly, Brigadier (Retd.) Gurmeet Kanwal,

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¹ Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia", 21 August 2017, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/08/21/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-and-south-asia>, accessed on 24 August 2017.

² C. Raja Mohan, "America's Reset of Afghan Strategy: Potential Realignment of South Asian Geopolitics", *ISAS Insight*, No. 456, 23 August 2017, available at <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/ISAS%20Reports/ISAS%20>

in one of his writings, has supported the idea of deploying up to one Indian division (15,000 troops), along with other neighbours. However, he acknowledges that there is no support in India for sending troops in Afghanistan.³ In May 2017, Kanwal presented similar view in a closed door session at the Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington D.C. There he said that "If invited, if there is a UN peacekeeping force ... it is my considered view that perhaps India could be persuaded to send up to a division, provided the logistics are in place, provided Pakistan's so-called sensibilities can be put in place.... We intervene when they ask for help"⁴

Looking at the other side of the coin, former governor of the Reserve Bank of India, D. Subbarao, after a nuanced study of Trump's speech, finds out that Trump did not request for India's involvement in Afghanistan. It seems, as Subbarao finds out, Trump feels that it is India's obligation because it makes dollars in trade from the United States. Hence, as he analyses, more than recognising India as a partner, Trump, in fact, linked US investment in arms production in India to the quantum of support the US gets from India in Afghanistan.⁵

Balancing the debate, soon after Trump's speech, a spokesperson for the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India stated,⁶ "We welcome President Trump's determination to enhance efforts to overcome the challenges facing Afghanistan and confronting issues of safe havens and other forms of cross-border support enjoyed by terrorists. India shares these concerns and objectives. We are committed to supporting the Government and the people of Afghanistan in their efforts to bring peace, security, stability and prosperity in their country. We have been steadfast in extending reconstruction and development assistance to Afghanistan in keeping with our traditional friendship with its people. We will continue these efforts, including in partnership with other countries."

Even Afghanistan's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Salahuddin Rabbani who paid a visit to New Delhi in September 2017, did not call for direct engagement of Indian troops in his country. In an interview with *The Hindu*, the minister expressed a hope

Insights%20No.%20456%20Americas%20Reset%20of%20Afghan%20Strategy%20Potential%20Realignment%20of%20South%20Asian%20Geopolitics.pdf, accessed on 24 August 2017.

³ Gurmeet Kanwal, "India Must Deploy Troops", *Deccan Herald*, 08 April 2017, available at <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/605240/india-must-deploy-troops.html>, accessed on 20 September 2017.

⁴ "India could Send Troops to Afghanistan under UN mission: Experts", *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, 28 May 2017, available at http://outlookafghanistan.net/national_detail.php?post_id=18268, accessed on 25 September 2017.

⁵ Duvvari Subbarao, "Donald Trump's Policy Statement on Afghanistan - Economic Implications for India", *ISAS Brief*, No. 511, 06 September 2017, available at <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/ISAS%20Reports/ISAS%20Briefs%20No.%20511%20Trump's%20Afghanistan%20Policy-Implications%20for%20India.pdf>, accessed on 22 September 2017.

⁶ "Official Spokesperson's Response to a Question on President Trump's Comments on Afghanistan", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28875/official+spokespersons+response+to+a+question+on+president+trumps+comments+on+afghanistan>, accessed on 25 September 2017.

that India would continue to help Afghanistan's security forces by training its cadets. He also expressed that India would convince other countries like Iran and Russia to find out a peaceful solution to Afghanistan's muddle.⁷

During the visit of US Secretary of Defense, James N. Mattis in September 2017, followed by a visit of US Secretary of State, Rex W. Tillerson, the Government of India once again clarified its position over the presence of Indian boots in Afghanistan. The Minister of Defence of India, Nirmala Sitharaman, during a joint press conference with Mattis in New Delhi, categorically stated that, "There shall not be any boots on the ground from India.... We have built dams, hospitals and roads that has been India's contribution and that will continue"⁸

Despite categorically stated by the Union Government of India that the Indian boots are not going to be present in Afghanistan, this issue is still being debated. To an extent, this paper is an attempt to present another side of the debate. This paper looks into the history of India-Afghanistan relations, present level of engagement between the two countries, and on that basis it assesses the consequences of any sort of military engagements by India in Afghanistan. It is divided into five sections including introduction and conclusion. After the introduction, section two discusses the historical ties between India and Afghanistan. In section three, India's engagement in Afghanistan after the US invasion of Afghanistan since 2001 has been discussed. The fourth section examines the challenges to any strategic engagement by India in Afghanistan. Section five ends with a conclusion.

2. Historical Ties between India and Afghanistan

India and Afghanistan have links since ancient times. A few cities like Kandahar (then known as Gandhar) and Samarkand etc. find a mention in ancient Indian texts and epics. The epic Mahabharata has a character called Shakuni whose sister Gandhari (named after Gandhar) was married to a king of Hastinapur (modern Delhi) named Dhritarashtra. Anthropological studies also show that Gandhari was a name of a tribe whose members were converted into Islam by the Afghans.⁹ As this paper is not about the society in ancient Afghanistan, getting into discussion over the character in Mahabharata or the tribe is beyond its scope. However, it is worth noting that the author(s) of the

⁷ Suhasini Haider, "Pakistan should see the Blowback from Supporting Terror: Afghan Minister", *The Hindu*, 13 September 2017, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/pakistan-should-see-the-blowback-from-supporting-terror/article19672253.ece?homepage=true>, accessed on 25 September 2017.

⁸ "No Indian Troops in Afghanistan, says Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman", *Indian Express*, 27 September 2017, available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/no-indian-troops-in-afghanistan-says-defence-minister-nirmala-sitharaman-4862943/>, accessed on 16 November 2017.

⁹ Haroon Rashid, *History of the Pathans: Vol. I, The Sarbani Pathans*, Islamabad: Printo Graphic, p. 32.

text¹⁰ was familiar with the city or the tribe. This is mainly because the *Aryans* used that route to enter India.¹¹

In mediaeval India, many Afghans invaded India and later, made it their home. Bahlul Khan Lodi who set up the Lodi dynasty after the fall of the Sayyid dynasty in 1451 in Delhi was an Afghan. Lodi dynasty was overthrown by Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur in 1526. He defeated the last king of Lodi dynasty, Ibrahim Lodi, with the help of 12,000 soldiers from Afghanistan. In mediaeval India, Afghanistan was strategically important because of its climate which was best suited for breeding high-quality horses which proved to be a potent force against the enemies during the wars. Any hostile ruler in Kabul could affect the supply of those horses and there were four roads between Kabul and India through the Khyber Mountains, Bangash, Naghar in Bagzhan, and Farmuli in Urghun. Any sort of security of India from the Central Asia was depended upon securing these four roadways.¹² The Mughals, especially since the reign of Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar (1556-1605), successfully held Afghanistan under their control through power and money.¹³ The decline of the Mughal power since 1707 led to the revival of Afghan rulers which proved dangerous for India. In 1739, Nadir Shah invaded India. His invasion led to killing of many people and hefty amount of wealth was looted, including war indemnity imposed on the Mughal King, Muhammad Shah. In 1747, one of his Generals, Ahmad Shah Abdali, who succeeded Nadir Shah after his death, repeatedly invaded India. In the 1740s, Ahmad Shah left India, and came again in 1761 to fight and defeat the Marathas in the third battle of Panipat. After Ahmad Shah, there was a decline in Afghan's power, but the Mughals were not powerful enough to re-establish their sway in Afghanistan.

The arrival of the British imperialists in the Indian subcontinent in the eighteenth century once again brought Afghanistan and India together. Like the Mughals, the British too wanted to establish their control over Afghanistan for security reasons. The fear was from the Russians and Persian kingdoms, as both had eyes on Afghanistan. In their early days, the Afghan ruler Dost Mohammad Khan was an ally of the East-India Company in Afghanistan but the two could not remain friend for a long time. The British alleged Dost Mohammad for also playing with the Russians. Due to that, the East-India Company declined Dost Mohammad's request to help him against the Sikhs to recapture Peshawar. The cracks in relationship between Dost Mohammad and the East-India Company paved the way for the British company to set up a friendly

¹⁰ Romila Thapar finds that Hindu epic Mahabharata is a story of different periods. She argues that a few events in this epic depict a picture of clan-based society while other features were possible only after the caste system came into existence. Hence, it is difficult to mark out a period for Mahabharata and locate genealogies. See Romila Thapar, *The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities through History*, New Delhi: Aleph Publication, 2014.

¹¹ Aryan is a race to which people in north India and some other parts of South Asia belong. They are originally from Europe who, in ancient time, came in various batches to South Asia. *Ibid.*

¹² Kaushik Roy, *War and Society in Afghanistan: From the Mughal to the Americans, 1500-2013*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*

regime in Afghanistan. As such, in March 1839, Sir Willoughby Cotton advanced through the Bolan Pass, installed Shah Shuja as the Amir, and occupied Kabul.¹⁴

However, this step backfired and led to the first Anglo-Afghan War in 1839-1842. The war ended with the retreat of the British forces from Afghanistan and reinstallation of Dost Mohammad Khan. The second Anglo-Afghan War in 1878-81 was due to strategic contest between the British and the Russians to establish their respective influences over Afghanistan. This war ended with the Treaty of Gandamak in 1879 under which the British attained control of foreign relations of Afghanistan and recognised the Amir's right to have sovereign control over the internal affairs of their country. In 1893, Durand line was drawn on the basis of Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between Mortimer Durand, the Foreign Secretary of the British Indian Government and Afghan Amir Abdur Rahman Khan¹⁵ to demarcate their respective areas of jurisdiction. The line separated British India from Afghanistan. In 1919, third Anglo-Afghan war took place. As a result of this war, the Afghans won their independence from the British rule. Also, the British lost their control over the Afghanistan's foreign affairs.

With the birth of Pakistan due to the partition of India in 1947, a new sovereign state came between India and Afghanistan. However, it was the result of the first Kashmir War between India and Pakistan in 1947-48, due to which India lost whatever territorial links it had with Afghanistan.¹⁶ Since 1947, Afghanistan is in disputes with Pakistan over the 2,400 kilometer-long Durand line. After independence, India recognised the Durand line as a boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Evidently, in 1947 when Afghan King Zahir Shah refused to recognise the Durand line as a border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the then Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, publicly expressed his opposition to Afghanistan's position.¹⁷

In 1950, an Indo-Afghan Friendship Treaty was signed to promote trade and cooperation between the two countries. Under that treaty, India also promised for a limited military training to the Afghans.¹⁸ In 1959, Nehru paid an official visit to Afghanistan.¹⁹ In the 1970s, the interactions between India and Afghanistan declined mainly because of internal squabbles in Afghanistan. However, it cannot be convincingly concluded that India was out of the great game which was going on in Afghanistan. The tension between the King and the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) eventually ended with the latter coming into power in 1978. The PDPA was a divided house with the *Khalq* (masses) led by Nur Muhammad Taraki and

¹⁴ Antoinette Burton, *The First Anglo-Afghan Wars: A Reader*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

¹⁵ Peter Marsden, *The Taliban: War, Religion and the New Order in Afghanistan*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

¹⁶ The border which touches Afghanistan lies in the Pakistan side of Kashmir.

¹⁷ Cited in Rani D. Mullen, "India-Afghanistan Relations", in Sumit Ganguly (ed.), *Engaging the World: Indian Foreign Policy Since 1947*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 105-129.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

the *Parcham* (banner or flag) led by Babrak Kamal. Both factions were united for a short time after King Zahir Shah was overthrown in a military coup in 1973 by his cousin and former Prime Minister, Mohammed Daoud Khan. After defeating Daoud, Nur Mohammad Taraki formed the government in 1978. The differences between the factions resurrected and graduated into conflicts.

In that conflict between *Khalq* and *Parcham*, India tilted towards the latter. In the 1980s, the successive Prime Ministers of India — Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi developed close relationship with *Parcham* leaderships. Rajiv Gandhi supported Mohammad Najibullah in the 1980s against all odds. There were reports of Indian pilots fighting in 1989 battle of Jalalabad between Najibullah's forces and the Mujahideen. However, the government of India denied any element of truth in that report.²⁰ By 1989, as the war was coming to an end, Najibullah became weak and turned into a liability for India.²¹

Earlier in 1979, in support of the President of Afghanistan, the Soviet Army entered Afghanistan. The then Prime Minister of India, Chaudhary Charan Singh strongly opposed the Soviet intervention and India's permanent representative at the United Nations (UN) was asked to express regret over the Soviet intervention in that country, and demanded its withdrawal from Afghanistan.²² However, after the fall of the short-lived Charan Singh led government, Mrs. Indira Gandhi made a comeback and India's stand was politically overturned. Now, as India was not being critical of the Soviet Army's presence in Afghanistan, the new government was seen as endorsing its support to the revolutionary leadership in Afghanistan.²³ This view became stronger when India abstained itself from voting on a UN resolution which asked for the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

However, more important than India's interaction and stand on Afghanistan, the development which still has its footprints in the region was entry of the US with a logistical support from Pakistan. This changed the course of the civil war and history. Pakistan provided a substantive number of recruits who were trained by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to fight against the Soviet army in Afghanistan. After General Zia ul Haq, the then head of the state, rejected America's US\$ 400 million offer calling it "peanuts", the then US president Ronald Reagan increased the aid to US\$ 3 billion in 1981. Since then Pakistan spiritually got engaged in the Afghanistan's affairs.

General Zia himself attended few meetings with the Afghan resistance leaders on the border areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. An Afghanistan bureau was set up with its headquarters at Ojhri Camp in Rawalpindi. Base camps were used by

²⁰ Avinash Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy: India in Afghanistan from the Soviet Invasion to the US Withdrawal*, London: Hurst & Company, 2017, p. 72.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² See, S. D. Muni, "India's Afghan Policy: Emerging from the Cold", in K. Warikkoo (ed.), *Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities*, Vol. 1, New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2007, pp. 332-357; and *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to supply weapons to Afghan Mujahideen.²⁴ The war ended in 1989 after the Soviet army left Afghanistan. After the end of the war, Afghanistan witnessed a phase of anarchy where everyone was free to do anything. To control such a prevailing situation, the Taliban was formed by Mohammad Omar in October 1994. After defeating many warlords and reining in Mujahideen, the Taliban came to power in 1996.

During the Taliban regime in 1996-2001, India had almost no contact with the political establishment of Afghanistan, yet it continued to provide aid and assistance to the country. The Annual Report of 1999-2001 of the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India states,²⁵ "As in previous years, India continued to send humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan both bilaterally and through the UN. To ameliorate the suffering of thousands of Afghan people displaced from the Shumali plains and Takhar province, 1000 tents, 25,500 blankets, 140 tonnes of food items and 15 tonnes of medicines, medical supplies and medical equipment were dispatched by eight chartered flights. More consignments of medicines, shelter material and food items will be sent in the coming months."

The first interaction by the Government of India with the Taliban government was in December 1999, when an Indian Airlines plane IC 814 from Kathmandu to New Delhi was hijacked *en route*, and landed at Kandahar in Afghanistan. During the eight days of negotiations between the Indian side and the hijackers, IC 814 remained on the runway at Kandahar.²⁶ The hijackers demanded the release of Masood Azhar (who later planned an attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001) and his two other associates, which the Indian political establishment accepted, after exploring a few options they had. At that time, the Taliban "condemned the hijacking and refused to give political asylum to the hijackers. They warned the hijackers not to harm any of the passengers or else they would storm (into) the aircraft. The Taliban provided fuel to the aircraft to keep the passengers warm."²⁷

On Taliban's role during the hijacking, the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India's Annual Report of 1999-2000 stated,²⁸ "Notwithstanding our lack of recognition of the Taliban, our strong reservations about its obscurantist ideologies and our opposition to the manner in which it has permitted itself to be manipulated by Pakistan, we established direct contact with the Taliban during the hijacking of Indian Airlines flight IC-814. The role played by the Taliban during this crisis was noted but we made it clear that the fundamentals of our Afghan policy would not change."

²⁴ Hein G. Kiessling, *Faith, Unity, Discipline: The ISI of Pakistan*, New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2016, p. 54.

²⁵ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Annual Report 1999-2000*, available at http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/162_Annual-Report-1999-2000.pdf, accessed on 25 September 2017.

²⁶ Iftikhar Malik, "Pashtun Identity Formation and Taliban Politics: Grand Narratives and Contemporary Searchlight", in Shaun Gregory (ed.), *Democratic Transition and Security in Pakistan*, London: Routledge, 2016, pp. 102-123.

²⁷ Cited in *Ibid*.

²⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Annual Reports, 1999-2000*, *op. cit*.

3. Post-2001: India's Engagement with Afghanistan

On 11 September 2001, terrorists hijacked four US planes and crashed them into the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York. This led to the killing of many innocent Americans. In the aftermath, the US declared Global War on Terrorism (GWOt) starting from Afghanistan in December 2001. In that invasion, the Northern Alliance (NA), a non-Taliban faction in Afghanistan, also fought against the Taliban regime. Initially, the US led alliance wanted India to become a part of it. The then Prime Minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee discussed the issue with his coalition cabinet which was divided on the issue over an active participation in the Afghan muddle by sending its armed forces to fight in Afghanistan along with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), though India provided material support to the NA in its fight against the Taliban.²⁹ In 2003, the US made such request again after it invaded Iraq, this time the government took the matter to the Parliament. As the majority number of members expressed their reservations against sending Indian soldiers to fight along with ISAF, the Government of India, once again, declined the request to provide an active military support to the US led alliance. However, India actively participated in the Bonn conference in December 2001 where it extended its support for post-conflict construction activities in Afghanistan.

Looking into the post-2001 India's engagements in Afghanistan, Harsh V. Pant divides it into three distinct phases: "soft" engagement, New Delhi marginalised, and India fights back.³⁰ Soon after the attack on Afghanistan began, as the Taliban started losing its ground, there was an upgradation of India's diplomatic representation in Afghanistan from liaison office to a full-fledged embassy in 2002.³¹ At present, India has its consulates in many other cities of Afghanistan like Herat, Jalalabad, Kandahar, and Mazaar-e-Sharif.

Since then, economically, India is one of the top six donors in Afghanistan. In May 2011, the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced commitment of US\$ 500 million for Afghanistan's development, over and above the then India's existing aid assistance around US\$ 1.5 billion. Also, New Delhi and Kabul signed the 'Strategic Partnership' agreement in 2011.³² India is actively engaged in construction of roads, schools, hospitals, training the Afghan officials, providing them subsidised medical facilities in India etc.³³ The Indian government provides a daily supply of 100 grams of fortified high-protein biscuits to nearly 1.2 million children under school feeding programme. This programme is administered through World Food Programme

²⁹ This was news in 2001 which was confirmed to the author by an active diplomat who was then posted in the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi.

³⁰ Harsh V. Pant, *Indian Foreign Policy: An Overview*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016.

³¹ Harsh V. Pant, "India's Af-Pak Conundrum: South Asia in Flux", *Orbis*, Vol. 56, No. 1, Winter, 2012, pp. 105-117.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

(WFP) and had cost US\$ 460 million.³⁴ To support education in Afghanistan, India provides 675 long-term university scholarships annually sponsored by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations for under-graduate and post-graduate studies in India.³⁵ To meet its internal security concerns, India also provides training to members of the Afghan National Army.³⁶ Furthermore, to maintain law and order situation in Afghanistan, in September 2017, India and Afghanistan will be signing an MoU under which India will train Afghan police. This MoU is being supported by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).³⁷

These engagements have been challenged by some external actors with support from the Taliban. Indian embassy in Afghanistan was attacked twice. The first one was in July 2008 and then in October 2009, when an explosion was carried out at the Indian mission in Afghanistan.³⁸ India blamed ISI agents for both attacks. To this, a Pakistani Army General, on a serious note, stated that the "Taliban in Afghanistan are attacking all outsiders who are collaborating with ISAF and so they need no special provocation from Pakistan to target Indians".³⁹

Obviously, growing engagements between India and Afghanistan have made Pakistan concerned. Evidently, in 2013, Hamid Karzai's spokesman Aimal Faizi revealed that Pakistan demanded for cutting Afghanistan's ties with India, to send army officers to Pakistan for training, and sign a strategic partnership.⁴⁰ Targeting Pakistan's role in Afghanistan, during the seventh Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process (HoA-IP) conference, the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani clarified that the member states have to identify cross-border terrorism and those who funds it. Naming Sartaj Aziz, foreign policy advisor to the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Ghani said, "Pakistan has pledged US\$ 500 million for Afghanistan's development. This amount, Mr. Aziz, can be spent to contain extremism."⁴¹ He held Pakistan responsible for violence in Afghanistan by providing safe sanctuary to Taliban fighters.⁴²

³⁴ Gulshan Sachdeva, "International and Regional Contributions to Afghan Reconstruction", in Arpita Roy Basu, Binod Kumar Mishra and Alvia Mishra (eds.), *International Intervention in Afghanistan: Motives and Approaches*, New Delhi: Shipra Publications, 2012, pp. 150-162.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Harsh V. Pant, *Indian Foreign Policy: An Overview*, *op. cit.*

³⁷ Suhasini Haider, "India to train Afghan Police", *The Hindu*, 29 September 2017, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-to-train-afghan-police/article19737384.ece>, accessed on 29 September 2017.

³⁸ Harsh V. Pant, "India's Af-Pak Conundrum: South Asia in Flux", *op. cit.*

³⁹ Hasan Abbas, *The Taliban Revival: Violence and Extremism on the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014, p. 210.

⁴⁰ "Afghan govt alleges Pakistan abandoned peace process", *The Dawn*, 29 March 2013, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/798671>, accessed on 25 July 2017.

⁴¹ "Pakistan snubbed by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani for giving 'sanctuary' to terrorists", *The Times of India*, 04 December 2016, available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Pakistan-snubbed-by-Afghan-President-Ashraf-Ghani-for-giving-sanctuary-to-terrorists/articleshow/55787178.cms>, accessed on 21 February 2017.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Unfazed by the challenges India faces due to its engagement with Afghanistan, India continued with its work. This made India to fight back and attain significance in Afghanistan. In real terms, the fight back began after many of the post 2001 India's engagement with Afghanistan have yielded some results. While fighting back to retain its position, India coordinated with the two important neighbours and players in Afghanistan — Russia and Iran. India also got engaged in some back channel talks with Pakistan to find out a regional solution to Afghanistan conundrum.⁴³ Not all coordinated efforts fructified, however, a few organisations, discussed in latter part of this paper, were formed as a result of such effort.

Politically, in recent years, until September 2016, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has met with the Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani eight times.⁴⁴ This is many in such a short period of time after the two leaders have assumed power in their respective countries. Modi came to power in May 2014, while Ghani assumed Afghan Presidency in September 2014. During their meeting in September 2016, the Indian Prime Minister announced the allocation of further US\$ 1 billion, beyond US\$ 2.2 billion utilised so far, to support and assist Afghanistan through capacity-building in sectors such as education, health, agriculture, providing training for skill development, empowerment of women, setting up energy infrastructure and the strengthening of democratic institutions. The two governments are also cooperating in other sectors like pharmaceuticals, infrastructure and air connectivity.⁴⁵

An absence of a common border and connectivity has its impact on India-Afghanistan trade. According to the World Bank's data of 2014, Iran is Afghanistan's top export partner, with an annual trade volume of US\$ 1.49 billion between them. This represents 19.5 per cent of Afghanistan's total trading activity. Export from Pakistan is around US\$ 1.3 billion, representing 17.25 per cent of total imports. Import from India to Afghanistan is around US\$ 100 million.⁴⁶ Although Pakistan allows Afghanistan to transport some goods to India through its territory, India is unable to export such goods to Afghanistan through Pakistan.⁴⁷ To overcome such a situation, the Chabahar port agreement was signed between Iran, India, and Afghanistan during Modi's state visit to Iran in May 2016.⁴⁸ India and Afghanistan also have a plan to carry their trade through air cargo which cannot increase the volume of their trade substantially. India has constructed India-Afghanistan Friendship Dam — also called Salma Dam in Herat, the Parliament Building in Kabul, the Zaranj-Delaram Highway,

⁴³ Harsh V. Pant, *Indian Foreign Policy: An Overview*, op. cit.

⁴⁴ Keynote Address by Sujata Mehta, Secretary West, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "ICWA Seminar on Heart of Asia", available at <http://www.icwa.in/pdfs/stmtdg/2014/KeynoteaddressHoA10112016.pdf>, accessed on 20 February 2017.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Ankit Panda, "India, Afghanistan Plan Air Link to bypass Pakistan for Trade", *The Diplomat*, 06 December 2016, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2016/12/india-afghanistan-plan-air-link-to-bypass-pakistan-for-trade/>, accessed on 21 February 2017.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

transmission lines, power stations and the innumerable small development projects which emphasise creating community infrastructure at local levels.⁴⁹ All such projects have been handed over to the Afghan government.

India officially participated in various donor conferences on Afghanistan. Speaking about India's assistance in development of Afghanistan, the Minister of State for External Affairs of India, M. J. Akbar, at the Brussels conference in October 2016, informed the other donors about the historical ties between India and Afghanistan when goods from Kabul easily moved to Calcutta (Kolkata) through the Grand Trunk Road. But this has been blocked now for political reasons by Pakistan. The minister assured the donors that despite it, India will continue to give access to products from Afghanistan into Indian market through all means of transportation — land, sea and air.⁵⁰

On 04-05 December 2016, India organised HoA-IP conference in Amritsar, India. Addressing the conference, the Indian Prime Minister and the Finance Minister reiterated India's commitment towards the development of Afghanistan. The conference ended with the Amritsar Declaration in which various steps to improve the situation in Afghanistan, the present challenges and certain guidelines to achieve objectives were highlighted. One such important question was how to tackle militancy and terrorism in Afghanistan? On this the Amritsar declaration stated,⁵¹ "Efforts to eliminate the menace of terrorism and violent extremism will not succeed without a concerted and coherent regional approach involving all HoA countries... We welcome and support Afghanistan's initiative in taking the lead in exploring a regional counter-terror strategy, in accordance with the established principles of the UN Charter, which we agreed was necessary when we last met in Islamabad in December 2015".⁵²

Afterwards, the six party consultations on Afghanistan, held at Moscow on 15 February 2017, ended without any substantive conclusion. Other than India and Russia, the participants were Afghanistan, China, Iran and Pakistan. After the consultations, India expressed a hope for regional cooperation to bring peace and

⁴⁹ Keynote Address by Sujata Mehta, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ M. J. Akbar, Minister of State for External Affairs, Government of India, "Regional Integration and Prosperity at Brussels Conference on Afghanistan", available at <https://www.mea.gov.in/SpeechesStatements.htm?dtl/27462/address+by+mj+akbar+minister+of+state+for+external+affairs+on+regional+integration+and+prosperity+at+brussels>, accessed on 20 February 2017.

⁵¹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Amritsar Declaration at the 6th Ministerial Conference of Heart of Asia", available at <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/27746/amritsar+de+claration+at+the+6th+ministerial+conference+of+heart+of+asia+december+04+2016>, accessed on 20 February 2017.

⁵² *Ibid.*

stability in Afghanistan.⁵³ Correspondingly, Pakistan too expressed similar feelings.⁵⁴ However, the question remains: can it happen?

4. Challenges to Strategic (Mis)Adventure

It is difficult to ascertain the number of Taliban fighters active in Afghanistan. The estimates vary from one source to another. The number of fighters and their strength has further increased after the Islamic State (IS) extended its support to the Taliban. At present, the Taliban controls or dominates over 48 out of roughly 400 administrative areas, the most since they were ousted from power in 2001.⁵⁵ More significant than the number of fighters it has, is the local support which it commands. In all war zones where the outside powers are militarily engaged against the locals, most of those individuals, who have no links or any affiliations with any group usually side with the local fighters because they consider them as their “own” people fighting against the foreign invaders. Former Finance Minister of Pakistan, Shahid Javed Burki, in his closed door presentation at Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore, narrated a story of an AK-47 gun in Afghanistan. As a fighter for the Taliban, the eldest son of the family had an AK-47. After he was killed, the second son got hold of the gun to fight against the foreigners. Subsequently, the gun was passed on to other brothers and they too were killed in action. Finally, after the death of his six sons, it was the father who became the carrier of that gun. Later, he too was killed in an American attack. Though a poignant story, it narrates the willingness of a few of Afghan men to fight against foreign invasion.

Historically, Afghanistan has remained as one of the most troublesome territories for the “outsiders” and known by an epithet — a “graveyard of empires”. In ancient, mediaeval and modern times, the battle hardened warriors from Afghanistan fought against the well-organised armies and defeated them. About the ruggedness of Afghans and their women, Rudyard Kipling has written long ago in 1895 in a stanza of his poem, “The Young British Soldier”:⁵⁶

⁵³ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Transcript of Media Briefing on Vice President’s visits to Rwanda & Uganda and Weekly Briefing by Official Spokesperson,” available at https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28075/Transcript_of_Media_Briefing_on_Vice_Presidents_visits_to_Rwanda_amp_Uganda_and_Weekly_Briefing_by_Official_Spokesperson_February_16_2017, accessed on 20 February 2017.

⁵⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, “Record of the Press Briefing by Spokesperson,” available at <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?mm=NDc3Mw>, accessed on 20 February 2017.

⁵⁵ Helene Cooper and Rod Nordland, “As Trump Rolls out War Plan, Taliban are Gaining”, *The New York Times*, 21 August 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/world/asia/trump-afghanistan-war-taliban.html>, accessed on 24 August 2017.

⁵⁶ Antoinette Burton, *op. cit.*

*When you're wounded and left,
On Afghanistan's plains,
And the women come out,
To cut up your remains,
Just roll on your rifle,
And blow out your brains,
And go to your Gawd,
Like a soldier.*

Apparently, even in modern times, Afghanistan has been a “graveyard of empires”. During the Cold War years (1945-1991) in 1979, erstwhile Soviet Union entered Afghanistan which may have caused for its disintegration and end of the Cold War. Not only the Soviet Union, other actors too who participated in that Afghan war (1979-1989) still face the brunt decades later. The Taliban who came to power after the Soviet withdrawal was thrown out of power in 2001. Pakistan which played a significant role in Afghan affairs since 1979 faces the legacies of terrorism.⁵⁷

On lines of Kipling, Alex Strick Linschoten and Felix Kuehn have compiled poems of young Taliban which clearly expresses anger against the presence of foreigners in Afghanistan. One of the couplets says:⁵⁸

*“I acknowledge we may not be gentlemen,
But, we didn't run away from the foreigners,
What does the foreigner think of us?
No one has driven us out of our own land.”*

Hence, guided by their legacy, the present Afghans, it seems are willing to fight. Therefore, defeating them through military means and attacks is a difficult proposition.

An external actor which is deeply engaged in Afghan affairs is Pakistan. In the past, even when Afghanistan's relationship with Pakistan had not been good, the two countries never turned against the other. For example, soon after the birth of Pakistan in 1947, Pakistan and Afghanistan entered into serious disputes over the status of the Durand line. The tension was such that Afghanistan was the only country which did not recognise Pakistan in 1948 in the UN. Despite this, the two countries had a close relationship. In the 1965 and 1971 wars between Pakistan and India, Afghan

⁵⁷ See Rasul Baksh Rais, “Afghanistan: A Weak State in Path of Power Rivalries”, in T. V. Paul (ed.), *South Asia's Weak States: Understanding the Regional Insecurity Predicament*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 195-219.

⁵⁸ Alex Strick Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *Poetry of the Taliban*, Gurgaon: Hachette India, 2011, p. 188.

government never created problems for Pakistan on its western frontier. On the contrary, in 1965, the ruler of Afghanistan, King Zahir Shah, even asked Pakistan to move all its troops from the border with Afghanistan saying Pakistan had no cause to fear its western border.⁵⁹

Even during what was thought to be a Pakistan friendly Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the Durand line issue remained a bone of contention between the two countries. Taliban spokesperson revealed that the government of Pakistan made a formal approach three times to the Taliban to agree upon the status of the Durand Line. To that, the Taliban maintained that they were not a national government of the country instead they regarded themselves as an emergency transition which cannot decide on such an important issue.⁶⁰ Yet, until Pakistan joined the GWoT in 2002, its social and political establishment had a close relationship with the Taliban government.⁶¹ After Pakistan became part of the invasion, there are officials in their individual capacity from both sides of the border who have close relations with each other.⁶²

An important guiding factor in Afghanistan's relationship with Pakistan is ethnic bonding between the two countries. Pakistan is home to about 1.3 million Afghan refugees plus it has its own around 300 million Pashtuns. As an ethnic group, the Pashtuns from both sides of the border share strong bondings. Unfolding the status of Afghanistan's relationship with India and Pakistan, Arwin Rahi writes that India and Afghanistan are closer to each other because of their shared opposition to Pakistan because of its certain policies. Once status quo changes in South Asia, Afghanistan and India will witness estrangement in their bilateral affairs.⁶³

Taking into account the above-mentioned reasons, the following scenarios can be envisaged or, to an extent, forebode if India goes beyond the present level of engagement in Afghanistan, especially if it includes anything related with military.

First, as India has made a lot of investments in Afghanistan, and has opened its door for Afghans; it is being presumed that India is favoured by them more than the other countries of the region. However, this is not an objective assessment of perception of India and Indians in Afghanistan. For Afghans, India is primarily a home to the Hindus. Stereotyping Hindus is common in many parts of Afghanistan.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Aparna Pande, *Explaining Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Escaping India*, London and New York: Routledge, 2011, p. 82.

⁶⁰ Cited in Abubakar Siddique, *The Pashtuns: The Unresolved Key to Afghanistan*, Gurgaon: Random House, 2014, p. 60. For original, see, Zahid Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, pp. 39-40.

⁶¹ See Carlotta Gall, *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001-2014*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2014.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Arwin Rahi, "Would India and Afghanistan have had a close relationship had Pakistan not been founded?," *The Dawn*, 22 August 2017, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1353172/would-india-and-afghanistan-have-had-a-close-relationship-had-pakistan-not-been-founded>, accessed on 24 August 2017.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

Derogating the Hindus in Afghanistan, a section of population believes that Hindus are ‘unbelievers’ and thus, cowards, and ‘one Muslim can overpower seven Hindus’⁶⁵ In some parts of Afghanistan, Hindus are referred to as ‘mis’keen’ (poor), not because they are poor, but because they lack ‘imaan’ (honesty)’⁶⁶

Second, once engaged in military actions in Afghanistan, collateral damages are bound to take place during such operations. This would certainly make a drastic change in the perception about India in Afghanistan. Along with the western troops, Indians would also be categorised as “enemy” against whom Afghans, mainly those influenced by the Taliban or victimised by the military operations think they have to fight. There is nothing unusual in it. Almost all locals develop similar thinking against foreign military presence no matter how cordial the foreigners are or present themselves to be. For example, in 1987 when the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) entered Sri Lanka, it was welcomed but over the time, as the troops engaged in military operations and casualties started, opposition to the IPKF and India began. During his visit to Sri Lanka, the then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was attacked by a Sri Lankan soldier while he was receiving the Guard of Honour. In the year 1990, the IPKF was called back amidst growing opposition in Sri Lanka and in India too. Rajiv Gandhi lost power, yet was not forgotten by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Later in 1991, during an election campaign, he was assassinated by the cadres of the Eelam at Sriperumbudur in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

Third, an engagement of Indian troops in Afghanistan would give reasons to insurgents and militants to justify their fight against the Indian state. This has happened in Pakistan. After the entry of Pakistan in the Afghanistan mess after 9/11, the Taliban turned against its erstwhile ally and has carried out many attacks in the country. Although it would not be very easy for the Taliban to do so in India because of geographical reasons, a possibility of limited attack remains open. In almost all major countries of the world, sleeper cells of terror groups do have their presence; problem emerges only when they become active and start carrying out attacks. In the past, in India, it has been reported about the individuals who went to Afghanistan to fight against the US Army. In May 2017, one such case which came into limelight was that of Abdul Rashid Abdulla. He was sought by the India’s National Investigation Agency (NIA) for leading 23 Kerala residents to join the Islamic State in Afghanistan’s Nangarhar province. He, in an exclusive interview with an Indian journalist Praveen Swami for an Indian daily *Indian Express* categorically stated that popularity of his organisation is increasing and he has lots of supporters and sympathisers in India.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Praveen Swami, “From Afghan hideout, Kerala jihad leader calls faithful to Caliphate”, *The Indian Express*, 18 May 2017, available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/from-afghan-hideout-kerala-jihad-leader-calls-faithful-to-caliphate-4661362/>, accessed on 25 September 2017.

Finally, an isolated and aggrieved Pakistan army may start doing what it did in the 1980s, and continued since then, though the number has declined — train the militants and send it across the border to fight a proxy war in the Indian territory.⁶⁸ With Indian soldiers in Afghanistan, it will be easier for Pakistan army to establish that Islam is under attack by the Hindu India, an idea which has been propagandised by the Pakistan army for decades to unite their country under its institutional leadership. In the 1980s, same propaganda prophetically guided many Pakistani youths to become warriors and martyrs to secure the American and Pakistan army's objective in Afghanistan.

5. Conclusion

Apparently, Afghanistan is turning into a more dangerous place where peace cannot be won, so it has to be negotiated; however, none of the fighting sides seem to be trying for it, at least at present. Instead, they are preparing for more fierce war in the near future. This is evident from Trump's statement: "We are not nation building again. We are killing terrorists".⁶⁹ As such, an additional 3,900 US soldiers are going to join their comrades in the war-ravaged Afghanistan. At present, there are about 8,400 troops on the ground in Afghanistan, but an actual number hovers between 11,000 and 12,000.⁷⁰

In the Afghan muddle, as discussed in the paper, any form of military engagement would be dangerous for India. Instead of giving an ear to Trump's plan, it is better if the South Asian countries join their hands together. However, looking into the region and weighing the level of trust each country has on another, especially after the postponement of the 19th Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) scheduled to be held in Islamabad in 2016, any talk about cooperation or coordination looks a little difficult although not absolutely impossible as this is the only effective way to bring peace in Afghanistan. Even the HoA-IP conferences talk about the importance of it.

⁶⁸ Zahid Hussain, *Frontline Pakistan: The Struggle with Militant Islam*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

⁶⁹ Office of the Press Secretary, *op. cit.*

⁷⁰ Courtney Kube, "US has thousand more troops in Afghanistan than the Pentagon Admits", *NBC News*, 23 August 2017, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/u-s-has-thousands-more-troops-afghanistan-pentagon-admits-n795141>, accessed on 24 August 2017.