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INDIA'S AFGHANISTAN POLICY: RAMIFICATIONS FOR REGIONAL POWER BALANCE IN SOUTH ASIA

Abstract

Regional security dynamics undergo significant transition with the shifting alliance formation within the geopolitical setting of South Asia. Traditional 'balance of power' argument sees a potential for stability in the emerging distribution of power, whether it is a 'unilateral hegemonic distribution' or a 'pluri-lateral bipolar or multi-polar distribution'. But a growing Indo-Afghan partnership in South Asia offers, as the paper argues, a more complicated case. Indian stronghold in Afghanistan is enhancing already asymmetric distribution of power in the region, granting a more favourable power balance for India allowing the country to pursue its objective of emerging as a major world power. The maturing of Indo-US defence ties and the US approval of Indian stronger presence in Afghanistan provide India with enlarged incentives and enthusiasm to dominate the regional security matters. On the other hand, Pakistan's critical stake in Afghan security and its likely antagonistic reaction to Indian pre-eminent position in the region might lead to prolonged instability in South Asia. Besides, China's growing presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia will also complicate India's regional leadership potential. The paper makes an attempt to assess the competing claims on the regional ramifications of India's Afghan policy in South Asia with a view to unravelling emerging security atmosphere in the region in the wake of US withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan in 2014.

1. Introduction

September 2001 has changed many things in the world. The foremost of all is the US invasion of Afghanistan and toppling of Taliban regime accused of harbouring Al-Qaeda, the perpetrator of 9/11 attack in the USA. Since then, Afghanistan allowed India an opportunity to regain its lost influence in the country as well as to underscore its role as a regional power. With many ups and downs, India's stake in Afghanistan has grown steadily ranging from aid, reconstruction and capability building to influence in the political decision making of the Afghan government.¹ India has been showing firmness in deepening a long term partnership with Afghanistan. The 2011 India-Afghanistan strategic partnership agreement underlines India's commitment to maintain a positive momentum in Delhi-Kabul ties.²

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¹ William Dalrymple, "Forget NATO v the Taliban. The real Afghan fight is India v Pakistan", *The Guardian*, 26 June 2013, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/26/nato-taliban-india-pakistan>, accessed on 28 October 2013.

² Harsh V. Pant, "India's Changing Afghanistan Policy: Regional and Global Implications", *SSI Monograph*,

A growing Indo-Afghanistan partnership will have significant implications for regional power distribution in South Asia, granting a more favourable balance of power for India. While Indian protagonists suggest that India's active role in Afghanistan can serve as a pacifying factor for security externalities³ emanating from Afghanistan⁴, Pakistani counterparts argue for more destabilised scenarios in which conflict would escalate in a more antagonistic direction.⁵ Both Indian and Pakistani perspectives tend to be overwhelmed by the nationalist interpretations of underlying motives and consequences of Indo-Afghan partnership. "In light of the disputes between India and Pakistan and between Pakistan and Afghanistan, India's involvement in the Afghan conflict is probably the most critical test case for India's leadership potential."⁶

In this context, the paper tries to see the development in Afghanistan in general and India's involvement in the country in particular by going beyond a state-centric approach and looking from a regional strategic perspective. The central hypothesis underlies a proposition that the Afghan policy of India is not necessarily a response to the post-Taliban Afghanistan's internal and humanitarian needs. The Indian motive is complicated by the gradual shift in Indian approach to Afghanistan as a new member of South Asia, appraised in terms of long term strategic goal of setting a more favourable regional environment for India's rise as a major world power. Critically dissecting the positions taken up by both Indian and Pakistani scholars, the paper tries to see the possible implications of these new developments into the distribution of power, the likelihood of relative stability, security externalities, leadership and conflict management structure and extra-regional response to the evolving regional order in South Asia.

The paper is based on secondary literature taken from both Indian and Pakistani scholarly works on the issue. Several published works by American and European scholars have also been consulted particularly in the conceptual part of the paper. To bring the discussion in a logical perspective, the paper is divided into few sections. After introduction, the second section sketches out a conceptual framework to delineate a regional argument of balance of power theory by examining notional properties and analytical perspective of the concept of balance of power in general and South Asian regional order in particular. In the third section, India's engagement in Afghanistan was detailed out. Particular emphasis was given on the post-Taliban phases and components of India's Afghan policy. Then, the paper distinguishes India's strategic objectives in Afghanistan and motives for a stronger involvement in the country in section four. In the fifth section, an attempt has been made to assess the

Pennsylvania: US Army War College Press, December 2012, p. 32.

³ Security externalities include the spread of cross-border terrorism, narcotics and drug trafficking, refugees and humanitarian crisis and so on.

⁴ Melanie Hanif, "Indian Involvement in Afghanistan in the Context of the South Asian Security System", *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2010, pp.13-26.

⁵ Qadar Bakhsh Baloch and Abdul Hafeez Khan Niazi, "Indian Encroachment in Afghanistan: A New Imperialism in the Making", *The Dialogue*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2008, pp.16-33.

⁶ Melanie Hanif, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

competing claims on the regional ramifications of India's Afghan policy in South Asia with a view to unravelling emerging security atmosphere in the region in the wake of US-withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan in 2014.

2. Regional Balance of Power in South Asia: Conceptual Framework

Relative capability distribution and transition in the power setting, either in the form of increasing power of one or more geopolitically significant actors⁷ or due to shifting alliance formation within a geo-strategic frontier, influence substantively the prospects for both chaos and stability. The centrality of power in this argument informs the key objective of countries acting in the process as to maximise power to offset any odds against their national interests. There are several positions taken by the scholars arguing on the realist approaches to power distribution. While classical standpoint of both Morgenthau and Waltz⁸ advocates for a more equal sharing of power as a balance which warrants peaceful conditions for stability, other strands including 'power transition theory' of Organski and Kugler⁹, 'hegemonic decline theory' of Gilpin¹⁰ and 'global cycle hypothesis' of Thompson and Modelski¹¹ see the balance of power as more chaotic and transitory conditions conducive for war and instability.¹² Despite the fact that many contemporary empirical studies tend to grant more validity to power transitions approaches, the classical formulation of balance of

⁷ Geopolitically significant actors are geopolitically catalytic states with comprehensive and planned objectives to achieve a central goal or vital assets of military significance. Brzezinski distinguishes them as either 'active geostrategic players' (states that have the capacity and the national will to exercise power or influence beyond their borders in order to alter the existing geopolitical state of affairs) or 'geopolitical pivots' (states whose importance is derived not from their power and motivation but rather from their sensitive location and from the consequences of their potential vulnerable condition for the behaviour of strategic players). See Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York: Basic Books, 1997, p. 41.

⁸ Kenneth Waltz considers that "balance-of-power politics prevail wherever two, and only two requirements are met: that the order be anarchic and that it be populated by units wishing to survive". See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979, p. 121.

⁹ Power transition theory refers to dynamic distribution of power where a big power gap between the dominant nations and the next layer of powerful states are vital for maintenance of international stability. According to this hypothesis, dissatisfied powers are responsible for international conflicts and changing power balance. See A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.

¹⁰ Hegemonic decline theory denotes that asymmetric distribution of power maintains stability within a system as long as there is a hegemon to provide public goods and to design the system to its own advantages. On the other hand, when the hegemonic country reaches its last limit of expansion, it faces immense difficulty in maintaining the system and eventually declines. See Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

¹¹ Global cycle hypothesis suggests that power distribution is defined neither by uncertainty nor by a challenger's intention, rather by the global power cycles each of which lasts around one hundred years. See George Modelski, "The Long Cycle of Global Politics and the Nation State", *Contemporary Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1978, pp. 214-235 and William R. Thomson, *On Global War: Historical-Structural Approaches to World Politics*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988.

¹² Vesna Danilovic, *When the Stakes are High: Deterrence and Conflict among Major Powers*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002, pp. 71-98.

power provides more comprehensive analytical tool to understand the behavioural pattern of the rising powers in both global and regional settings. Particularly, the motive of balancing underlies a continuous pursuit of checking the rise of any adverse forces and at the same time to maintain stability by granting incentives to forces complementing the augmentation of favourable outcomes.

For the analytical design of this paper, it would be methodologically useful to contextualise the meaning of 'balance of power' before going to fundamental conceptual positions of the theory in general and to construe a regional argument of balance of power in particular. One of the key conceptual difficulties in delimiting a precise definition of balance of power lies in its multiple, even contrasting, meanings attributed by the scholars who pioneered the idea. Morgenthau in *Politics among Nations* outlined a set of four diverse meanings, defining balance of power as (i) a policy aimed at certain state of affairs, (ii) an actual state of affairs, (iii) an approximately equal distribution of power and (iv) any distribution of power.¹³ But in his definition he emphasised that balance of power is generally an actual state of affairs in which power is distributed approximately in an equal manner.¹⁴ However, a more dualistic characterisation of balance of power by Quincy Wright as both *static*, meaning 'conditions for balancing' and *dynamic*, referring 'policies taken by actors to sustain that conditions', offered a more inclusive and pragmatic approach to the understanding of the balance of power process.¹⁵ However, this paper considers balance of power as any form of power distribution within a given geo-political setting that maintains relative stability, be it 'unilateral hegemonic distribution' or 'pluri-lateral bipolar or multi-polar distribution'.

Key to the balance of power theory is the method of balancing and the position of a balancer within the act of balancing. Morgenthau identified two possible ways of balancing: "either by diminishing the weight of the heavier scale or by increasing the weight of the lighter one."¹⁶ First one involves containment strategies (i.e., divide and rule) and the latter one requires expansion strategies (i.e., armament, alliance building, strategic partnership, aid diplomacy and so on). The latter strategies can also be employed by relatively powerful actors to dictate more favourable balance to their side. A balancer, which is the holder of the balance with a consistent objective of maintaining the balance, is required in a definite structural setting.

A regional balance of power is a sub-order balance reflecting the similar notional properties and techniques used in global balance of power. With the end of the Cold War, the US and Russia or any other big powers for that matter not only lost grasp but also faced reduced legitimacy of involving in the regional matters, leaving weak countries to look for local masters for security guarantee. Importantly, with

¹³ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York: Knopf, 1948, p. 134.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Quincy Wright, *A Study of War, Vol. II*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942, p. 743.

¹⁶ Hans J. Morgenthau, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

the intensification of regionalisation of both bilateral and multi-lateral interactions, geopolitical regions have emerged as distinct and autonomous subsystems requiring unique analytical formulations to understand intra-regional power distribution. Newer forms of alliance formation, arms race and aid diplomacy are getting new momentum at the regional level. Unlike the global balance, regional balances are determined largely by the countries that are located in the given region, though a dominant hegemonic state outside the region may also play a role in the given region.

South Asia is one of the significant geopolitical regions in today's world. It has become a geopolitical pivot of Eurasia particularly after the War on Terror and growing US interest in the region. The region's geo-strategic appeal has been demonstrably increased due to its pivotal location in the 'Inner Crescent' of what Spykman in his famous geopolitical theory called as 'Rimland'.¹⁷ The South Asian regional balance of power is characterised by at least three competing factors: an asymmetric distribution of power, Indo-Pak rivalry with bipolar nuclear constellation and emerging security complexes determined by exogenous interest factors.

The South Asian region is asymmetrical in all respects – geographic, economic and military. India's physical size is almost equal to that of other countries combined. Its population, GDP, armed forces are also asymmetrically bigger than those of all other countries in the region. India accounts for more than seventy five per cent of the region's population, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and military expenditure.¹⁸ Moreover, India's geographical position puts it in the centre of South Asia: it shares borders with almost all the countries of the region and no other country shares border with another except Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁹ Though asymmetric distribution suggests a uni-polarisation of the region, India has never been able to rise in a hegemonic fashion by transforming its material superiority into political preponderance. Two inter-related factors have obstructed Indian unilateral supremacy: *firstly*, due to crisis prone nature of South Asian regional order which has been heavily influenced by Indo-Pak bipolar constellation, Indian apparent preeminence remained illusory; and *secondly*, smaller countries, though do not have any collective balancing effort strategically,²⁰ have always acted in a constant fear of Indian hegemony and thus limiting the efficacy of

¹⁷ Rimland is a geopolitical theory championed by Nicholas J. Spykman to describe the strip of coastal land that encircles Eurasia including the Asiatic monsoon what he thought as more important than the central Asian zone, the Heartland of Halford Mackinder, for the control of the Eurasian continent. The Rimland's defining characteristic is that it is an intermediate region, lying between the heartland and the marginal sea powers. This amphibious buffer position, along with the region's demographic weight and natural resources, gives Rimland immense power potential. See Nicholas J. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942.

¹⁸ World Bank, "World Development Indicators", available at <http://devdata.worldbank.org/data-query> and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database", available at http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database, accessed on 12 October 2013.

¹⁹ See Harun ur Rashid, *Bangladesh Foreign Policy: Realities, Priorities & Challenges*, Dhaka: Academic Press and Publishers Library, 2005.

²⁰ SAARC is more of an economic and development venture by the regional small states and India actively participates in this regional organisation instead of rebalancing using its relative supremacy.

Indian bandwagoning. However, with respect to Indian relative control, the regional order can be divided into two sub-orders: bipolar sub-order between India and Pakistan in the western theatre, on the one hand, and unipolar sub-order between India and its smaller neighbours in the eastern theatre, on the other.²¹ Unlike the western theatre, states in the eastern theatre (Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and the Maldives) were too weak to resist Indian superiority.²² As Pakistan, after India, is still disproportionately strong compared to the remaining South Asian states, Indian advantage of using the principle of non-reciprocity with other smaller countries have been reduced substantially.

Indo-Pak strategic rivalry, in particular, demands much deeper attention in understanding the regional strategic dynamics in South Asia. It is a region in which two big and very dissimilar countries with nuclear weapons often have sharp disagreements.²³ Indo-Pak rivalry both in conventional and nuclear arena makes the region a nuclear flashpoint. A constant debate over the defining of nationality based on religious identity along with the historic trauma of partition in 1947 makes the prospect for cooperation and compromise very unlikely. The demographic pattern markedly dividing people into a common fault line of Hindu versus Muslim, except Buddhists, defines the regional politics both in colonial and post colonial nation-building experiences in the Indian Subcontinent. Issues ranging from terrorism to nuclear arms race are also influenced by a Hindu-Muslim narrative. Both share common and disputed boundaries with each other. Besides, the uncompromising dispute over Kashmir has exacerbated the bitterness of their relations further.

South Asian security complexes are also characterised by several exogenous forces and interest factors in addition to intra-regional struggle for power. South Asia is in the top priority of Chinese foreign policy where it follows a policy similar to that of former US President Clinton's regime: "Policy of Engagement and Enlargement". China has been trying to make stable and deepening relations with the small South Asian countries in the neighbourhood of India: Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Its primary focus though involves economic transactions but it also purports to increase its strategic influence over the region. Into the bargain, China has uneasy political relations with India as the country faces a contested border, while it enjoys an enduring friendship with Pakistan which it considers a trusted ally. India assesses its security position in the light of China's strength, while Pakistan defines its security concerns against India.²⁴ Besides, militarisation of the Indian Ocean also determines South Asian geopolitical dynamics. The strategic importance of the Indian Ocean is increasing for many reasons *viz.* its role in connecting the oil-rich Persian Gulf with

²¹ Kanti Bajpai, "Managing Conflict in South Asia", in Paul Diehl and Joseph Lepgold (eds.), *Regional Conflict Management*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, p. 231.

²² Melanie Hanif, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

²³ Ron Chepesiuk, "Renewed US Interest in South Asia: Impact on Bangladesh", *The Daily Star*, 15th Anniversary Special, 19 February 2006.

²⁴ Harun ur Rashid *op. cit.*

growing energy markets in East Asia. Indian Ocean has also transformed South Asia into a bridge between Washington's European-Atlantic strategy and Asia-Pacific strategy. The United States began to contemplate the need for a new European-Asian strategy to deal with potential threats stemming from the uncertain futures of both Russia and China. India is playing a key role in this new strategy.²⁵

A crucial change in the security-dynamics of South Asia lies in the redefinition of South Asian boundary: the inclusion of Afghanistan into the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 2007. Afghanistan, situated at the axis of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East, bears enormous geo-strategic significance as well as security externalities for the neighbouring countries. While historically Afghanistan was considered excluded from what naturally constituted South Asia by the British colonial rule due to its failure to gain control over the territory west of the Indus²⁶, the process of linking Afghanistan with South Asia started with US involvement in Afghanistan during Soviet invasion of the country in 1989. Using Pakistan as sanctuary for US clandestine support for Afghan Mujahideen against Soviet Union, it linked the security externalities of Afghanistan with Indo-Pak conflict postures. More importantly, US war on terror after the 9/11 terrorist attack did much about the change than the mere inclusion of Afghanistan. The US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 served its objective not only to destroy Al-Qaeda or to overthrow the Taliban regime from power, but also to establish US security and strategic centre in the heart of middle-southern Asia. It has included both India (using carrot of regional leadership) and Pakistan (using stick of invasion) in the anti-terrorist campaign and thereby in the effort to contain any influence either by China or Russia in the region. Regional balance of power in South Asia has become extensively linked with the Afghan dynamics in the post-Taliban period.

3. India's Afghanistan Policy

India's Afghan policy has a long tradition starting from the colonial era. Historically, India enjoyed friendly relations with Afghanistan throughout much of the reign of King Zahir Shah (1933-1973), except a short interlude during the 1965 Indo-Pakistani conflict.²⁷ This excellent phase of relations continued even during the communist regime that had overthrown the King. India was in good condition in Afghanistan as well throughout the period of Soviet invasion of the country.²⁸ It was the fall of the puppet regime of Mohammed Najibullah after the withdrawal of

²⁵ See Zhang Guihong, *U.S. Security Policy toward South Asia after September 11th and its Implications for China: A Chinese Perspective*, Hangzhou: Zhejiang University, 2003.

²⁶ Stephen P. Cohen, "Geostrategic Factors in India-Pakistan Relations", *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 1983, pp. 24-31.

²⁷ Sumit Ganguly, "India's Role in Afghanistan", *CIDOB Policy Research Project*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 2012, p. 2, available at www.cidob.org/es/content/download/.../OK_SUMIT+GANGULY.pdf, accessed on 24 September 2013.

²⁸ Nicholas Howenstein and Sumit Ganguly, "Pakistan and Afghanistan: Domestic Pressures and Regional Threats: India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan", *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 63, No. 1, 2009, pp. 127-140.

the USSR that undermined Indo-Afghan relations significantly. Subsequently, India had limited influence in both the Burhanuddin Rabbani (1992-1996) regime and the Taliban rule (1996-2001). India did not recognise the Taliban government because of its tilt towards Pakistan.²⁹ During the Taliban period, Indo-Afghan relations were badly affected by the Taliban-Pakistan close rapport and India forged a functional relationship with the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance that opposed the Taliban. India's relations with the Taliban were dominated by the lack of trust and confidence on each other. In the wake of US War on Terror, though United States exclusively relied on Pakistan's Musharraf regime to pursue its strategic goals in Afghanistan, India maintained strong relations with the Northern Alliance that offered the US with logistical support for military action against the Taliban regime.³⁰ India finally got its chance to re-establish its former ties with Afghanistan after the toppling of the Taliban regime and the establishment of Karzai government.

Indian policy in Afghanistan is, however, a manifestation of Indian major foreign policy doctrines – Indira Doctrine, Rajiv Doctrine and Gujral Doctrine – all of which advocated an expanded Indian role in the neighbourhood, checking the influence of any outside power in its extra-territorial sphere of influence.³¹ India considers its influence and stronghold in Afghanistan as inextricably linked with its national interest. The country's involvement in Afghanistan has been multi-pronged and involves issues ranging from past memories to present shared interests. Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru once remarked about Indian relations with Afghanistan:

Ever since India's independence, we have grown closer to each other, for a variety of reasons. The long memory of our past was there, and the moment it was possible to renew them, we renewed them. And then came mutual interest, (our common hostility towards Pakistan) which is a powerful factor.³²

With regard to Indian policy in the post-Taliban Afghanistan, Harsh V. Pant distinguished three different phases of engagement. In the first phase, what he calls soft engagement, India started to engage multidimensionally after the installation of an interim authority in Afghanistan in 2001. It upgraded its Liaison Office in Kabul to a full-fledged embassy in 2002 and started to participate in the Bonn Conference to play instrumental role in the post-Taliban Afghan governance. During this period, India pursued "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 the country."³³

²⁹ Fahmida Ashraf, "India-Afghanistan Relations: Post-9/11", *Strategic Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2007, p. 6.

³⁰ Madhav Nalapat, "Why the US Fumbled Afghanistan", *The Diplomat*, 09 October 2011, available at <http://the-diplomat.com/2011/10/09/why-the-us-fumbled-afghanistan/>, accessed on 30 June 2013.

³¹ Qadar Bakhsh Baloch and Abdul Hafeez Khan Niazi, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³³ Harsh V. Pant, SSI Monograph, 2012, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

In the second phase in which India was marginalised in Afghanistan, New Delhi had little or no strategic space to maneuver, experiencing rapid deterioration in its security environment in the country. During this period, “the balance of power shifted in favour of Pakistan and its proxies, Indian interests, including personnel and projects, emerged as viable targets.”³⁴ On the other hand, Pakistan succeeded in convincing the West that the best way towards reconciliation between Kabul and the Taliban is by means of negotiation and settlement. The United States publicly endorsed the idea of negotiations with the Taliban, while it actively discouraged India from assuming a higher profile in Afghanistan for fear of offending Pakistan.³⁵ Though India continued to help the Afghan government in its reconstruction efforts, but this increasingly became harder to sustain. One time India was considering a stronger military presence as a security measure to support its humanitarian endeavours in Afghanistan.

In the final phase, India fought back to reclaim its previous stronghold in the Afghan matters and undertook several significant policy measures including decisions to initiate trainings for Afghan forces, to manage greater policy coordination with states like Russia and Iran and to establish linkages with all sections of Afghan society.³⁶ This phase started with the deteriorating relations between the USA and Pakistan after the killing of Osama Bin Laden on 02 May 2011. During this phase, India signed a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan, announced a new commitment of US\$ 500 million for the country’s development³⁷ and agreed to enhance political cooperation as well as institutionalise regular bilateral political and foreign office consultations. New Delhi strengthened its partnership with Kabul, recognising the immediacy of US plan for a pull-out from Afghanistan.

India’s policy in Afghanistan is based on several interconnected components such as aid and development assistance, civilian and military capability building, inclusive and political settlement, connectivity and infrastructure development and strategic partnership. India is the fifth largest aid donor to Afghanistan, total amount being around US\$ 2 billion.³⁸ Much of the Indian aid was provided in the form of developmental assistance in the areas of education, health and infrastructure. India has made substantial contribution in the training of Afghan diplomats, judges, police officers, doctors; developing Afghanistan’s civil aviation and transport sectors; construction of roads, dams, hospitals, educational institutions; and in establishing telecom and power transmission lines. Some notable assistance include Afghanistan’s new parliament building, 218-kilometre long highway linking the town of Zaranj near the Iranian border, a power transmission line to Kabul, a

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.11.

³⁵ “US Seeks to Balance India’s Afghanistan Stake”, *Reuters*, 01 June 2010, published in the *Express Tribune*, available at <http://tribune.com.pk/story/17662/us-seeks-to-balance-indias-afghanistan-stake/>, accessed on 05 October 2013.

³⁶ Amit Baruah, “Karzai Keen on Indian Expertise”, *The Hindu*, 22 January 2002, available at <http://hindu.com/2002/01/22/stories/2002012201240900.htm>, accessed on 05 October 2013.

³⁷ Harsh V. Pant, “India’s ‘Af-Pak’ Conundrum: South Asia in Flux”, *Orbis*, Vol. 56, No. 1, 2012, pp. 105-117.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

hydroelectric project at the Salma Dam and other various forms of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.³⁹ India is providing 500 annual scholarships to Afghan students under the supervision of the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR).⁴⁰

India is employing money and personnel to bolster Afghanistan's security capabilities in order to discourage and prevent the rise of militancy in general and the Taliban in particular. India is also concerned about the safety and security of its aid workers and investment in Afghanistan. The country has provided US\$ 8 million worth of high-altitude warfare equipment to Afghanistan, shared high-ranking military advisers and helicopter technicians from its clandestine foreign intelligence and counter-espionage organisations.⁴¹ India is also heavily investing in physical connectivity and transport infrastructure building in Afghanistan to facilitate its trade with Afghanistan via Iran. It is constructing the Zaranj-Delaram road which will provide Afghanistan's access to the Iranian coast. This road will be vital to facilitate trade not only with Afghanistan but also with the Gulf region and Central Asia. Besides, India is building an US\$ 80 million road, linking Afghanistan's Kandahar province with the Iranian port at Chabahar.⁴²

Another big priority for India is an inclusive and political settlement for the Afghan problem. For India, military options are less effective, though a handful of members of India's strategic community are enthusiastic about a future Indian military role in Afghanistan. India's disappointment with the deployment of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka in the 1980s still remains vivid within the policymaking circles in New Delhi.⁴³ With the changing condition in Afghanistan and in the wake of US withdrawal, India has shifted its thinking from a military to political solution of the Afghan war. It has expressed its support for a "national unity" government based on reconciliation and politically inclusive order.⁴⁴ Vishal Chandra suggested a need for Indian balancing between different ethnic groups in Afghanistan:

The fact that India does not have borders contiguous with Afghanistan puts India into a dependency mode. India needs to build bridges with all the major ethnic groups in Afghanistan. India should balance its relationship with both the Pashtuns and the minority ethnic groups. The idea of engaging anti-

³⁹ Sumit Ganguly, 2012, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁴⁰ C. Christine Fair, "Under the Shrinking U.S. Security Umbrella: India's End Game in Afghanistan," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2011, pp.179-192.

⁴¹ Shashank Joshi, "India's Af-Pak Strategy", *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 155, No.1, 2010, pp. 20-29.

⁴² Marvin G. Weinbaum, "Afghanistan and Its Neighbors: An Ever Dangerous Neighborhood", *USIP Special Report 162*, Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, June 2006, p. 16, available at <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/sr162.pdf>, accessed on 27 September 2013.

⁴³ Sumit Ganguly, 2012, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Pankaj Singh, "Indian Involvement in Afghanistan", From the Selected Works of Pankaj Singh, June 2010, *JASON Magazine*, No. 2, 2010, pp. 14-16, available at http://works.bepress.com/pankaj_singh/6, accessed on 26 September 2013.

India politico-military formations in Afghanistan should not be considered as untenable in the changed and changing scenario in Afghanistan.⁴⁵

India's Afghan policy reaches to a new height with the signing of Indo-Afghan strategic partnership agreement in October 2011. Under this agreement, India commits to training, equipping and capacity building of the Afghan security forces.⁴⁶ Besides, both agreed to establish a strategic dialogue between their respective national security advisers "to provide a framework for cooperation in the area of national security." This opens up a new chapter in bilateral relations in that it allows both countries to discuss both regional and global strategic issues.⁴⁷

Above all, India has devised its Afghan policy in a way so that it can become the most vital player in the 'endgame' in Afghanistan. But, post-2014 Afghan policy of India would face two fundamental limitations: (1) fluidity of Afghan condition leading Indian consideration of multiple options including military and (2) the US escaping posture in the post-withdrawal Afghanistan. Obama's "surge and withdraw" strategy indicates that the administration is burdened with, and consequently, is focused on extricating itself from the situation, while ensuring that a stable form of government apparatus remains functional in Afghanistan. But it would be unrealistic to expect the Afghanistan National Army (ANA) to pick up from where the United States left off, defend the country and deter the Taliban from expanding its influence. The uncertain landscape of post-2014 Afghanistan makes India wary about the security of its men and material in Afghanistan as well as its strategic objectives. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on 04 October 2011 reiterated India's commitment to assume the responsibility for Afghan governance and security after the withdrawal of international forces in 2014.⁴⁸

4. Indian Objectives in Contemporary Afghanistan

Indian objectives in post-Taliban Afghanistan are complicated and multi-faceted. Indian concerns range from political to security to economic issues. One of the complicating factors is that different analyses suggest differing priorities for India; some focus more on political and strategic aspects, while others stress on economic and security imperatives. However, an analysis that accommodates varying claims over Indian objectives in Afghanistan recognising their underlying

⁴⁵ Vishal Chandra, "The Afghan Elections and the Bonn Process: Assessing India's Options", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 2005, pp. 723-731, available at [http://www.idsa.in/strategicanalysis/The Afghan Elections and the Bonn Process Assessing Indias Options_vchandra_1005](http://www.idsa.in/strategicanalysis/The_Afghan_Elections_and_the_Bonn_Process_Assessing_Indias_Options_vchandra_1005), accessed on 24 September 2013.

⁴⁶ Harsh V. Pant, SSI Monograph, 2012 *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁴⁷ Bhashyam Kasturi, "India's Role in Afghanistan", *State of Pakistan Blog*, 20 February 2012, available at <http://www.stateofpakistan.org/indias-role-in-afghanistan>, accessed on 10 October 2013.

⁴⁸ Arvind Thakur, "Beyond 2014: India's Security Concerns and Indo-U.S. Strategic Partnership in Afghanistan", manuscript submitted as a fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Strategic Studies Degree, United States Army War College, 2012, p. 1, available at <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA562576>, accessed on 12 October 2013.

merits and contextual relevance should discuss four issues of concern for India in post-Taliban Afghanistan.

Firstly, favourable and stable domestic power structure in Afghanistan: India considers peaceful and stable Afghanistan vital for its long term strategic interests both regionally and globally. One crucial interest for India is to offset an inimical rise of Afghanistan. Afghanistan, located in a geopolitically vital location, has enormous potential to rise as a big regional power if the internal stability persists for a long period. A hostile powerful Afghanistan would exert further pressure on India's regional ambition by creating a possibility of two front balancing – Pakistan and Afghanistan – for India. For that end, India seeks to ensure that the regime in Kabul is not fundamentally hostile towards India by undertaking four tactical objectives: (a) to prevent the restoration of any form of a resurgent Taliban regime, (b) to thwart the rise of Islamist militancy, (c) to build capacity of Afghan security force capable of preventing Taliban rise and (d) to limit Pakistan's influence over any emergent regime.⁴⁹

Besides, for internal stability in Afghanistan, India also supports inclusive and coordinated approach to both domestic power distribution and regional arrangement to facilitate a peaceful post-war transition in Afghanistan. India is promoting a plural government in Afghanistan representing all the ethnic groups.⁵⁰ It is also interested to engage regional countries in finding a solution to Afghanistan and to support Afghan government's multilateral political and economic initiatives. India in recent years has earned enormous goodwill and is not perceived by the Afghan people and its political elite as a country with hegemonic ambitions.⁵¹ This has set a positive ground for India to play a vital role in the internal affairs of Afghanistan.

Secondly, India's regional ambition in South Asia and its strategic depth *vis-à-vis* China: Indian objectives in Afghanistan are propelled by its growing regional and global ambitions in which it is redefining its foreign policy priorities in the neighbourhood with intent to reshape regional strategic environment according to its own interest.⁵² Christine Fair concludes that "India's interests in Afghanistan can be seen as merely one element within India's larger desire to be able to project its interests well beyond South Asia."⁵³ To realise Indian dream of a big power status, it vies

⁴⁹ Bhashyam Kasturi, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ Smruti S. Pattanaik, "Afghanistan and Its Neighbourhood: In Search of a Stable Future", *PRIO Paper*, Oslo: Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO), 2013, p. 37, available at [http://file.prio.no/publication_files/Prio/Pattanaik,%20S%20\(2013\)%20Afghanistan%20and%20Its%20Neighbourhood,%20PRIO%20Paper.pdf](http://file.prio.no/publication_files/Prio/Pattanaik,%20S%20(2013)%20Afghanistan%20and%20Its%20Neighbourhood,%20PRIO%20Paper.pdf), accessed on 15 September 2013.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵² Harsh V. Pant, "India's Challenge in Afghanistan: With Power Comes Responsibility", *Contemporary Readings in Law and Justice*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2010, pp. 36-67.

⁵³ C. Christine Fair, "India in Afghanistan and Beyond: Opportunities and Constraints", *A Century Foundation Report*, New York: The Century Foundation, 2010, p. 6, available at <http://tcf.org/assets/downloads/IndiainAfghanistan.pdf>, accessed on 15 September 2013.

for power and market in South Asia as well as other neighbouring regions. Given the persistent hostility in two fronts both with China and Pakistan, Afghanistan can play a vital role in India's extra-territorial objectives and in maintaining favourable regional power setting for India. Harsh V. Pant considers Indian involvement in Afghanistan as testing ground to assess its capacity to emerge as a great power based on its strategic capability to handle the regional instability.⁵⁴ A successful accomplishment in Afghanistan would give credence to India's credibility and legitimacy by the international community as regional balancer in South Asia. Thus, Afghanistan lies in the Indian overall big power strategy that divides the world into three homocentric circles:

In the first, which encompasses the immediate neighborhood, India has sought primacy and a veto over the actions of outside powers. In the second, which encompasses the so-called extended neighborhood stretching across Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral, India has sought to balance the influence of other powers and prevent them from undercutting its interests. In the third, which includes the entire global stage, India has tried to take its place as one of the great powers, a key player in international peace and security.⁵⁵

Besides, India's influence in Afghanistan cannot be considered in isolation from its opposition to China and Pakistan, just as China's influence in Afghanistan cannot be considered in isolation from its influence in Pakistan.⁵⁶ China, though initially reluctant to explore its interest in Afghanistan, has shown substantial priority to post-war development in Afghanistan. Its growing interest is manifested with Beijing's giant US\$ 3.5 billion investment in Afghanistan, the far largest foreign direct investment in the country's history.⁵⁷ China which shares boundary with Afghanistan, like India, considers Afghanistan as a source of strategic competition in South and Central Asia and a key factor for its energy security. Indian stronghold in Afghanistan would reduce China's impunity in the greater South-West Asian energy and geo-strategic dynamics. India's posture as counterweight to China complements the US objectives of preventing Chinese influence over the Central Asian republics; the US has in turn encouraged Indian trade, investment and assistance to the Central Asian states and Afghanistan.⁵⁸

Thirdly, the Pakistan factor and India's counterbalancing of Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan: Historically, India's drive to cultivate strong partnership with Afghanistan has been fuelled by Indo-Pak socio-cultural and political conflicts starting from traumatic partition experiences in 1947. While Pakistan has always

⁵⁴ Harsh V. Pant, 2010, *op. cit.*, p. iii.

⁵⁵ C. Raja Mohan, "India and the Balance of Power," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 4, 2006, pp. 17-34.

⁵⁶ Kevin Govern, "The 'Great Game' and the US-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement", *Jurist Forum*, 23 May 2012, available at <http://jurist.org/forum/2012/05/kevin-govern-us-afghan-spa.php>, accessed on 10 October 2013.

⁵⁷ Nicklas Norling, "The Emerging China-Afghanistan Relationship," Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Analyst, 14 May 2008, available at <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4858>, accessed on 13 October 2013.

⁵⁸ Qadar Bakhsh Baloch and Abdul Hafeez Khan Niazi, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

been unsuccessful in establishing a strong foothold except during the Taliban period, India's success to maintain a favourable regime in Kabul has been consistent till the Soviet defeat by the US supported mujahedeen. After the fall of the Taliban regime, India is given another opportunity to link its present with the past. Pakistan factor gets emphasis in the similar direction, as India is interested to monitor and cultivate assets to influence activities in Pakistan by retaining Afghanistan as a friendly state.⁵⁹ India seeks to offset Pakistan's unique advantages in maneuvering with the US to form alliance in the War on Terror by effectively marginalising India's role in Afghanistan.⁶⁰ Indian support to current Afghan regime is seen as counterbalancing Pakistan's help to Kashmiris and other insurgencies in India, given the Indian support to Pakistan's Afghan adversaries has potential to affect the security of the federally administered areas in Pakistan. Besides, "Indian solid positioning in Afghanistan politics would enable India to become a formidable part of Central Asian oil and gas distribution network, thereby, acquiring a strong foothold in the region and marginalizing Pakistan's unique position in this regard."⁶¹

Finally, energy security and opportunities in Central Asia: Like almost every other major power, India wants a slice of the pie, since anyone who controls Afghanistan controls the land routes between the Indian subcontinent, Iran and resource rich Central Asia.⁶² Afghanistan is of fundamental geo-strategic importance to India due to its location as a land bridge not only to the Central Asian Republics but also to and from Caucasus and further on to Russia. Afghanistan can serve India to reap the opportunities of rich resources of energy (oil and gas), enormous mineral resources and a large consumer market of the Central Asian countries. Particularly, the natural gas from Turkmenistan and other energy pipeline routes between Central Asia and the subcontinent makes Afghanistan a 'particularly critical country' for India to meet its growing energy needs.⁶³ India plans to secure an easy access to the energy rich Central Asian states, through Afghanistan as an overland conduit, to the Iranian coast. Through such arrangements, India can compensate its strategic disadvantage concerning Pakistan as a bridging country in both the proposals of Iran-Afghanistan-Pakistan (IPI) pipeline and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline.⁶⁴ India's goals reflect the desire to control overland routes to maritime ports for Central Asian resources by denying both China and Pakistan the ability to threaten Indian assets in the region.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ C. Christine Fair, 2010, *op. cit.*, p.8.

⁶⁰ D. Choudhury, "India-Afghanistan: Strategic Stakes", *Seaford House Paper*, Royal College of Defence Studies, July 2011, p. 18, available at <http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/rcds/publications/seaford-house-papers/2011-seaford-house-papers/shp11choudhury.pdf>, accessed on 15 September 2013.

⁶¹ Qadar Bakhsh Baloch and Abdul Hafeez Khan Niazi, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁶² K. N. Tennyson, "India-Afghanistan Relations during Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan", *Air Power Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 5, 2010, pp. 153-183.

⁶³ For a detail analysis on the Afghanistan geopolitical significance as a potential hub of energy pipeline see Robert D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, New York: Random House, 2010.

⁶⁴ D. Choudhury, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁶⁵ Nicholas Howenstein and Sumit Ganguly, *op.cit.*, pp. 127-140.

5. Ramifications for Regional Balance of Power

Hanif investigated the implications of India's involvement in Afghanistan from a conflict management perspective using two approaches: Regional Security Complexes (RSC) and an associated regional security management system called regional hegemony. Hanif, using the analytical underpinnings of Buzan and Waever,⁶⁶ defined RSC based on the notion of security externalities. These externalities are measured in terms of costs and benefits that accrue not only to the actors that cause them, but also imperil the safety of neighbouring states, that continually affect a set of inter-related states in a given geographical area.⁶⁷ On the other hand, the concept of regional hegemony, derived from hegemonic stability theory, argues that power asymmetry (the structure of power distribution) leads to peace and stability when power is exercised in a benign manner.⁶⁸ Her arguments based on the study findings suggest that the distribution of power and the resultant regional order in South Asia have been influenced by the inclusion of Afghanistan in the South Asian regional security order. India's active role here can serve as a pacifying factor for security externalities emanating from Afghanistan. On the regional hegemony viewpoint, she considered India as a soft regional hegemon capable of playing security manager's role. In that process, she argued that India's Afghan policy would favour the regional power distribution in India's favour enabling India to reach a unipolar hegemonic position necessary for South Asian peace and stability.

One of the substantive implications for South Asian regional stability is the shifting conflict theatre from an Indo-Pak to an Indo-Af-Pak centric dynamics. In South Asian regional setting where Kashmir issue has been dictating the terms of conflict between India and Pakistan for last many decades, now any developments in Afghanistan front would create destabilising condition for the traditional regional enemies. The outcome of a strong partnership between India and Afghanistan may turn into a further antagonistic direction between India and Pakistan, leaving less room for resolving disputed matters and causing more hostilities in any conflicting bilateral issues. Pakistan has a constant fear concerning Indian encirclement and has been protesting stridently about India's expanding presence in Afghanistan.⁶⁹ Its reactions to the Indian long term engagement in Afghanistan are fuelled by its fear of losing "strategic depth" *vis-à-vis* India. One of the key concerns for Pakistan is the likelihood of Indian involvement in fostering an insurgency inside Pakistan's Baluchistan province where the Chinese-built port Gwadar stands. Pakistan considers this port as central to a new international route for sea traffic

⁶⁶ Regional Security Complex theory of Buzan and Waever views that security is clustered in geographically shaped regions. Intra-regional security interdependence creates regional security complexes where regional actors play the vital role. See Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

⁶⁷ Melanie Hanif, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶⁹ C. Christine Fair, 2010, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

that could serve China, Afghanistan and Central Asia.⁷⁰ "Islamabad wants a 'friendly' government in Afghanistan post-2014; one which is stable and does not threaten its national interests. But more importantly, it would not want to see Afghanistan closely allied with its arch-enemy India."⁷¹

Pakistan, therefore, would consider limiting India's presence and influence in a post-US and post-ISAF Afghanistan in order to prevent India from obtaining land access to the resource-rich states of Central Asia, gathering intelligence on Pakistan's western reaches and would also limit India's ability to exert any possible military pressure alongside a future Afghan regime whose interests might be aligned with those of India.⁷² However, Indo-Af-Pak dynamics would depend on how inclusively India can maneuver Pakistan and effectively convince the country about its security apprehensions. Hegemonic tendencies and the use of Afghanistan by India to cultivate its anti-Pakistani assets would bring destabilising situation for both the countries, since Pakistan cannot afford to have another India on its western border, nor can it allow a War against Terror to spread and spill over to Pakistan.⁷³ Sumit Ganguly's opinion qualifies reasonable doubt for a collaborative position by India and Pakistan in the post-2014 Afghanistan:

Whether or not India, Pakistan and Afghanistan can actually work in concert to ensure Afghanistan's stability and security in the aftermath of the US and the ISAF's withdrawal, of course, remains the most critical question confronting policymakers in many capitals well beyond the subcontinent. Given the depth of distrust and hostility that has long characterized the Indo-Pakistani relationship, the prospect of any imminent diplomatic breakthrough that might enable the two sides to reach a *modus vivendi* on their respective positions in Afghanistan seems rather doubtful.⁷⁴

However, the successful establishment of an Indian stronghold in Afghanistan and the marginalisation of Pakistan's assets in the country would give India a leverage to play more powerfully both in Afghanistan's matters as well as other regional issues. There are two possible scenarios with regard to Indian 'soft hegemony' in South Asia: (1) India's emergence as the sole dominant regional power undermining Pakistan's assets and influence in Afghanistan and Chinese influence in the region, or (2) a cooperative India as regional leader following a policy of engagement with the US, China and Pakistan in devising a peaceful transition in Afghanistan in post-2014 period. Either way, Afghan policy of India has potential to provide the country with its long aspired position as an Asian power moving towards great power status. A

⁷⁰ Marvin G. Weinbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁷¹ Claude Rakisits, "The End Game in Afghanistan: Pakistan's Critical Role", *Associate Paper*, Future Directions International, 21 May 2012, p. 7, available at <http://www.futuredirections.org.au/publications/associate-papers/529-the-end-game-in-afghanistan-pakistans-critical-role.html>, accessed on 19 October 2013.

⁷² Sumit Ganguly, 2012, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁷³ Qadar Bakhsh Baloch and Abdul Hafeez Khan Niazi, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁷⁴ Sumit Ganguly, 2012, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

favourable Afghan government would facilitate India to overcome India's inability to dominate regional affairs proportionately to its material superiority.

This furthering of asymmetric distribution of regional power could lead to a new polarisation granting India a unilateral position in the region. To support this hypothesis, four factors can be attributed to relative growth of Indian power: Firstly, it will enhance India's credibility as a big Asian power to the extra-regional powers including Russia and the USA. India will enjoy increased strategic appeal from both the USA and Russia, while its confidence to compete with China in the greater Asian and Indian Ocean frontier will be augmented. Secondly, India will exert more legitimacy and incentives to deal with the regional issues particularly those involving smaller and developing regional countries. Thus, smaller South Asian states will have lowering tendency to form joint balancing or "bandwagoning" among them, either because of the lack of security compulsions in one hand, or mounting pressure from a regional hegemon on the other. Thirdly, due to loss of strategic depth *vis-à-vis* India, bipolar nuclear constellation in the region will be less functional in effectively deterring India from playing the role of regional policeman.⁷⁵ And finally, India's relative disadvantages emanating from the lack of physical connectivity with the resource rich Central Asia and Middle East will be reduced substantively. India will be able to marginalise Pakistan's unique position in this regard and to satiate its growing energy needs from the Central Asian gas and oil supplies.

Another fundamental development in the wake of Afghanistan-India partnership that counts on Indian favour is the shifting alliance formation from US-Pakistan to US-India. Pakistan's ties with the US have deteriorated sharply since May 2011. Obama administration decided to suspend a portion of US aid to the Pakistani military. It has also shifted its Afghan baggage from the shoulder of Pakistan and is backing a more robust Indian involvement in Afghanistan, signalling a long-term commitment to Afghanistan's future. "Now Washington is making it clear that it views Pakistan as part of the problem and India as part of the solution."⁷⁶ The US and India announced regular trilateral consultations with Afghanistan as part of the third US-India Strategic Dialogue in June 2012.⁷⁷ In the wake of troops' withdrawal in 2014, Washington is showing more inclination towards greater Indian involvement in shaping Afghanistan's future. Washington-Kabul strategic partnership, on the one hand, and New Delhi-Washington partnership on the other, are likely to provide India with crucial space for diplomatic maneuvering so as to regain lost ground and expand its footprint in the neighbouring state.

⁷⁵ Bhashyam Kasturi, *op. cit.*

⁷⁶ Harsh V. Pant, SSI Monograph, 2012, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁷⁷ Chidanand Rajghatta, "America persuades India to expand Afghan footprint," *The Times of India*, 14 June 2012, available at http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-06-14/us/32234576_1_afghanistan-and-pakistan-afghan-national-army-afghan-military-personnel, accessed on 12 October 2013.

India-Afghanistan partnership will also complicate China's position in South Asian regional power balance. In an evolving Asian economic and security architecture, most Asian countries would be looking towards China or India for future economic and security alignments.⁷⁸ India has been shifting its policy from their decades-long Pakistan focus to a China centric security and regional posture. India increased its defence budget in 2012-2013 fiscal year stating the changing realities and the necessity to prepare against Chinese growing capabilities.⁷⁹ As India has exposed its confidence in terms of its military capabilities *vis-à-vis* Pakistan, Delhi is increasingly able to more substantively address other regional security issues beyond the traditional concerns about its rival to the west. India is now preparing for "a multi-front confrontation along both the disputed India-Pakistan 'Line of Control' (LOC) and sectors of the disputed India-China 'Line of Actual Control' (LOAC) and expanding India's naval presence in the Indian Ocean Realm".⁸⁰ US willingness to provide India greater latitude within Afghanistan may also stem from concerns about China's attempts to penetrate the country in the quest for influence and natural resources.⁸¹ The US is less likely to keep its troops in Afghanistan for longer term and therefore, it will take resort to India to encounter Chinese attempt to penetrate Afghanistan and South-Central Asian region. India's growing future role and alignments in Central Asia will be determined by the actions of the US and China and their military involvement with Pakistan.

6. Conclusion

Historically, Afghanistan stands in a difficult neighbourhood. The security dynamics of the country has undergone complicated transformation mostly shaped by the interests and role of external forces. Much of the political instability and misery of its people can be traced to external powers seeking to realise their own strategic, ideological, and economic interests in the country.⁸² A new episode of similar kind has been staged since 2001 with the US invasion of the country, where India gets its long aspired opportunity to reclaim its influence in the country. India's contemporary role is entangled with its all-out effort to transform a reactive India's Afghan policy of responding to a strategic environment shaped by other actors in the region into proactive policy-engineering intended to reshape the strategic landscape centering Afghanistan. As the US-led NATO forces prepare to leave Afghanistan in 2014, India stands at a crossroad as it remains keen to preserve its interests in Afghanistan. For Afghanistan, it is both a security question as well as a partnership dilemma. While

⁷⁸ Gulshan Sachdeva, "India's Attitude towards China's Growing Influence in Central Asia", *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2006, pp. 23-34.

⁷⁹ K. Alan Kronstadt and Sonia Pinto, "U.S.-India Security Relations: Strategic Issues," Congressional Research Service, 24 January 2013, p. 8, available at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42948.pdf>, accessed on 12 October 2013.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Sumit Ganguly, 2012, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁸² Marvin G. Weinbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

the country's security dynamics is inextricably linked with Pakistan due to Pashtun connection and Pakistan's long established influence within the domestic armed factions, the Karzai government's economic and strategic objectives have long-term convergence with the Indian interest in the region. In the wake of US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Afghan position has already tilted towards India particularly after the signing of strategic partnership agreement in 2012.

In South Asia, Indo-Afghan partnership has been undergoing a dynamic transition creating a more complicated scenario than a mere deepening of bilateral relations between the two countries. Indian extensive aid, reconstruction and capacity building activities inside Afghanistan, coupled with US shifting of dependence from Pakistan to India to deal with Afghan matters, allowed India to play more active role in the post-war transition of the country. There has been a broader maturing of the US-India defense ties. While this could be a big factor to rebalance the traditional regional order, a bipolar distribution marked by Indo-Pak nuclear constellation with relative stability, a counter-balancing on the part of Pakistan and other small states along with shifting alignment of interests of the extra-regional powers notably China with countries likely to part outside the Indian game plan could bring an unstable transition period in the region. The argument advocated by the Indian protagonists that India's vigorous role can serve as a pacifying factor for security externalities emanating from Afghanistan is reduced to an optimistic projection that could possibly be obstructed by the fact of how Pakistan responds to the emerging US-Indo-Afghan partnership in its backyard. Pakistan can only accept an India-centered order if its own security *vis-à-vis* neighbours, external powers, and most importantly India itself is granted.⁸³ Otherwise, the outcome of a strong partnership between India and Afghanistan might turn into a further antagonistic direction between India and Pakistan, leaving less room for resolving disputed matters and causing more hostilities in any shared but conflicting bilateral issues.

Looking at the regional security complexes from an extra-regional standpoint suggests that Chinese future posture in Afghanistan and its neighbouring Central and South Asia would greatly influence the regional power distribution and affect any potential for an Indo-centric soft hegemony in South Asia. Indian leadership in the region is increasingly seen as a counterbalance to China in Asia and the Indian Ocean region. On the one hand, India has a keen interest in minimising the influence that potentially adversarial external powers are able to exert in the region and thus, it sees Beijing's strengthening aid, trade and even military links with its sub-continental neighbours as a big challenge to New Delhi's aspirations of expanding its regional influence.⁸⁴ On the other hand, China has been continuing to deepen its engagement with the South Asian countries, particularly Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and the neighbouring Myanmar, both as an alignment of interests and its desire to dictate the emerging strategic landscape in the greater Indo-Pacific theatre. The underlying

⁸³ Melanie Hanif, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁸⁴ K. Alan Kronstadt and Sonia Pinto, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

strategic competition between China and the US has created the broader context of the regional power distribution in South Asia. Given the cultural, religious and domestic-political divergences among India, China and the US, the three giant claimants of major position in the Asia-Pacific 'Great Game', it would be interesting to see the shifting alliance formation dynamics in the greater Indo-Pacific region.

However, while Afghanistan provides a unique window of opportunity for India to realise its aspiration of a powerful place in the international high table, India still lacks a clear vision to devise a set of policies and incentives that will make that future more likely than not. India's policy to capitalise Indo-US ties to build a long term Indo-centric regional order could face considerable limitations due to US inability to address the paradoxes of its 'War on Terror' leaving political climate in Afghanistan more uncertain and fluid. The US earnestness in wanting to "de-hyphenate" India and Pakistan and its somewhat random cooperation with one frustrating the other⁸⁵ would continue to complicate the creation of a shared policy agenda for Washington and New Delhi in South Asia. Besides, to make Afghanistan a stable entity in the post-2014 period, managing Pakistan and its fear of encirclement by both Washington and New Delhi would be crucial in the coming years. What is needed is an Indo-Pak regional arrangement independent from the extra-regional influences to devise a peaceful and stable post-war transition in Afghanistan.

⁸⁵ Council on Foreign Relations and Aspen Institute India, "The United States and India: A Shared Strategic Future", Joint Study Group Report, September 2011, p. 41, available at http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/USIndia_jointstudygroup_IIGG.pdf, accessed on 18 October 2013.