

Afghanistan in India's Regional Calculus and Pakistan's Detrimental Impact

Written by Djan Sauerborn

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Pakistani-Indian relations in the past have hardly been amicable. However, the post 9/11 landscape offered both nations an opportunity to renew their political and diplomatic ties with more positive overtones. However, this did not occur.

In the Pakistani-Indian context, the tragedies of 9/11, the fluid nature in global politics and the regional security environment acted as catalysts in further deteriorating the relationship between these two countries. India's influence in Afghanistan has suffered under Pakistan's successful attempts at positioning itself as the core mediator between the Taliban and the West, while at the same time instrumentalizing radical elements to maintain its strategic advantage.

India

In the early stages of the post 9/11 era, India's main focus regarding Afghanistan was solely centered on the threat of an influential and heavily involved Pakistan on India. This was of particular concern to India due to the US support of Pakistan (Price 2013:3). Nonetheless, in the immediate aftermath of Operation Enduring Freedom, India had a favorable position in Afghanistan. This stemmed from the fact it had close ties to key elites of the victorious Northern Alliance. However, influence decreased over time as the United States favored Pakistan as its main node for the War on Terror (Chaudhuri 2010: 206). As such, India's influence in Afghanistan has deteriorated under Pakistan's strategy of positioning itself as the core mediator between the Taliban and the West. It can be argued that this strategy is being implemented while Pakistan simultaneously utilizes radical elements to maintain its strategic advantage.

From the perspective of India's policy makers, the worst-case scenario that could have emerged in the post 9/11 era was a rise in Pakistani hegemony in Afghanistan. The fear was that such hegemony would result in the creation of an Islamabad controlled client regime, which would allow the Pakistani security apparatus to revamp its military presence on the border with India (Roy 2011: 69). New Delhi was thus concerned that a strong Pakistani strategic footprint would rekindle ties with the Taliban (Yadav/Barwa 2011:117). Pakistan's intelligence agencies have also used Afghanistan to equip and train terrorist elements and instrumentalize them as asymmetrical tactical assets against India in Jammu and Kashmir. This highlights that Afghanistan can be regarded as a domestic issue for India as well. Even though reducing Pakistan's influence is still a core issue and essential to India's regional approach, it should not be reduced to and only seen in the light of Indo-Pak rivalry. India has also reanimated the commitment towards its regional role as a benign power investing in social and economic development of its immediate neighborhood, reminiscent of the 'Gujral Doctrine' of the mid-1990s. (Price 2013:4)

Integrating Afghanistan into South Asian regional dynamics became a strategic imperative for India. At the 14th Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 2007 in New Delhi, Afghanistan was granted full membership (Sharma 2011: 112). As such, the economic realm of India's Afghanistan approach has been increasing ever since. Although intra-regional trade in South Asia is extremely low, the admittance to SAARC was aimed at paving the way for economic reconstruction initiated by Indian support. The generated economic

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benefits would lead to political capital, reestablishing India's historically positive linkages with Afghanistan and demonstrating to the world community that India, although a developing country itself, was able to live up to its great power aspirations (Pattanaik 2012:572). The economic realm of India's Afghanistan strategy is not however detached from the Pakistan and Taliban factor as Yadav and Barwa highlight:

By drawing Afghanistan away from its economic and geo-political dependence on Pakistan, India hopes to weaken the resources base of the Taliban or at least provide alternative sources of income and resources for the Karzai regime. (Yadav/Barwa 2011: 116)

Increasing economic growth, providing humanitarian assistance, improving capacity building measures are all part of India's soft power strategy of "reviving the traditional role of Afghanistan as a land bridge, connecting South Asia with Central Asia and West Asia." (Roy 2011: 70) This notion was reiterated by Shri S.K. Lambah, the special envoy of India's prime minister at the Afghanistan conference in Moscow in 2009:

Historically, Afghanistan has prospered when it has served as the trade and transportation hub between Central and South Asia. If we were to implement the projects and activities on the anvil, which allow greater commercial and economic exchanges by removing barriers to investment, trade and transit, this would transform not just Afghanistan but other regional countries as well.

Afghanistan is not only relevant from a security perspective, but also as an essential gateway to hydrocarbon rich Central Asia. This region, if made accessible could improve the resource portfolio of an energy thirsty economy, while reducing the dependency of supplies from the Middle East. Moreover, it would allow India to chime in to the concert of other nations, such as Russia and China, seeking to exert influence in Central Asia and exploit energy hotspots. (Sharma 2011:111)

Overall, India's Afghanistan focus is aimed at curbing terrorism, containing and decreasing Pakistan's influence, pursuing an aid, development and economic integration policy with the goal of being recognized as a major power globally and general good will locally, within the Afghan population. In addition, it is also keen on exploiting energy sources in Afghanistan and developing it into a hub for accessing Central Asian resources.

The Pakistan Factor

India and Pakistan have had 'a relationship of unremitting hostility' as Ganguly writes, which reached its low-point four times, in 1948, 1965, 1971 and 1999 where both former nations of British India went to war (Ganguly 2013:1). The issues of state construction, Jammu and Kashmir, cross-border terrorism, alliances with extra-regional powers and water disputes continue to have cast a cloud over potential reapproachment and have fostered deeply entrenched patterns of 'enmity' (Ganguly 2013:6). Moreover, Pakistan has been the main obstacle of Indian hegemony, through nuclearization, but also due to Islamabad's ability to force alliances or deep cooperation with other powers such as China or the United States. As a result, India's ambition to gain global status continues to be "curbed by the ongoing conflict with Pakistan" (Tadjbakhsh 2011:49). The competition over influence in Afghanistan also exemplifies the hostile nature of this troubled relationship. (see Chatterjee 2013)

As India's footprint started growing in Afghanistan, so too was Pakistan's will to curb Indian engagement in its backyard. The Iraq war in 2003 diverted the attention of the United States and Pakistan utilized the reemergence of the Taliban as a welcome entry point to reestablish itself as the prime partner for Washington in the War on Terror, as well as, foster its ties with radical non-state proxy elements (Pant 2013:48). For example, India lost its standing in the Afghan peace negotiations whereas Pakistan "positioned itself as a vital player in any Afghan reconciliation process" (Hanauer/Chalk 2012:29). The disjuncture between India's position and that of other nations became evident at a 60 nation London conference on Afghanistan in 2010, where New Delhi was alone on its 'zero-tolerance' stance towards the Taliban (Pant 2013:50). Pant attributes the dwindling perception amongst international stakeholders that India should play a more pro-active in Afghanistan to successful Pakistan lobbying:

So when London decided that the time had come to woo the 'moderate' section of the Taliban back to share power in

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Kabul, it was a signal to India that Pakistan seemed to have convinced the West that it could play the role of mediator in negotiations with the Taliban—thereby underlining its centrality in the unfolding strategic dynamic in the region. (Pant 2013:50)

Pakistan has also stifled the efficiency of Indian trade and transport to Afghanistan. Due to the fact that both nations are in competition for the same consumer goods in the Afghanistan and because Islamabad wants to prevent an integration of Indian and Afghan markets, Pakistan has not allowed India to transit its territory (Ved 2008:77). Although Pakistan did not veto the admittance of Afghanistan to SAARC, it is not interested in a regional integration of Kabul into Central and South Asia. While one could make the argument that Indo-Pak levels have improved, at least in the realm of trade, since Pakistan granted India a 'most favored nation' status in 2011, it has not altered the rationale of Islamabad's stance towards Afghanistan. While Afghan goods can enter India, Indian products cannot reach Kabul through Pakistan (Hanauer/Chalk 2012:31). As a response India has built rail and road links from Afghanistan to Iranian border cities, where goods are transported to ports at Bandar Abbas and Chahbahar and then shipped to Indian harbors (Torjesen/Stankovic 2010:26). Although Pakistan has been heavily subsidized by the United States it still fears alliances that undermine its position in Afghanistan as Rashid and Rubin argue:

The Pakistani security establishment believes that it faces both a US-Indian-Afghan alliance and a separate Iranian-Russian alliance, each aimed at undermining Pakistani influence in Afghanistan and even dismembering the Pakistani state. Some (but not all) see armed militants within Pakistan as a threat—but largely consider it one that is ultimately controllable. (Rashid and Rubin 2008: 36-37)

With regards to India, Pakistan has accused its neighbor of using its four consulate in Afghanistan, especially the ones in Kandahar and Jelalabad, close to Pakistani territory as Indian intelligence gathering facilities aimed at destabilizing Afghanistan. (Ved 2008:75)

Conclusion

India's influence in Afghanistan has suffered under Pakistan's successful attempts at positioning itself as the core mediator between the Taliban and the West, while at the same time instrumentalizing radical elements to maintain its strategic depth vis-a-vis New Delhi. Pakistan has intentionally redirected activities of Kashmiri extremists to Afghanistan, especially the Lakshar-e-Taiba, which has worked closely with the ISI to is recruiting militants from mosques and madreassas in Peshawar (Hanauer/Chalk 2012: 29). Islamabad's optimal scenario would include a pro-Pakistani state, which would function as a rear base, in which it could train Islamist militants such as Harakat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), Lakshar-e-Taiba and the Haqqani network. This would keep extremist forces outside of Pakistan, creating a safe haven in Afghanistan, which in turn would allow Islamabad to refute accusations of state-sponsored terrorism (Hanauer/Chalk 2012:29). It does not seem that this strategic modus vivendi will soon be altered, for "as India continues its rise, Pakistan's reliance upon Islamic militancy, the only tool it has to change India's trajectory, will increase, not decrease" (Fair 2011:6). With NATO troops leaving Afghanistan, an increased presence of Chinese involvement and the entrenched patterns of enmity between India and Pakistan, to use a term of Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, it will be interesting to observe how India pursues its stakes in the Hindu Kush.

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