

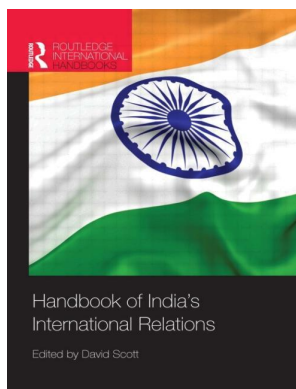
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India's relations with Afghanistan

Raghav Sharma

Introduction

The camaraderie that characterizes India-Afghanistan relations both at the political and popular level is not merely a product of modern geopolitics but is also a testimony to the historico-cultural linkages that have existed between Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent since ancient times.¹ The partition of British India in 1947 ruptured India's geographical contiguity with Afghanistan, but not the warmth that characterized their relations; this stood in sharp contrast to Pakistan, which, in spite of its geographical contiguity as well as religious and ethnic congruity, has seen its relations with Kabul for most of its history being clouded by bitterness and a deep sense of distrust. India's role in Afghanistan has re-emerged into importance not just for Afghanistan and the region, but also as 'a test case for a rising power'—India.² Afghanistan's importance for India and others is largely geopolitical, as Afghanistan faces southwards down from the Hindu Kush into the Indian subcontinent, India's *immediate neighbourhood*. Yet it also looks northwards down from the Hindu Kush into India's *extended neighbourhood*, in which 'Afghanistan is the fractious gateway to and from Central Asia, which defines the way other powers grapple and circumvent the complexities of the region', as well as being part of what has been called the 'Greater Middle East'.³

India's interaction with Afghanistan: 1947–2009

Afghanistan's stance on the question of the creation of *Pakhtunistan*, its 1948 vote opposing Pakistan's entry into the UN—making it the only country to do so—and its refusal to toe Pakistan's line on the question of Kashmir, laid the foundations for forging close links quite early on with the new Republic of India that took over the reins of power from the British. India's gradual drift towards Moscow and Kabul's increasing dependence on the Soviets for aid further complemented India-Afghanistan bilateral ties. Relations between the two states remained warm and both sides maintained deep cultural and modest economic links.

The first formidable challenge to India's Afghanistan policy came in the wake of the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979 to help prop up a pro-Soviet communist regime that had usurped power through a bloody coup christened the 'Saur Revolution'.

The challenge at hand for New Delhi became more pronounced in light of its proclaimed policy of non-alignment. The then Prime Minister, Chaudhary Charan Singh, categorically opposed Soviet intervention and called for an immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops. However, this stand was short lived and was reversed when Indira Gandhi made a dramatic political comeback and was re-elected to office in January 1980.⁴ She stated that Soviet troops were introduced into Afghanistan 'only after Pakistan started training Afghan rebels and sending them in to topple the government there [...] nevertheless India was opposed to the USSR's presence and it had told that country so'.⁵ However, despite its discomfort with Soviet military presence in its neighbourhood, India, while steering clear of an unequivocal endorsement of Soviet military intervention, consistently chose to abstain on key UN resolutions calling for Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

India's response to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was essentially conditioned by the following four key factors: first, Washington's economic aid, supply of sophisticated arms and F-16 fighter aircrafts to Pakistan; second, Washington's rapprochement with Beijing in which Islamabad had played a key role; third, a US naval build-up in the Indian Ocean region;⁶ and fourth, a fear of *mujahideen* victory giving Pakistan clear strategic leverage in Afghanistan. Given these complex geopolitical realities, India could not afford to jeopardize its partnership with the USSR, which had emerged as its major supplier of defence equipment and space technology, and which played a key role in extending support to India at key international forums on critical issues such as Kashmir and the Bangladesh war of 1971, in face of stiff opposition from the USA and People's Republic of China.

India's recognition of the pro-Kremlin regime in Kabul—making it the only country outside the Warsaw Pact to do so—did to an extent undermine India's moral stature, especially in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and to an extent also sullied India's image within Afghanistan. Subsequently, New Delhi's decision in 1982 to restore the Indo-Afghan Joint Commission, constituted in the early 1970s for economic and technical assistance and lying in abeyance since the Saur Revolution in 1978, further eroded India's position on the international stage.

India supported all Moscow-backed governments in Kabul and extended modest developmental assistance to the Najibullah regime, in spite of Najibullah's increasingly fragile control over the country. However, within months of the Soviet collapse the Najibullah regime, too, had dramatically unravelled, and was replaced by a fragile coalition of *mujahideen* forces with Badrudin Rabbani at the helm. Given the extremely limited room for political manoeuvring, India cast its lot with Rabbani notwithstanding its apprehensions of Rabbani's own Islamist *Jamat-e-Islami* background and endorsement of Pakistan's position on Kashmir—a clear break from the policy adopted by preceding regimes of Kabul. However, factionalism was rife in Rabbani's *mujahideen*, and this ensured its demise which once again plunged Afghanistan into a brutal civil war.

India suffered its greatest strategic setback in Afghanistan with the rise of the Pakistan-backed Taliban to the political centre stage in 1996. New Delhi refused to recognize the extremist Taliban regime under which Afghanistan, in the now seemingly prophetic words of Dr Najibullah, was to emerge as 'a centre of world smuggling for narcotic drugs. Afghanistan will be turned into a centre for terrorism'.⁷ For India, the fallout of the rise of fundamentalism in Afghanistan was ferocious and almost immediate, as it witnessed the rise of what proved to be long and traumatic Islamist insurgency in the Kashmir valley. The participation of 200 soldiers from the Taliban's elite brigade 055 in active combat during the Kargil conflict with Pakistan in 1999,⁸ and their more visible role during the landing of the hijacked Indian airliner IC 814 in Kandahar in December 1999 (which led to the freeing of three terrorist including Masood Azhar), foreclosed whatever limited possibility might have existed for exploring the idea of

accommodation with the Taliban. India, however, remained sensitive to the plight of the common people in Afghanistan and did indirectly extend limited humanitarian assistance to the country in the form of medicine, vegetable oil, tea and emergency relief material through Dushanbe.⁹

New Delhi's deep antipathy towards the Taliban brought it onto a common platform with Tehran and Moscow, which supported the predominantly Tajik Northern Alliance whose control over Afghanistan was reduced to a mere 10% of the territory in the extreme north. Indian support to the opposition was routed through its base in Farakhor in Tajikistan. The events that ensued in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the USA on 11 September 2001 were principally responsible for tilting the scales in favour of the opposition Northern Alliance and unseating the Taliban from power within a matter of weeks. As Ramachandran noted, 'in Afghanistan, Pakistan's loss is India's gain'.¹⁰

Subsequently, India has managed to effectively claw its way back into Afghanistan's power equations, at least for the near future. The India-educated Hamid Karzai, a Pushtun, came to power first as head of the interim government and has since been re-elected twice as President. Karzai adopted a policy of rekindling Kabul's close ties with New Delhi. This is borne out in particular by two significant symbolic gestures: first, the visit of then foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah and defence minister Mohammad Qasim Fahim to India within three months of the installation of the interim government; and second, the choice of New Delhi as the first destination by national carrier Ariana on its inaugural run, overlooking all the other six geographically contiguous neighbours of Afghanistan. India has attempted to give greater traction to its efforts to secure its interests in Afghanistan by engaging in diplomatic parleys with Kabul at the highest level, Karzai has visited India seven times since taking charge, while in 2005 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh paid a state visit to Kabul, significantly the first such visit by an Indian head of state in three decades.

Today, India is recognized as a key regional player in efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and for the first time there is a broad congruity of Indian and US interests in Afghanistan: both wish to see a stable, democratic and multi-ethnic political solution take root in the country. India moved swiftly to deepen its footprint in Afghanistan by opening its embassy in Kabul and four other consulates in Jalalabad (eastern Afghanistan), Herat (northern Afghanistan), Kandahar (southern Afghanistan) and Mazar-e-Sharif (western Afghanistan). In addition, India also unveiled a US \$1,200m. aid programme—a substantial amount for a traditionally non-donor country—making it the largest regional and fifth largest international donor. Indian aid projects spread across various sectors, ranging from offering 500 annual scholarships for Afghan students, provision of vocational training activities for women, construction of roads, dams, transmission lines and telecom networks, to the construction of the new Afghanistan parliament building.¹¹ Commenting on the Indian aid programme, the Pakistani analyst Ahmed Rashid reckoned that 'India's reconstruction strategy was designed to win over every sector of Afghan society, give India a high profile with Afghans, gain the maximum political advantage and of course, undercut Pakistani influence'.¹²

India's interests in Afghanistan

Indian efforts in Afghanistan are underpinned by the following three key objectives: negating the influence of Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)-backed groups like the Taliban, which are hostile to Indian interests in the neighbourhood; curtailing the spread of drugs-trafficking, which poses a risk to both national and human security in the region; and securing Afghanistan as a trade and energy corridor to Central Asia.

Security interests

Historically, challenges to India's physical security have tended to emanate from its north-western frontier with Afghanistan; serving as a launch pad for invasions into the plains of northern India and Kashmir, the latter region came under a brief but bitterly remembered spell of Afghan rule from 1753–1819.¹³ Kashmir's linkage with Afghanistan was rekindled following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, albeit in a completely different context. The winding down of *jihad* against the atheist Soviets freed up the energies of hundreds of thousands of ideologically motivated *mujahideen*, flush with weapons supplied by the members of the 'free world' (i.e. the USA) who had for the first time in modern history tasted serving on the battlefield for the cause of their religion. Many of the Afghanistan war veterans canalized their energies for waging *jihad* in Kashmir in what was perceived to be a 'holy war'. This linkage was further reinforced with the ascendance of the ISI-backed Taliban in Afghanistan. Commenting on this phenomenon, the Pakistani analyst Ishtiaq Ahmed poignantly noted:

A Taliban controlled Afghanistan fulfilled military objectives vis-à-vis India: achieving strategic depth for the Pakistan army in case of war with India and ensuring the continuity of Arab and Afghan militancy in Indian Kashmir [...] most of the Islamic militant groups that are now fighting in Kashmir, including Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, are products of the Afghan war. The Taliban are an important external agent in fuelling the fire of Islamic militancy in Kashmir.¹⁴

The Taliban provided sanctuary for training terrorists for Kashmir and allowed for the establishment of 21 camps across the country.¹⁵ Subsequently, the Taliban's role in the Kargil conflict on the side of Pakistan in the summer of 1999, and later over the course of the negotiations following the landing of the hijacked Indian airliner in the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar in December 1999, further accentuated New Delhi's security concerns.

In light of India's past experiences, it is not surprising that its core security interests in Afghanistan essentially comprise denying reclamation of political and military space to the ISI-backed Taliban in Afghanistan. India sought to achieve this by extending military support to the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance against the predominantly Pushtun Taliban before 2002, and by extending political, diplomatic and extensive humanitarian support to the Karzai Government from 2002.

Drugs-trafficking

India has the largest opiate-using population in the sub-region (the five Central Asian republics, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and India), accounting for an astounding 3.2m. users out of a total of 5m. users estimated for the entire sub-region. India has also reported the largest cannabis seizures made in Asia, at 108m. tonnes, the bulk of which originated in Afghanistan.¹⁶ Afghanistan's opium makes its way to the Indian market through the Indo-Pakistani border in the Punjab. Opium addiction has grown at an alarming rate, particularly amongst the youth in the border villages, inflicting tremendous damage on the country's social fabric.

The other disconcerting trend for India has been the strengthening linkages between drugs-trafficking and the Taliban insurgency, which has gained tremendous momentum over the last four years. The money generated from drugs-trafficking is being used to fund the supply of sophisticated arms and to win over foot soldiers for the insurgency by paying them a monthly salary of \$250–\$350, as compared with the paltry sum of \$40 being paid to an Afghan National

Army soldier, with the salary only recently being raised to a range of \$180–\$240. The growing menace of drugs-trafficking poses serious challenges to human security as well as the national security of India.

Energy and commercial interests

A stable Afghanistan has the potential to serve as a key land bridge to facilitate India's energy and commercial interests in hydrocarbon-rich Central Asia, thus facilitating the diversification of oil and gas supplies and reducing India's excessive dependence on supplies from the Middle East. The weight attached to the issue was reflected in a speech by India's then President Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam: 'my government will give full importance to synchronizing our diplomatic activity with our need for energy to fuel our development needs'.¹⁷ With this objective of enhancing India's energy security, vital to sustain the momentum of its economic growth, India joined the ambitious \$7,500m. TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India) pipeline initiative, which was envisaged to carry 30,000m. cu feet of gas from the Dauletabad field in Turkmenistan via Afghanistan and Pakistan, into India.

Afghanistan also has considerable amounts of untapped reserves of oil and natural gas. As per the estimates of Gustavson Associates, the undiscovered gas reserves range between 3.6 trillion and 36.5 trillion cubic feet, while oil reserves are estimated to be between 0.4 billion and 3.6 billion barrels, with 0.1m. to 1.3m. barrels of natural gas liquids.¹⁸ The bulk of these resources are concentrated in the Tajik-dominated north, in the plains and basins next to the Amu Darya, where India has traditionally enjoyed a particularly strong constituency. More recently the discovery of a vast array of industrial metals such as copper, gold, iron, cobalt and lithium, the value of which is estimated at more than \$1 trillion, could dramatically transform not only the Afghan economy, but its geopolitical standing in the region if exploited in the right way.¹⁹

For Indian industry, too, Afghanistan offers a huge untapped market which is presently dominated by Pakistan, Iran and Turkmenistan. It also has the potential to serve as a gateway to penetrate the Central Asian market, which is presently flooded with cheap but low-quality Chinese goods and expensive imports from the West. In particular, both the Afghan as well as the Central Asian markets offer immense potential for Indian tea, pharmaceuticals, food processing, information technology (IT), banking, health, tourism, consumer durables and automobiles industry. India's emergence as a global IT hub, a destination for medical tourism, the remarkable ability of its pharmaceutical industry to make available life-saving drugs at reasonable rates, its expertise in small and medium-sized enterprises, and its emergence as a global automobile manufacturing hub give Indian industry a distinct edge.

In light of Pakistan's refusal to grant trade transit rights, India has worked towards developing an alternative trade corridor going down to Chabahar, christened as the International North South Trade Corridor (INSTC), developed under an agreement that it inked with Russia and Iran in 2000 to access the Central Asian markets. Through the development of the 218-km Zaranj–Delaram road on the Afghanistan–Iran border, at a cost of \$150m. and the loss of 11 Indian and 129 Afghan lives, India hopes to achieve two objectives. First, provide land-locked Afghanistan with shorter and alternative access to the sea, thereby reducing its dependency on Pakistan;²⁰ and second, in light of Pakistan's refusal to grant trade transit rights over land, it envisages by-passing Pakistan and instead shipping its goods from Mumbai port to Chabahar in Iran and then onwards by the Zaranj–Delaram road into Afghanistan and by rail into Central Asia.

The decision to admit Afghanistan as a full member of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) at its 14th summit in New Delhi in April 2007 was as much

strategic as it was commercial. Strategically, this formally draws Afghanistan into the South Asian regional matrix, where India looms large. On the commercial front, with the passage in 2006 of the South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), which eases tariff barriers, sub-continental trade is expected to benefit to the tune of \$2,000m., of which \$606m. would accrue to Afghanistan.²¹

In addition to the above, a commercial interest with a unique dimension to it is the multi-million dollar Indian entertainment industry. Apart from having huge commercial interests in the Afghanistan market, it also serves as one of the most powerful vehicles for projection of Indian 'soft power'. While Indian films have long been popular with Afghans, with the coming of satellite television a booming Indian television industry has helped India make rapid inroads into the hearts and minds of the people of Afghanistan. A walk down the streets of a bazaar, be it in any major city of Afghanistan or in the dusty countryside, is testimony to India's status as something of a cultural tsar in Afghanistan.²² Consider, for instance, the immense popularity of the Hindi soap opera *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, broadcast on Tolo TV and enjoying 90% audience penetration.²³ This exponential growth in Indian soft power has been completely independent of any government backing, but it has helped to foster and strengthen constituencies of immense goodwill amongst the Afghan people. Instructive in this respect was a 'random national survey', conducted in January 2009, in which 74% of the respondents had a favourable view of India; this was a contrast with Afghan perceptions of Pakistan, where an astounding 91% (up 11 percentage points from the previous year) of respondents viewed Pakistan's role in a negative light.²⁴ Although India has no military mission in Afghanistan, it is, as Joseph Nye puts it, 'the side with the better story' in the battle for hearts and minds in Afghanistan.

Challenges facing India

The key challenges facing Indian policy in Afghanistan can broadly be classified under two fronts: security and diplomacy.

Security challenges

The vulnerability of Indian interests within Afghanistan has been demonstrated on numerous occasions by the attacks mounted on Indian personnel engaged in a cross-spectrum of reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and grenade attacks on the Indian consulate in the border city of Jalalabad. However, the gravity of the threat was forcefully driven home by the car-bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul in July 2008, which killed, amongst others, two high-ranking Indian officials: the Press Counsellor V.V Rao and Indian Defence Attaché Brigadier Ravi Mehta. The latter had been posted to Kabul as an adviser in Afghanistan's Ministry of Defence, given his substantive counter-insurgency experience in Jammu and Kashmir and the north-east. Credible intelligence reports pointed to the involvement of Pakistan's notorious ISI, which has been covertly supporting Taliban elements to destabilize the growing Indian profile in Afghanistan.²⁵ Some 15 months later, in October 2009, the Kabul embassy was the target of yet another bomb attack. The February 2010 attack on two Kabul guest-houses that primarily housed Indian civilian personnel engaged in reconstruction work further brought to the fore the increasing vulnerability of Indians as soft targets in Afghanistan.²⁶ Repeated targeting of India both at home and now increasingly in Afghanistan, often claimed and popularly believed to be at the behest of Pakistan's ISI, has given rise to a popular perception among many in Afghanistan of India being seen as a 'soft state'.²⁷ There are no signs of the threat to Indian interests

abating, with a recent announcement by the Taliban commander Qari Ziaur Rehman stating that 'the operation commanders of the Islamic Emirate are going to meet shortly to finalise a new war strategy under which foreigners working on their national agendas, particularly Indians, will be targeted'.²⁸

On the one hand, this magnifying terror threat has been discussed at the ministerial level with the Afghan foreign minister Rangin Spanta, following talks with his Indian counterpart Pranab Mukherjee in 2009, proclaiming that both countries face the 'same terrorism from the same source [read Pakistan]', and efforts will be made to enhance co-operation on terrorism.²⁹ On the other hand, to date no institutional mechanisms have actually been instituted for sharing of intelligence or information.

The challenges to India's security interests are likely to be magnified in the post-London Conference (2010) scenario. Given the decision of the key players in the Western world to actively support the idea of extending an olive branch to members of the Taliban, many of whom are backed by the ISI, by offering them an intoxicating combination of financial and political power, India faces a complex situation. Repercussions on Indian security interests will play out at three tiers: national security, human security and energy security. First, New Delhi's leverage over Kabul is likely to decrease significantly, which will adversely impact India's ability to shape the regional security dynamics, be it over Kashmir or its efforts to contain the proliferation of radical Islamist ideology. The latter of the two assumes heightened significance as the phenomenon of Islamist militancy is no longer confined to the Kashmir valley; this assumes significance given New Delhi's fears of a radicalization amongst sections of its own community of 140m. Muslims. Second, given the deeply entrenched linkages between terrorism and drugs-trafficking and the latter's growing presence in the Indian market, a political ascendance of the Taliban will multiply the challenge of sapping the channels of financial support to terrorist groups. It will also further challenge the ability of the Indian state to safeguard its human security net that is increasingly coming under strain from a large inflow of Afghan opium. Third, with soaring energy needs, India is expected to import around 94% of its fuel needs by 2030,³⁰ and its plans to bolster energy security by tapping into hydrocarbon and hydro electric resources of Central Asia, with Afghanistan as a key energy transit hub, appear to be in jeopardy.

Diplomatic challenges

On the diplomatic plane, the challenges before India are threefold: first, India has traditionally been closely identified with the Northern Alliance, which is primarily composed of three ethnic minorities in Afghanistan—the Tajiks who constitute approximately 27% cent of the population, and the Hazaras and Uzbeks who constitute approximately 9% each of the population. It is imperative that India effectively capitalize on some of its key developmental projects located in the Pushtun belt, cultivate links with key Pushtun figures outside the rank and file of the Karzai Government and encourage working towards evolving a multi-ethnic political solution to the Afghan quagmire. Addressing this challenge is crucial if India wishes to counter propaganda of supporting the northern tribes against the Pushtuns, who largely dominate the ranks of the Taliban.

Second, in light of the Taliban insurgency having gained a lethal momentum and with an impatient West willing to negotiate and buy its way out, India will have to find creative ways to retain its relevance as a consequential player in Afghanistan. The changes in the composition of the erstwhile Northern Alliance, the rise in Islamabad's influence as demonstrated at the London Conference and subsequently at the Istanbul security conference on Afghanistan, to which India was not even invited, have further magnified the challenge at hand.

Third, India also needs to effectively leverage its soft power prowess in Afghanistan and reinforce it with a more active role in the country's military sector. This could be done by way of scaling up the very modest levels of training being currently offered to the Afghan National Police and the Afghan National Army. Such an exercise, apart from being far more cost effective than the training programmes being offered by the West, hold out two other distinct advantages: namely, that there is a far greater degree of trust between India and Afghanistan as compared with the West or with any of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries, and also because India is culturally much closer to the Afghans, thus making communication and establishment of bonds with the soldiers far easier. In addition, India has the capacity and capability to offer expertise in counter-insurgency training to Afghan forces at its elite training academies in India. However, for this to materialize, India would have to engage in some tactful diplomacy with Washington and other Western capitals in order to soothe the frayed nerves that such a move would cause in Islamabad.

Finally, pressure on New Delhi from Washington is likely to intensify for not only a resumption of its stalled composite dialogue process with Pakistan, but also for arriving at a solution on the issue of Kashmir. The dominant sentiment prevalent in Western policy circles is underscored by Chief of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen's statement that 'the longstanding animosity and mistrust between Pakistan and India complicates regional efforts [...] we must offer our help to improve confidence and understanding between them in a manner that builds long-term stability across the wider region of South Asia'.³¹

Potential developments for India in Afghanistan

The political alignments and re-alignments underway in Afghanistan triggered by an intensifying Taliban insurgency and waning commitment of the West are likely to give rise to four key developments that will have reverberations for India in the near future.

First, with the West accepting Pakistan's offer of using its leverage (especially with the Haqqani group) to broker what appears to be at best a tenuous peace, Islamabad will be tempted to once again look upon Afghanistan as its 'strategic depth' against India and the Taliban as a strategic leverage. The thinking within the Pakistani establishment on this particular issue and the weight attached to it is lucidly demonstrated by the Pakistan army chief's recent statement that 'we want to have strategic depth in Afghanistan'.³² Former ISI chief Hamid Gul—who both played an instrumental role in propping up the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan, and later supported insurgency in Punjab and Kashmir and was also closely associated with Lashkar-e-Taiba, which was believed to be behind the 2008 terrorist attacks on Mumbai—was even more blunt when publicly proclaiming that, 'America is history, Karzai is history, and the Taliban are the future'.³³ Thus, India's old security concerns emanating from Afghanistan are likely to be rekindled. However, another key point of concern for New Delhi will be that, this time, with a politico-military re-emergence of the Taliban, there also exists a strong possibility of the Taliban using Pakistan's lawless frontier regions as its own strategic depth. This would bring the threat posed by extremist groups much closer to India's geographical as well as psychological frontiers.

Second, with India's political influence being clipped in Afghanistan its efforts to project power, in what New Delhi considers to be its *extended neighbourhood* of energy-rich Central Asia, will suffer a setback, as will its efforts to bolster energy security. Furthermore, as radical Islamist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) increasingly forge transnational linkages, particularly with the ISI and Taliban, security challenges on India's western frontiers are likely to multiply. Developments in Afghanistan will inescapably have trans-border reverberations in the Central Asian republics (CARs), three of which, apart from being

geographically proximate, have cross-ethnic linkages with Afghanistan. A spillover of Afghan instability in the already fragile CARs could disrupt India's growing interest in the region, especially its growing military co-operation with states like Tajikistan, which is believed to be hosting India's first ever foreign military outpost at Ayni.

Third, as the West utilizes the services of Islamabad to reach out to the Taliban, it will also be attracted to Islamabad's proposition that Kashmir, too, is a major cause for fuelling pan-Islamic radicalism. Thus, major Western capitals will be tempted to put renewed pressure on New Delhi to resolve the issue of Kashmir. India must demonstrate greater dexterity with regard to its policies of engagement with Pakistan if it is to pre-empt efforts being made to hyphenate it with 'Af-Pak'. Moreover, another potential area of concern for India is likely to be the variance of its stance with the USA towards groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, which are of immediate concern for New Delhi. This difference in threat perception is underscored by US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates's recent proclamation before the Senate foreign relations committee 'that Al Qaeda is supportive of Lashkar-e-Taiba [...] Al Qaeda is providing them with targeting information and helping them in their plotting in India'.³⁴ Such a view goes distinctly against the widely held Indian view that the real sponsors of Lashkar-e-Taiba are at the ISI headquarters in Pakistan.

Fourth, the role played by Beijing in Afghanistan in coming years will be closely watched in New Delhi. Beijing's past record of flirting with radical Islamist movements,³⁵ as also its extremely close alliance with Pakistan through which it hopes to pacify Xinjiang while on the external plane use this alliance to temper a rising Indian profile in both Afghanistan and Central Asia, has all helped deepen suspicions in New Delhi about Beijing's intentions in the region. Indian discomfort can be seen over Beijing's linkages between Pakistan and Afghanistan, Chinese linkages typified in a *People's Daily* editorial that 'the US must ensure a stable domestic and international environment for Pakistan and ease the tension between Pakistan and India [... The] Afghan problem, the Pakistani problem and the Indian-Pakistani problem are all related'.³⁶ Even more disconcerting for India was the fact that this sentiment found echo in the joint statement issued after President Obama's visit to Beijing in November 2009, which said that 'they [the USA and China] support the efforts of Afghanistan and Pakistan to fight terrorism, maintain domestic stability and achieve sustainable economic and social development, and support the improvement and growth of relations between India and Pakistan. The two sides are ready to strengthen communication, dialogue and cooperation on issues related to South Asia and work together to promote peace, stability and development in that region'.³⁷ Signals like these from Beijing have hardened suspicions of mandarins in New Delhi, who believe that Beijing's real intention is to re-hyphenate India with Pakistan and strengthen the case for India as being part of the problem and not the solution.

Conclusions

As the international community desperately attempts to find a way to extricate itself from the Afghan quagmire, India may increasingly find itself hemmed in by the powers that be. A difficult road lay ahead for India in the summer of 2010 over its Afghanistan policy, in which if India aspired to be a consequential player in Afghan affairs and pre-empt political marginalization, 'New Delhi must recalibrate its strategic calculus in Afghanistan' by playing a proactive role in the political re-alignments taking place in Kabul, as opposed to viewing them with disdain.³⁸ New Delhi needs to broaden its political engagement outside the ambit of the Kabul Government; this will be imperative if it desires to prevent Pakistan's ISI from once again having a free run. All its attempts to usher in development will be rendered ineffectual if not

complemented by a stable political and security paradigm that is not hostile to India. The contours of Indo–Afghan engagement will, to a large extent, be determined by India’s ability to effectively respond to the rapidly evolving political dynamics within Afghanistan as well as among the external powers. India’s ability to successfully navigate its way through the Afghan matrix in its *immediate neighbourhood* and *extended neighbourhood* will be particularly keenly observed, as New Delhi increasingly jockeys for a position at the global high table.

Notes

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- 4 S. Muni, ‘India’s Afghan Policy Emerging from the Cold’, in K. Warikoo (ed.), *The Afghanistan Crisis: Issues and Perspectives*, New Delhi: Bhavana Books, 2002, p.335.
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- 6 *Ibid.*, pp.248–49.
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- 9 Muni, ‘India’s Afghan Policy Emerging from the Cold’, op. cit., p.341.
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- 13 For a detailed account of the historical and political linkages between Kashmir and Afghanistan, read K. Warikoo, ‘Shadow of Afghanistan over Kashmir’, in K. Warikoo (ed.), *The Afghanistan Crisis: Issues and Perspectives*, 2002.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp.361–62.
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