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**INDIA IN AFGHANISTAN: A RISING POWER OR A HESITANT
POWER?**

**Project on:
Globalization and the
National Security State**

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India in Afghanistan: A Rising Power or a Hesitant Power?

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India in Afghanistan: A Rising Power or a Hesitant Power?

Indian diplomacy faced a major setback at the Afghanistan Conference in London in January 2010, where Indian concerns were summarily ignored. In one stroke, Pakistan rendered New Delhi irrelevant in the evolving security dynamic in Afghanistan. When Indian External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna underscored the folly of making a distinction “between good Taliban and bad Taliban,” he was completely out of sync with the larger mood at the conference.¹ Days before this much-hyped conference, senior U.S. military commanders were suggesting that peace talks with the Taliban may be imminent and that Taliban members might even be invited to join the government in Kabul.² The West had made up its mind that it was not a question of if, but when and how to exit from Afghanistan, which seemed to be becoming a quagmire for the leaders in Washington and London.

The London conference decided that the time had come to woo the “moderate” section of the Taliban to share power in Kabul.³ Pakistan seems to have convinced the West that it can play the role of mediator in negotiations with the Taliban. Pakistan is attempting to preserve its influence in Afghanistan and to force the West into taking its concerns vis-à-vis India more seriously. The Obama Administration has commenced talks with the Taliban even as its reliance on the Pakistani Army for the resolution of the Afghanistan conundrum continues unabated.

Meanwhile, despite its best attempts to keep a low profile in Afghanistan, India and its nationals are increasingly becoming the target of the extremist forces. In February 2010, terrorists,

¹ Ashis Ray, “World Rejects India’s Taliban Stand,” Times of India (New Delhi), January 29, 2010.

² See, for example, Gen. Stanley McChrystal’s interview with the Financial Times (London) on January 19, 2010, available at <http://www.cfr.org/publication/21303/ft.html>

³ Mark Landler and Alissa J. Rubin “War Plan for Karzai: Reach Out to Taliban,” New York Times, January 28, 2010.

suspected to be Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) operatives, targeted guest houses frequented by Indians, resulting in the death of nine Indians.⁴ The Indian Embassy in Kabul has been struck twice in recent years, alerting New Delhi to the fact that as its influence has grown in Afghanistan and as India-Afghanistan ties have gathered momentum, it has changed the regional power configuration with some long-term implications. India has viewed these strikes as an attempt to force New Delhi out of Afghanistan, something that the Indian government has explicitly ruled out despite recent setbacks. Indian policy towards Afghanistan is struggling to respond to the rapidly evolving strategic environment in the region. Amidst the approaching endgame in Afghanistan, India is finding itself increasingly vulnerable and more damagingly, unable to preserve its vital interests in Af-Pak.⁵

Ever since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, India has tried to pursue a pro-active Afghanistan policy and a broad-based interaction is taking place between the two states. This is also a time when Indian capabilities - political, economic, and military - have increased markedly and India has become increasingly ambitious in defining its foreign policy agenda. According to neo-classical realism, it is the international systemic constraints that determine the foreign policy behaviour of states. While individual or domestic political variables may influence foreign policy at the margins, it is structure of the international system that sets the terms of conduct of foreign policy across time and space. Realists contend that “the pressures of [international] competition weigh more heavily than ideological preferences or internal political pressures.”⁶ In his seminal work on structural realism, Kenneth Waltz has argued that his is a theory of International Politics, not a theory of foreign policy because structural realism tries to explain the outcomes of

⁴ “9 Indians among 17 dead as Taliban bombers attack Kabul,” Times of India, February 26, 2010.

⁵ For a detailed explication of Indian interests in Afghanistan, see Harsh V. Pant, “India in Afghanistan: A Test Case for a Rising Power,” *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (June 2010), pp. 133-153.

⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz, “A Response to My Critics,” in Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 329.

state interactions. Theories of foreign policy would seek to explain the behaviour of individual states in the external realm.⁷ According to Waltz, foreign policy does not constitute an autonomous realm because it is driven by both external and internal factors and so there is no point in trying to find a theoretical explanation for foreign policy. A theory of international politics shows how the interaction of states generates a structure which then constrains states, rewarding or punishing them for taking certain actions. A theory of international politics thus explains why states similarly placed in the system behave similar despite the differences among them. For Waltz, to explain how any single state will respond to the constraints imposed by the international structure requires a theory of foreign policy. A theory of foreign policy, therefore, explains why states similarly placed in the international system do not behave similarly, thereby underlining the differences in the internal make-up of states as explanations for the differences.⁸ Structural constraints, in other words, force states towards a particular set of foreign policies in line with their relative position in the international system. And as that position undergoes a change, so will change the foreign policy of that state. As Robert Gilpin explains, “a more wealthy and a more powerful state...will select a larger bundle of security and welfare goals than a less wealthy and less powerful state,” thereby trying to use the tools at its disposal to gain control over its strategic environment.⁹ A state, therefore, will become more ambitious in defining the scale and scope of its foreign policy as its relative material power capabilities increase and vice versa. According to Hans Morgenthau, the interests of a state are shaped by its

⁷ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 71-72

⁸ Kenneth N. Waltz, “International Politics Is Not Foreign Policy,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 6, 1996, pp. 54-55

⁹ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 22-23, 94-95

power.¹⁰ An increase in a state's relative power capabilities will result in a concomitant increase in its interests in the realm of foreign policy. And as it will rise in inter-state hierarchy, it will "try to expand its economic, political, and territorial control; it will try to change the international system in accordance with its own interests."¹¹ Rising powers in the international system will try to change the status-quo and establish new institutions and arrangements that more accurately reflect their own conception of their place in the world. Rising powers seek to enhance their security by increasing their capabilities and their control over the external environment. As a rising power India has also sought to make its presence felt by adopting a more pro-active role in its extended neighbourhood and forging economic, military and institutional linkages. In many ways, Afghanistan has become emblematic of such an ambitious course that India seems to be charting in its foreign policy. But the trajectory of Indian policy towards Afghanistan cannot merely be explained by India's rising capabilities. The seeming failure of New Delhi in preserving its vital interests in Afghanistan is a result of a complex set of domestic political and institutional variables that have led to an overall confused policy framework.

India's Afghanistan Policy

India's relations with Afghanistan have steadily improved since the fall of the Taliban for a number of reasons. India's main focus has been to support the Afghan government and the political process in the country as mandated under the Bonn agreement of 2001.¹² Unlike

¹⁰ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), p. 75

¹¹ Gilpin, pp. 94-95

¹² Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, Bonn Agreement, United Nations, Bonn, Ger., Dec. 5, 2001, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3f48f4754.html>

Pakistan, ties between India and Afghanistan are not hampered by the existence of a contiguous, and contested, border. Its support for the Northern Alliance against the Pakistan-backed Taliban in the 1990s strengthened its position in Kabul after 2001. Many members of the Alliance are members of the government or hold influential provincial posts. India has also done its best to restore the balance in its engagement with a range of different ethnic groups and political affiliations in Afghanistan. The balance was tilted towards the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance during the 1990s as a counter to Pakistan-controlled hard-line Pashtun factions, led by the Taliban. India has used its vocal support for Karzai, an ethnic Pashtun educated in India, to demonstrate its keenness to revive its close ties with Pashtuns.

India has pursued a “soft power” strategy towards Afghanistan, sticking to civilian rather than military matters. In consonance with the priorities laid down by Afghanistan’s government, Indian assistance has focused on building human capital and physical infrastructure, improving security and helping the agricultural and other important sectors of the country’s economy. India is building roads, providing medical facilities and helping with educational programs in an effort to develop and enhance long-term local Afghan capabilities.

India has pledged around \$1.3 billion on various projects, emerging as the sixth largest bilateral donor to Afghanistan. Important infrastructural projects undertaken by India include building of the 218-km Zelarang-Delaram highway enabling south-western Afghanistan access to the Iranian port of Chabahar, construction of electricity transmission lines, the Salma Dam power project in Herat province, construction of the Afghan Parliament building, helping in the expansion of the Afghan national television network, and several smaller projects in agriculture, rural development, education, health, energy, and vocational training. The Zaranj-Delaram road, which will enable Afghanistan to have access to sea via Iran and will provide a shorter route for

Indian goods to reach Afghanistan, was completed in 2008 despite stiff resistance from the Taliban by India's Border Roads Organization.¹³ The security of the Indian workers working on this project was provided by a 300-strong paramilitary force provided by India itself because of which the project overshot time and monetary deadlines.

As a consequence, India has come to enjoy considerable soft power in Afghanistan. Indeed, ordinary Afghans appear to have welcomed Indian involvement in development projects in their country. Indian films and television programs are extremely popular among the local Afghan populace. India remains the favourite destination for Afghans with the Indian embassy and four other missions issuing around 350 visas daily. India has a fundamental interest in ensuring that Afghanistan emerges as a stable and economically integrated state in the region. Though Afghanistan's economy has recovered significantly since the fall of the Taliban, it remains highly dependent on foreign aid and trade with neighboring countries. The only way in which the flailing Karzai government can retain and enhance its legitimacy is by bringing the Afghan economy back on track. For this it largely depends on other states and India is playing an important role by laying the foundations for sustainable economic development in its neighbour. The Preferential trade agreement signed by India and Afghanistan gives substantial duty concessions to certain categories of Afghan dry fruits when entering India with Afghanistan allowing reciprocal concessions to Indian products such as sugar, tea, and pharmaceuticals. Kabul wants Indian businesses to take advantage of the low tax regime to help develop a manufacturing hub in areas such as cement, oil and gas, electricity, and in services including hotels, banking and communications.

¹³ Manu Pubby, "India hands over Afghan road, trade can now flow via Iran," Indian Express (New Delhi), January 23, 2009.

India also piloted the move to make Afghanistan a member of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) with the hope that with the entry of Afghanistan into the SAARC, issues relating to the transit and free flow of goods across borders in the region can be addressed, thereby leading to greater economic development of Afghanistan and the region as a whole. Moreover, South Asia will be able to reach out to Central and West Asia more meaningfully with Afghanistan as a member of the SAARC. It has been estimated that given Afghanistan's low trade linkages with other states in the region, its participation in the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) would result in trade gains of \$2 billion to the region with as much as \$606 million accruing to Afghanistan.¹⁴

Indian interests in Afghanistan

Given that a politically and economically stable Afghanistan is a strategic priority for India, India maintains that the ongoing effort to help Afghanistan emerge from war, strife and privation is its responsibility as a regional power. India has a range of interests in Afghanistan that it would like to preserve and enhance and it is towards this end that it has expended its diplomatic energy in recent years.

Countering Pakistan

To a large extent, India's approach towards Afghanistan has been a function of its Pakistan policy. It is important for India that Pakistan does not get a foothold in Afghanistan and so historically India has attempted to prevent Pakistan from dominating Afghanistan. India would like to minimize Pakistan's involvement in the affairs of Afghanistan and to ensure that a fundamentalist regime of the Taliban variety does not take root again. Pakistan, on the other

¹⁴ G. Srinivasan, "Afghanistan's entry to SAARC will lead to \$2-bn gain for sub-continent," *The Hindu Business Line*, March 29, 2007.

hand, has viewed Afghanistan as a good means of balancing out India's preponderance in South Asia.¹⁵ Good India-Afghanistan ties are seen by Pakistan as detrimental to its national security interests as the two states flank the two sides of Pakistan's borders. A friendly political dispensation in Kabul is viewed by Pakistan as essential to escape the strategic dilemma of being caught between a powerful adversary in India in the east and an irredentist Afghanistan with claims on the Pashtun dominated areas in the west.¹⁶ Given its Pashtun-ethnic linkage with Afghanistan, Pakistan considers its role to be a privileged one in the affairs of Afghanistan. Given these conflicting imperatives, both India and Pakistan have tried to neutralize the influence of each other in the affairs of Afghanistan. Both are stuck in a classic security dilemma in so far as their policies towards Afghanistan are concerned. Any measure by either Pakistan or India to increase its own security causes the other to act in response, thereby causing a deterioration in the overall regional security environment.

Containing Islamist Extremism

India's other major interest is to make sure that Islamist extremism remains under control in its neighbourhood and its struggle against Islamist extremism is also closely intertwined with the rise of extremism in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan has long backed separatists in Jammu and Kashmir in the name of self-determination and India has over the years been a major victim of the radicalization of Islamist forces in Kashmir which have been successful in expanding their network across India. Any breeding ground of radical Islamists under the aegis of Pakistan has a direct impact on the security of India, resulting in a rise in infiltration of terrorists across borders

¹⁵ Marvin G. Weinbaum, "Pakistan and Afghanistan: The Strategic Relationship," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 31, no. 6, (1991), pp. 498-99.

¹⁶ Rifaat Hussain, "Pakistan's Relations With Afghanistan: Continuity and Change," *Strategic Studies*, 22(4), 2002, Available at http://www.issi.org.pk/journal/2002_files/no_4/article/3a.htm

as well attacks. It is vital for both India and Afghanistan that the latter would never again emerge as a safe haven for terrorism and extremism.

A friendly Afghanistan where religious extremism continues to flourish is seen by Pakistan as essential to keep the pressure on India in Kashmir by providing a base where militants could be trained for fighting against the Indian forces. The mujahideen fighting in Kashmir have not only drawn inspiration from the Afghan resistance against the Soviets but has also drawn resources and materiel support from Pakistan.¹⁷ Kashmiri militants were among the thousands of “volunteers” from various Islamic countries that participated in the war against the Soviet forces. They went back indoctrinated in a version of Islam that destined their victory over the “infidels” as well as with important knowledge of guerrilla warfare.¹⁸ India rightly perceived that the victors of mujahideen against the Soviet Union would fundamentally alter the direction of Islamic extremism as Afghanistan would end up playing a crucial role in the shaping of an Islamic geopolitics sitting as it does astride the Islamic heartland involving South and Central Asia as well as Middle East.

A Bridge to Central Asia

Afghanistan is also viewed as a gateway to the Central Asian region where India hopes to expand its influence. Central Asia is crucial for India not only because of its oil and gas reserves that India wishes to tap for its energy security but also because other major powers such as the US, Russia and China have already started competing for influence in the region. The regional actors view Afghanistan as a potential source of instability even as their geopolitical rivalry remains a major cause of Afghanistan’s troubles.

¹⁷ Ahmad Rashid, *Taliban: The Story of Afghan Warlords*, (Oxford: Pan Books, 2001), pp. 183-187

¹⁸ Rasyul Bakhsh Rais, Afghanistan and the Regional Powers., *Asian Survey*, 33(9), 1993, pp. 915-16.

India was forced to increase its military profile in Central Asia after the diplomatic humiliation it had to endure in 1999 when an Indian Airlines flight from Kathmandu was hijacked by Pakistan-backed terrorists to Kandahar in southern Afghanistan. India had to negotiate a deal with the Taliban that involved the release of the aircraft in exchange for three hardened terrorists held by India. India then decided to set up its first military base abroad in Farkhor in Tajikistan, close to the Afghan border, that was used to provide assistance to the Northern Alliance fighters and later to provide assistance to the post-Taliban government in Kabul.

As the geopolitical importance of Central Asia has increased in recent years, all the major powers have been keen to expand their influence in the region and India is no exception. It shares many of the interests of other major powers such as the US, Russia and China vis-à-vis Central Asia, including access to Central Asian energy resources, controlling the spread of radical Islam, ensuring political stability, and strengthening of regional economies. But unlike China and Russia, its interests converge with that of the US in Central Asia and some have even suggested that it is in the US interests to have a greater Indian presence in Central Asia to counter growing Chinese or Russian involvement.¹⁹

Expanding Regional Influence

A major factor behind India's pro-active Afghanistan agenda has been India's attempt to carve out for itself a greater role in regional affairs, more in consonance with its rising economic and military profile. India wants to establish its credentials as a major power in the region that is willing to take responsibility for ensuring stability around its periphery. By emerging as a major

¹⁹ Stephen Blank, *US Interests in Central Asia and the Challenges to Them*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2007, pp. 31-32

donor for Afghanistan, India is trying to project itself as a significant economic power that can provide necessary aid to the needy states in its neighborhood.

It has been contended that India's "pro-active foreign policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan has been predicated upon New Delhi's keenness to be of use to American regional policy" to the detriment of a traditional "independent" Indian approach towards its neighbours.²⁰ It is not clear, however, what alternative policy India can pursue given that America's "war on terror" – its strategic priority – has at its center the goal of achieving Afghanistan's stabilization. Though India's interests are best served in helping the US achieve that aim, India will have to make some difficult choices now that the US commitment to create an enduring environment in Afghanistan has waned and it plans to leave before achieving its long-term objectives. India will find the going tough if the US decides to revert back to its policy of the 1990s when despite convergent security interests, it failed to develop an effective counter-terrorism partnership with India.

The Limits of Soft Power

Despite having a range of interests in Afghanistan, a consensus has emerged in India in recent years that India's 'soft power' strategy of relying on political and economic engagement and cultural outreach, while making India one of the most popular foreign presence among ordinary Afghans, has not brought it any perceptible strategic gains. Rather, India stands side-lined by the West despite being the only country that has been relatively successful in winning the "hearts and minds" of the Afghans. From the very beginning the prime objective of India's Afghanistan policy has been pre-empting the return of Pakistan's embedment in Afghanistan's strategic and political firmament. And ironically it is India's success in Afghanistan that had driven Pakistan's

²⁰ M.K.. Bhadrakumar, "The Taliban turns its Attention on India," *The Hindu*, November 28, 2005

security establishment into a panic mode with a perception gaining ground that India was ‘taking over Afghanistan.’ The Obama Administration’s desire for a rapid withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan has given the necessary opening to Pakistan to regain its lost influence in Kabul.²¹ In order to keep Islamabad in good humor, Washington has insisted on India limiting its role in Afghanistan. Washington seems to have bought Islamabad’s argument that large Indian presence in Afghanistan threatens Pakistan and make it difficult for it to cooperate fully with the international community in the fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Yet India had a very limited presence in Afghanistan in 1990s and it was then that Pakistan got a free hand in nurturing the Taliban.

India has much to consider. The return of the Taliban to Afghanistan would pose a major threat to its borders. In the end, the brunt of escalating terrorism will be borne by India, which already has been described as ‘the sponge that protects’ the West. Indian strategists warn that a hurried US withdrawal with the Taliban still posing a threat to Afghanistan will have serious implications for India, not the least of which would be to see Pakistan, its eternal rival, step in more aggressively. As Henry Kissinger has warned, “In many respects India will be the most affected country if jihadist Islamism gains impetus in Afghanistan.”²²

Afghanistan’s President, Hamid Karzai, meanwhile, is grudgingly accepting a larger role for Pakistan in his country. His decision to send a contingent of Afghan military officers to Pakistan for training underlines his desire to seek a rapprochement with Islamabad.²³ The July 2011 deadline was intended to force Karzai to address urgent problems like corruption and ineffective governance. But it may have had the opposite effect, convincing Karzai that in a year from now,

²¹ David E. Sanger and Peter Baker, “Afghanistan Drawdown to Begin in 2011, Officials Say,” New York Times, December 1, 2009.

²² “Fundamentalist regime in Kabul to affect India most,” Indian Express (New Delhi), September 13, 2010.

²³ Karin Brulliard and Karen DeYoung, “Some Afghan military officers to get training in Pakistan,” Washington Post, July 1, 2010.

he will be on his own. Though the US is at pains to underline that July 2011 “will be the beginning of a conditions-based process” and that the deadline will be debated in the military’s formal review of progress later this year in December, there are few who are willing to bet at the moment that the Obama Administration has the stomach to stay for much longer in Afghanistan. Karzai in particular seems convinced that Americans will not be able to stay the course.

Not surprisingly, Karzai is trying to craft a more autonomous foreign policy. Karzai lost no time in dismissing two high-profile ministers – interior minister and intelligence chief – from his cabinet who were most closely allied with the US. These were the men Washington had insisted Karzai include in his cabinet after his re-election last year and they were resisting Karzai’s attempts to negotiate with the Taliban and closer ties with Islamabad. Karzai now views Pakistan as an important player in ending the war through negotiations with the Taliban or on the battlefield. The decision to send officers for training in Pakistan is of great symbolic value and is the result of talks between the Afghan government and Pakistan’s security agencies that began in May. It has even been reported that Karzai had a face-to-face meeting with Sirajuddin Haqqani in the presence of Pakistan’s Army Chief and the ISI Chief.²⁴ Taliban’s growing power is evident in their dismissal of proposed negotiations with the US. The Taliban seem convinced that they are winning the war in Afghanistan and that public opinion in the West is turning against the war.

Pakistan’s security establishment is relishing the double game it is playing in Afghanistan. Pakistani support for the Taliban in Afghanistan continues to be sanctioned at the highest levels of Pakistan’s government with the ISI even represented on the Quetta Shura – the Taliban’s war council – so as to retain influence over the Taliban’s leadership. Taliban fighters continue to be

²⁴ Ibid.

trained in Pakistani camps. The ISI does not merely provide financial, military and logistical support to the insurgency. It retains strong strategic and operational control over the Taliban campaign in Afghanistan.²⁵ Despite launching offensives against militants in North and South Waziristan, Pakistani military continues to look upon the Taliban as a strategic asset. The conclusion of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Trade and Transit Agreement (APTTA) is a major shot in the arm for Pakistan as it explicitly affirms that India will not be allowed to export goods to Afghanistan through the Wagah border.²⁶ Both Pakistan and Afghanistan are hedging their bets against the coming US withdrawal.

In one of the largest single disclosures of such information in US history, *WikiLeaks*, a self-described whistleblower organization, released more than 91,000 classified documents in July 2010, largely consisting of low-level field reports.²⁷ These documents merely confirmed the long held belief that Pakistan's intelligence agency continues to guide the Afghan insurgency even as it continues to receive more than \$1 billion a year from Washington to combat the extremists. The ISI has been helping Afghan insurgents plan and carry out attacks on US forces in Afghanistan and their Afghan government allies. The efforts by the ISI to run the networks of suicide bombers and its help in organizing Taliban offensives at crucial periods in the Afghan war have also been underlined.²⁸

These revelations made it clear that India has been systematically targeted by the ISI. The bombing of the Indian embassy in 2008 was at the behest of the ISI and Haqqani network sent bombers to strike Indian officials, development workers and engineers in Afghanistan. The ISI

²⁵ Miles Amore, "Pakistan puppet masters guide the Taliban killers," *The Sunday Times* (London), June 13, 2010.

²⁶ Jay Solomon and Alan Cullison, "Islamabad, Kabul Sign Pact," *Wall Street Journal*, July 18, 2010.

²⁷ Greg Jaffe and Karen De Young, "Leaked files lay bare war in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, July 26, 2010.

²⁸ Mark Mazzetti, Jane Perlez, Eric Schmitt and Andrew W. Lehren, "Pakistan Aids Insurgency in Afghanistan, Reports Assert," *New York Times*, July 25, 2010.

paid the Haqqani network to eliminate Indians working in Afghanistan as well as gave orders to orchestrate attacks on Indian consulates in Afghanistan.²⁹ That the Pakistani security complex has engendered targeting of Indian interests in Afghanistan was hardly news in New Delhi. But what has been troubling the Indian policy-makers is Washington's reluctance to counter Pakistan's designs in Afghanistan.

Though India continues to insist that it won't retreat from Afghanistan, there are signs that it is indeed scaling down its presence. Almost half of Indian personnel working on various projects in Afghanistan have returned back. India is not taking on any new projects and various Indian schemes have been put on hold. The training programs for the Afghan personnel are now taking place in India.

India Debates Its Options

India is debating its options in Afghanistan in a strategic space that seems to have shrunk over the last few years. By failing to craft its own narrative on Af-Pak ever since the U.S. troops went into Afghanistan in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, New Delhi has allowed the West, and increasingly Pakistan, to dictate the contours of Indian policy towards the region. Two major strands can be discerned in the present debate on Afghanistan in India. There are those who argue that despite recent setbacks, India should continue to rely on the U.S. to secure its interests in Af-Pak.³⁰ They suggest that there is a fundamental convergence between India and the Obama Administration in viewing Pakistan as the source of Afghanistan's insecurity and the suggestion that the world must act together to cure Islamabad of its political malaise. In recognizing that the

²⁹ Manu Pubby, "Evidence of Pak blackmail, how ISI paid Taliban to hit Indians in Kabul," Indian Express, July 27, 2010.

³⁰ K. Subrahmanyam, "The Second Deception," Indian Express (New Delhi), March 3, 2010.

borderlands between Pakistan and Afghanistan constitute the single most important threat to global peace and security, arguing that Islamabad is part of the problem rather than the solution, and asking India to join an international concert in managing the Af-Pak region, the U.S. has made significant departures from its traditionally held posture towards South Asia. India, therefore, would be best served by coordinating its counter-terror strategy with the American one and should help the U.S. by acknowledging the linkage between Pakistan's eastern and western frontiers. India should, in this view, try to address Pakistan's fears of Indian meddling on its western frontiers, unfounded as they might be and should not even hesitate in reaching out to the Pakistani Army.³¹

The other side in this debate is getting impatient with India's continued reliance on the U.S. to pull its chestnuts out of the fire. According to this argument, a fundamental disconnect has emerged between U.S. and Indian interests in Af-Pak.³² The Obama Administration has been systematically ignoring Indian interests in the crafting of its Af-Pak priorities. While actively discouraging India from assuming a higher profile in Afghanistan, for fear of offending Pakistan, the U.S. has failed to persuade Pakistan into taking Indian concerns more seriously. Anxious for some kind of victory, the West has decided to court "good" Taliban with Pakistan's help. This has underlined Islamabad's centrality in the unfolding strategic dynamic in the region, much to India's discomfiture. By pursuing a strategy that will give Pakistan the leading role in the state structures in Afghanistan, the West, however, is only sowing the seeds for future regional turmoil. While the U.S. may have no vital interest in determining who actually governs in Afghanistan, so long as the Afghan territory is not being used to launch attacks on U.S. soil, India does. The Taliban – good or bad – are opposed to India in fundamental ways. The

³¹ C. Raja Mohan, "Great Game folio," Indian Express (New Delhi), January 27, 2010.

³² G. Parthasarthy, "US at crossroads in Afghanistan," The Tribune (Chandigarh), August 19, 2010.

consequence of abandoning the goal to establish a functioning Afghan state and a moderate Pakistan will be greater pressure on Indian security.³³

Indian influence in Afghanistan rose significantly as American support for Pakistan shifted and Washington demanded that Pakistan adopt policies that India had long wanted in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Moreover, India emerged as a major economic actor in Afghanistan trying to bolster the Afghan state's capacity in various measures. But by refusing to use hard power and asserting its profile more forcefully India soon made itself irrelevant as the ground realities changed and a divergence emerged between the strategic interests of India and Washington. The Obama Administration intent on moving out of Afghanistan has managed to signal to Indian adversaries that they can shape the post-American ground realities to serve their own ends. India lost the confidence of its own allies in Afghanistan. If India was unwilling to stand up for its own interests, few saw the benefit of aligning with India. The Indian presence which looked formidable during George W. Bush period started weakening with the emergence of the Obama Administration which deepened its security dependence on Pakistan in the hope of achieving rapid success.

To preserve its interests in a changing strategic milieu, India is coordinating with states like Russia and Iran more closely with whom India has convergent interests vis-à-vis Af-Pak. New Delhi, Moscow and Tehran will not accept a fundamentalist Sunni-dominated regime in Kabul and re-emergence of Afghanistan as a base for jihadi terrorism directed at neighboring states. India has reached out to Russia with political interactions at the highest levels reiterating the two nations' shared positions on Afghanistan and institutionalising cooperation on Afghanistan. Much like New Delhi, Moscow has, time and again, laid down certain 'red lines' on the

³³ Kanwal Sibal, "Don't Lose the Game," *Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), March 4, 2010; Shyam Saran, "How not to exit Afghanistan," *Business Standard*, September 15, 2010.

integration of the Taliban that include renunciation of violence by the Taliban, cessation of armed struggle, acceptance of the Afghan constitution and a complete break-up with Al Qaeda.³⁴

During the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier this year to New Delhi, India had sought Russian support in countering what it views as a US-Pakistan axis in Afghanistan.

Moscow is refocusing on Afghanistan as Islamist extremism and drug trafficking emanating from Central Asia have emerged as major threats to its national security. Moscow hosted the Presidents of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan in August 2010, promising to invest significant resources in Afghanistan to develop infrastructure and natural resources. After keeping itself aloof from Af-Pak for years after Taliban's ouster, Russia is back in the game and even the US seems to be supporting greater Russian involvement. This has prompted greater cooperation between India and Russia on Afghanistan.³⁵

Iran is the third part of this triangle and India's outreach to Tehran has become serious after signals from Iran that the relationship is drifting.³⁶ India and Iran had worked closely when the Taliban was in power in Kabul and have continued to cooperate on several infrastructure projects with Iran allowing transit facilities for Indian goods. India's decision to vote against Iran at the IAEA on the nuclear issue however led to a chilling in Indo-Iran ties. Now New Delhi is trying to revive its partnership with Iran in Afghanistan. The two sides have decided to hold "structured and regular consultations" on the issue of Afghanistan. Despite western sanctions, the Indian government is encouraging Indian companies to invest in the Iranian energy sector so that economic interests can underpin India-Iran political realignment. Iran is worried about the potential major role for leaders of the almost exclusively Sunni Taliban in the emerging political

³⁴ Vladimir Radyuhin, "India, Russia to step up cooperation in Afghanistan," *The Hindu*, August 3, 2010.

³⁵ Jason Motlagh, "With US Approval, Moscow Heads Back to Afghanistan," *Time*, August 24, 2010.

³⁶ On the present state of India-Iran ties, see Harsh V. Pant, "Delhi's Tehran Conundrum," *Wall Street Journal*, September 20, 2010.

dispensation in Afghanistan. It has even encouraged India to send more of its assistance to provinces in northern and western Afghanistan that are under the control of those associated with the Northern Alliance. At the initiative of Iran, India is now part of a trilateral initiative on Afghanistan and this India-Iran-Afghanistan initiative is aimed at countering Pakistan's attempts to freeze India out of various other regional initiatives.³⁷ New Delhi is seeking reassurances from Moscow and Tehran that the three states are on the same page on the Af-Pak situation as the US presses ahead with the accommodation of the Taliban in the Afghan power structures. It remains to be seen, however, if India's gravitation towards Russia and Iran would be enough to change the situation in Af-Pak from evolving to India's disadvantage.

Overall, New Delhi has not had a very consistent policy towards Afghanistan over the last decade. Part of it is a function of the rapidly evolving ground realities in Afghanistan to which India is having to respond. But a large part of it is India's own inability to put its own house in order. There is an overarching lack of coherence in Indian response as New Delhi seems to making several arguments depending on the audience at hand. On the one hand, India is signalling to the US that it views long-term American presence in Afghanistan as integral to regional security. On the other, it is reaching out to the Iranians who want to see a full and complete US withdrawal from the region. Even as India has signed a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan promising to enhance its role in Afghan security sector, it is at the same time reducing its economic footprint in Afghanistan. As a result, New Delhi has not only complicated its own future options but it has also lost allies who are having difficulty in viewing India as a credible partner in the emerging strategic realities in Afghanistan.

Indian Foreign Policy: Whither Structure?

³⁷ Pranab Dhal Samanta, "Now, a India-Iran-Afghanistan tri-summit," *Indian Express*, September 21, 2010.

Structural factors only partially explain India's policy towards Afghanistan. While structural factors have clearly pushed India into a more assertive policy vis-a-vis Afghanistan, there are a range of other domestic political and institutional factors that have shaped India's actual response and seem to provide a much more effective prism to examine the trajectory of the Indian foreign policy.

Discomfort with Power

India's inability to comprehend the role of power in the international system is coming into sharp relief with India's ascent in the global inter-state hierarchy. Power lies at the heart of international politics as it permits one state to exert influence over another, thereby shaping political outcomes. The success or failure of a state's foreign policy is largely a function of how power is wielded.

A fundamental quandary afflicting India in the realm of foreign affairs and becoming even more acute with India's recent rise is what Sunil Khilnani has identified as India's lack of an "instinct for power." The exercise of power can be shocking and at times corrupting but power is absolutely necessary to maintain one's place in the international arena. But because India continues to be ambivalent about power it has failed to develop a strategic agenda commensurate with its growing economic and military capabilities. As Morgenthau observed, "The prestige of a nation is its reputation for power. That reputation, the reflection of the reality of power in the mind of the observers, can be as important as the reality of power itself. What others think about us is as important as what we actually are."³⁸ India faces a unique conundrum: its political elites desperately want global recognition as a major power and all the prestige and authority associated with it. Yet, they continue to be reticent about the acquisition and use of power in

³⁸ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 79.

foreign affairs. It was Nehru's daughter and his successor as the nation's Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi who long back addressing a foreign audience asserted that "India doesn't believe in power," an extraordinary statement from a politician who was ruthless in expanding her own power in domestic politics. Most recently, this ambivalence was expressed by the Indian Minister of Commerce, Kamal Nath, during a speech in which he stated that "this word power often makes me uncomfortable."³⁹ Though he was talking about India's economic rise and the challenges it continues to face as it strives for sustained economic growth, his discomfort with the notion of India as a rising power was indicative of a larger reality in Indian polity. This ambivalence about the use of power in international relations where "any prestige or authority eventually relies upon traditional measures of power, whether military or economic" is curious.⁴⁰ For the Indian political elites have rarely shied away from maximizing power in domestic politics, thereby corroding the institutional fabric of liberal democracy in the country. Some have defined this proclivity as a "mini state syndrome," those states which lack the material capabilities to make a difference to the outcomes at the international level, often denounce the concept of power in foreign policymaking.⁴¹ India had long been such a state, viewing itself as an object of the foreign policies of powerful nations. Consequently, the Indian political and strategic elites developed a suspicion of power politics with the word "power" itself acquiring a pejorative connotation regarding foreign policy. The relationship between power and foreign policy was never fully understood, leading to a progressive loss in India's ability to wield power effectively in the international realm. This ambivalence of the Indian elites about power in the realm of international politics is reflected in India's tentative policy towards Afghanistan.

³⁹ The full transcript of this speech is available at <http://www.iiss.org.uk/conferences/iiss-citi-india-global-forum/igf-plenary-sessions-2008/opening-remarks-and-dinner-address/dinner-address-kamal-nath>

⁴⁰ Michael Sheehan, *The Balance of Power: History and Theory* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 7.

⁴¹ K. Subrahmanyam, *Indian Security Perspectives* (New Delhi: ABC Publishing House, 1982), p. 127.

Inability to Meld Hard and Soft Power

India's lack of an instinct for power is most palpable in military realm where, unlike other major global powers throughout history, India has failed to master the creation, deployment and use of its military instruments in support of its national objectives.⁴² Nehru envisioned India's becoming a global leader without the use of armed forces, arguing that, "the right approach to defense is to avoid having unfriendly relations with other countries – to put it differently, war today is, and ought to be, out of question."⁴³ But the modern state system, in fact the very nature of the state itself, has been determined largely by the changing demands of war and it has developed through a series of what Philip Bobbitt called "Epochal Wars."⁴⁴ A defining feature of any state is its ability to make war and keep peace. And yet over the years war has been systematically factored out of Indian foreign policy and national security matrix calling into question India's ability to prevail in major wars of the future.

Few states face the kind of security challenges that confront India. Yet since independence, the military has never been seen as central to achieving Indian national priorities. India ignored the defense sector after independence and paid inadequate attention to its security needs. Indeed, it was not until the Sino-Indian War of 1962 that the Indian military was given role in the formulation of defense policy.⁴⁵ Divorcing foreign policy from military power was a recipe for disaster as India realized in 1962 when even Nehru was forced to concede that "military

⁴² This point has been eloquently elaborated in Ashley J. Tellis, , *Future Fire: Challenges Facing Indian Defense Policy in the New Century*, Delivered at the India Today Conclave, New Delhi, March 13, 2004, available at <http://www.ceip.org/files/pdf/futurefire.pdf>

⁴³ Quoted in P.V.R. Rao, *India's Defence Policy and Organisation Since Independence* (New Delhi: The United Services Institution of India, 1977), pp. 5-6.

⁴⁴ This argument has been explicated in Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace, and the Course of History* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003).

⁴⁵ K. Subrahmanyam, *Perspectives in Defence Planning* (New Delhi: Abhinav, 1972), pp. 126-133.

weakness has been a temptation, and a little military strength may be a deterrent.”⁴⁶ This trend continues even today as was exemplified by the policy paralysis in New Delhi after the Mumbai terror attacks in November 2008 when Indians to their shock found out that due to the blatant politicization of military acquisitions India no longer enjoyed conventional military superiority vis-à-vis Pakistan, throwing Indian military posture in complete disarray and resulting in a serious loss of credibility.⁴⁷ A state’s legitimacy is tied to its ability to monopolize the use of force and operate effectively in an international strategic environment and India had lacked clarity on this relationship between the use of force and its foreign policy priorities. This has had some grave consequences for India’s Afghanistan policy where New Delhi has failed to integrate hard power with its soft power strategy in early years, thereby ceding advantages to its adversaries.

Lack of Institutionalisation

Resources alone do not a major power make. Its quality of government must be willing and able to transform the potentialities of national power into a political reality. A major reason why India has been unwilling and/or unable to make effective use of its resources in supporting national policy in the realm of foreign affairs is a perceptible lack of institutionalization of the nation’s foreign policy making. At its very foundation, Indian democracy is sustained by a range of institutions from the more formal ones of the executive, legislative, and the judiciary to the less formal ones of the broader civil society. It is these institutions primarily that have allowed Indian democracy to flourish for more than sixty years now despite several constraints that have led to

⁴⁶ Lorne J. Kavic, *India’s Quest for Security: Defence Policies, 1947-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 192.

⁴⁷ Gupta, “No First Use Options.”

the failure of democracy in many other societies. However, in foreign policy, the lack of institutionalization has resulted in a failure to take the long view.

While some have blamed Nehru for his unwillingness to construct a strategic planning architecture because he single-handedly shaped Indian foreign policy during his tenure,⁴⁸ even his successors have failed to pursue institutionalization in a consistent manner. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance came to power in 1999 promising that it would establish a National Security Council (NSC) to analyze the military, economic, and political threats to the nation and to advise the government on meeting these challenges effectively.

The party did set up the NSC in the late 1990s, defining its role in policy formulation, yet it failed to institutionalize the NSC or to provide it the capabilities necessary to play the role assigned to it. As in the past, important national security decisions were addressed in an ad hoc manner without utilizing the Cabinet Committee on Security, the Strategic Policy Group (comprised of key secretaries, service chiefs, and heads of intelligence agencies), and officials of the National Security Advisory Board. Moreover, as has been rightly pointed out, the structure of the NSC makes long-term planning impossible, thereby negating the very purpose of its existence. Its effectiveness remains hostage to the weight of the National Security Advisor (NSA) in national politics.⁴⁹ The NSA has become the most powerful authority on national security, eclipsing the NSC as an institution.

When the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance came to power in 2004 it also promised to make the NSC a professional and effective institution (and blamed the NDA for making only cosmetic changes in the institutional arrangements), but to date it has failed to make it work. The

⁴⁸ Singh, *Defending India*, p. 34.

⁴⁹ Ashley J. Tellis, *India's Emerging Nuclear Posture: Between Recessed deterrent and Ready Arsenal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 658.

NSC still does not anticipate national security threats, coordinate the management of national security, and engender long-term planning by generating new and bold ideas. This lack of institutionalization has affected most areas of Indian foreign policy and India's Afghanistan policy is no exception. There has been no long-term appraisal of the ground situation in Afghanistan either before when the Taliban were ousted from power in 2001 or in recent times when the western forces are preparing to leave the region by 2014. India's Afghanistan policy is being conducted by a small group of individuals in the Prime Minister's Office and the results of such an ad hoc structure are clearly tentative. This has left Indian policy in Afghanistan reacting to the actions of other actors, thereby leading to a diminution of its profile.

Conclusion

There is clearly an appreciation in Indian policymaking circles of India's rising capabilities and the need for an effective Afghanistan policy. For many in the Indian strategic community, Afghanistan is a test case for India as a regional and global power on the ascendant. India's strategic capacity to deal with instability in its own backyard will, in the ultimate analysis, determine India's rise as a global power of major import. And so an Indian failure in Afghanistan is not really an option. Yet by failing to assert its profile in Afghanistan, India has failed to win the confidence of those constituencies in Afghanistan who considered India a natural ally. India is unnerved as Hamid Karzai seems to be exploring deeper alignments with China, Pakistan, and Iran with the prospect of American exit from Afghanistan getting closer to realization. As this paper underlines, India's policy towards Afghanistan is being filtered through a range of historical, institutional and domestic political factors.

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

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