

Afghanistan: India's Options

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Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's visit to New Delhi came at a crucial time and could well have set in motion the trajectory of how Indo-Afghan relations will pan out in the foreseeable future. That the Indo-Afghan relations have acquired a new salience is partly on account of certain regional and international developments, partly because the Afghan government has realised that expecting any positive contribution from its bete noire – Pakistan – is an exercise in futility, and partly because of the realisation in the government of India that instead of bothering about Pakistani sensitivities (a hall-mark of the Manmohan Singh years) India should be more concerned about Afghan security and do whatever it can to bolster the Afghan state by building up its sinews, both economic and military.

The regional and international environment is fraught with uncertainty as far as Afghanistan is concerned. Within a few months, a new administration will have been elected in the US and there is a question mark over how committed it will be to securing Afghanistan from the forces of medieval barbarism represented by the Taliban and other assorted Islamist terror groups and their Patron – Pakistan. Pakistan's hostility and duplicity is apparent, as are its intentions to dominate Afghanistan and reduce it into a virtual vassal state. The rest of the West is too caught up in its own economic and security mess to care too much for what happens in Afghanistan. China is happy to wait and watch from the side lines how the cookie crumbles and is placing its faith on its client – Pakistan – to manage, if not control, whatever happens next in Afghanistan. Iran is so involved in fighting the Islamic State and out maneuvering its Arab rival.

that it is even willing to live with the Taliban, at least for the time being. The Russians have already burnt their fingers in Afghanistan and don't seem interested in any direct role or even putting their weight behind any of the protagonists in Afghanistan. That leaves India as one country which, despite all its limitations, has an interest in seeing the Afghan state survive and thrive as an independent country which doesn't become Terror Central once again, something that is inevitable if the Taliban manage to hold sway over Afghanistan.

This is the backdrop in which President Ashraf Ghani visited India. While the government of India has assured the Afghans of its abiding

commitment to their country, and is even willing to walk the talk by providing whatever economic and military assistance it can in order to secure the Afghan government. Not only did Prime Minister Narendra Modi announce a \$ 1 billion package Afghanistan, there is also greater acknowledgment and willingness to provide whatever possible military assistance India can give to fulfill some of the critical equipment that the Afghan National Army needs to fight the Pakistan-based and Pakistan-sponsored Islamist terror groups. The military equipment that India could procure for the Afghans is unlikely to be state of the art. But it doesn't need to be because a couple of brigades of armour (even if obsolete), a couple of squadrons of fixed-wing aircraft and choppers, and a few dozen artillery pieces (many of them which are no longer being used by India) will be enough to change the balance of power in favour of the Afghan forces and provide them a decisive edge against their enemies.

Although India is making no bones about enhancing its commitment to Afghanistan, it is important that India be clear about what it is getting into, and why. Towards this end, India must first define its interests in Afghanistan and how supporting the Afghan government serves India's interests. Once this is done, India must evaluate how far it is willing to go to secure these interests. This will not just be about how much money and military assistance India can offer to the Afghan government, but will also be function of both India's capacity to provide this assistance, as well as the limitations imposed on India by geography, economy and geopolitics. In other words, India's ability to play an effective role in support of the Afghan government and people will depend on how much it can act on its own and how much it will need to partner, even piggyback on, other countries to achieve its objectives.

Anyone who thinks that Indian interest in Afghanistan is primarily with an eye on Pakistan is mistaking the wood for the trees. Afghanistan as a pressure point against Pakistan is at best a side-effect of having a stable, secure and independent Afghanistan. Historically, an unstable and unfriendly Afghanistan has been destabilised the entire region and it is in India's strategic interest to forestall such an eventuality. It is of course another matter that the single biggest source of instability in Afghanistan is Pakistan, and to the extent Afghanistan's and India's interest converge in preventing Pakistan from spreading its poisonous ideology and influence through its terrorist proxies, only adds to India's reasons to do its bit for the Afghans.

Of course, there are inherent limitations imposed on India by geography,

economics, and techno-military factors that restrict India's ability to pursue a completely independent policy on Afghanistan. This means that India needs to work with partners from the international community to help Afghanistan survive. The problem with working with partners – USA, Iran, Russia, and even China – is that each of these countries have their own interests and compulsions, not all of which will necessarily be in conjunction with India's interests. Complicating things further is the fact that each of these major players have their own issues with each other. This means that India's will have to deftly maneuver through this minefield of diplomacy to not only protect and further its own interests without stepping on anyone else's shoes, a task that is easier said than done, but is also not as difficult as it seems. One of way of doing this is to ensure that pivotal players like the US, Russia, Iran, and perhaps even China, don't forge their policy in a way that the problem in Afghanistan – Pakistan – is seen as the solution to Afghanistan.

There are some clear instrumentalities available to India to achieve the objective of preventing any coalescing around Pakistan by regional and global players in Afghanistan. The first is of course to pull out all stops to develop and operationalise the Chabahar port and the road and rail networks that will not only open up access to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Russia, but also cement Iran's stake in closer relations with India. The Chabahar project will break Pakistan's stranglehold over Afghanistan's trade and transit with rest of the world and to that extent help Afghanistan keep Pakistan's baleful influence and interference at bay.

Access through Chabahar to Russia will also be helpful in taking India's relations with Russia to the next level by deepening trading and commercial ties between the two countries. Alongside, India must ensure that it doesn't neglect its defence and security relationship with Russia. While there are some problems that have emerged over the years in this relationship and which have forced India to diversify its defence procurement, Russia will continue to remain a critical partner in India's defence industry. In any case, India's growing closeness with the US doesn't have to be at the expense of an old friend like Russia, which remains an influential and powerful country. After all, if the US and China can continue to pamper a terrorist state like Pakistan even as they build their relations with India, there is no reason for India to neglect its relationship with Russia simply because it is building its relations with the US. What is more, if the Russian intervention in Syria is anything to go by, there is a good chance that India can work with an increasingly assertive Russia to build up the military sinews of the Afghan government.

With Afghanistan, India can work together to pressure Pakistan. Once again, it needs to be underscored that pressuring Pakistan isn't the objective of India's Afghan policy; rather it is the instrument of achieving the objective of India's Afghan policy viz. securing Afghanistan.

One of the first things India can do is to de-recognise the Durand line and give diplomatic and political backing to the Afghan position on this issue. The second thing India can do is to help Afghanistan develop its considerable water resources. This in any case is critical for Afghanistan to not only produce power but also provide irrigation to Afghan farmlands, both of which will go a long way in making Afghanistan a self-sustaining state which doesn't need to live on handouts from rest of the world. Of course the fringe benefit of building a dam on say the Kabul river is the squeeze it will put on Pakistan which depends on Kabul river waters for its own agriculture economy. The third thing India needs to do for Afghanistan is use its considerable soft power to forge a more positive narrative about the Afghan state before the rest of the international community. For nearly four decades now, the Afghan story is one of war and violence. But over the last decade and a half, many good things have happened and these need to be played up before international audiences. This is required to keep the international community involved in helping the Afghans stand on their own feet and not desert them midway. The fourth thing India needs to do is assist Afghan capacity building through both project and budgetary support programs. While some amount of capacity building will be done by providing military equipment and training, there is a civilian dimension to the capacity building which is just as important as the military dimension. Finally, India and Afghanistan can work together to pay Pakistan back in the same coin in so far as its proxy war against both countries is concerned. But ideally, this must transcend the tit-for-tat sort of response and must concentrate on building and backing centrifugal political movements inside Pakistan as these are more potent and hold more potential.

Clearly, after having soft-peddled on Afghanistan for close to a decade and a half, the time has come for India to play a more assertive role to help Afghanistan stabilise and become secure. This will however involve all elements of India's comprehensive national power to be brought into play and cannot be done in an ad hoc, much less a whimsical manner. More importantly, it will require resoluteness and steadfastness in the face of inevitable setbacks and backlashes that will come. But if the strategic objective is to prevent the region from becoming another Syria or Iraq, then this is something that India will need to do.

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