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## India, Afghanistan and the ‘End Game’?

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### Abstract

*New Delhi, in recent times, has been confronted with some hard choices in Afghanistan. A decade-long policy of providing huge humanitarian and developmental assistance, which has accrued tremendous goodwill among the Afghans, is now perceived to be in imminent danger of being disrupted and overwhelmed by the United States (US) decision of conditional withdrawal. This is in addition to the recently shifting discourse of negotiating with the Taliban, which is interpreted as an upsurge of Pakistani influence in Kabul. The choice for India was never whether it should stay engaged in Afghanistan or not. Even in the face of repeated onslaughts on its personnel and mission, India was committed to staying the course. However, decision making to that extent has become even more difficult given that the West appears to be in a hurry to bring its ominous gamble in Afghanistan to a close. It is thus timely to take stock of India’s role and interests in Afghanistan. It is also useful to explore various policy options in the evolving scenarios of limited downsizing or even complete withdrawal of international troops from the conflict-ridden country.*

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## Introduction

India's role in post-9/11 Afghanistan has been a subject of intense pedantic policy deliberations, at times bordering on speculations. On one hand, India is seen to play a critical role in the reconstruction of the war-ravaged country, and on the other, India's growing influence in Afghanistan as a result of its aid diplomacy is said to have increased Pakistan's real or imagined concerns of encirclement in what it perceives to be its 'strategic backyard'. This 'zero-sum' geopolitical rivalry between India and Pakistan, dubbed by Western analysts as the 'new great game', is seen as a source of further instability.

India's interests in post-9/11 Afghanistan have centred on three broad objectives – security concerns, economic interests and regional aspirations. In understanding India's strategic thinking on Afghanistan, it would be useful to locate India's strategic mind within the broad parameters of three schools of thought/paradigms: (1) Realist, (2) Neo-liberal, and (3) Nehruvian-Marxist.<sup>2</sup> The Realist perspective envisions India's aid and development assistance as a useful tool directed at supporting the nascent democratic regime, the strengthening of which denies the space for return of the Taliban to the seat of power. The Neo-liberals prod India to take a more proactive role as a major regional and economic power with ambitions of extending its influence beyond its immediate neighbourhood for tapping enormous energy and trade potential in the region. India has worked towards this objective by reviving the role of Afghanistan as a land bridge, which connects South Asia with energy-rich Central Asia for economic and energy interests. By linking stability with greater economic integration, India has been actively promoting greater trade and economic integration of Afghanistan with South Asia through the regional mechanism of South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The thinkers in the Nehruvian tradition, while arguing against interference in internal affairs, emphasise the need for regional cooperation and restoring 'peace and neutrality' in Afghanistan, preferably under the aegis of the United Nations (UN).

To achieve these objectives, as indicated by various strands of Indian thinking, India adopted the 'soft power', reviving its historical, traditional, socio-cultural and civilisational linkages with the war-ravaged country. This ideational and enabling role which has been well received by the Afghans, has important lessons for the international community for the long-term stabilisation of Afghanistan. However, as the discourse on the 'end game' gains momentum, whether India's interests and role can be sustained or even expanded to protect its core

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<sup>2</sup> It is, however, important to note that any attempt to compartmentalise Indian strategic thinking into these three schools of thought would be simplistic and futile given the significant overlapping and mixed motives these thinkers represent in reacting to fluid geopolitical environment in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Some of the noted scholars belonging to these three schools are: K. Subrahmanyam, Brijesh Mishra, G. Parthasarathy and Gurmeet Kanwal (Realist); Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Sanjaya Baru (Neoliberal); Mohammed Hamid Ansari, Chinmaya Gharekhan, Bhabani Sen Gupta and Mani Shankar Aiyar (Nehruvian). See Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, 'India's Strategic Approach towards Afghanistan' (8-10 September 2010). Paper presented at the Oslo *IFS-IDSA Conference* on 'India's Grand Strategic Thought'.

national security concerns emanating from the region, has emerged as a subject of immediate academic and policy importance.

## India, Afghanistan and the Cold War

Most of the commentators on India's foreign policy bemoan the absence of a 'grand strategy'<sup>3</sup> as a factor which has impeded India's rise as a major power on the global stage. Contrary to such perceptions, a brief survey of India's relations with Afghanistan would indicate that there has been a constant search for 'the right balance between force and diplomacy, functional and political criteria.'<sup>4</sup> Peace and stability in Afghanistan have remained important foreign policy objectives for India. Being members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), both countries maintained 'neutrality' in the Cold War atmospherics. Afghanistan maintained neutrality by adhering to its traditional policy of *bi-tarafi* in its efforts to balance the great power rivalry.<sup>5</sup> The signing of a 'Friendship Treaty' in 1950 paved the way for development of India's friendly relations with King Zahir Shah's regime which continued till the late 1970s.

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, which brought the Cold War to India's doorsteps, spurred immense diplomatic activity in New Delhi. According to a well-known commentator, 'Never before in the history of Indian diplomacy was there so much groping for ideas and directions. Never before was India's foreign policy an act of sterner choice.'<sup>6</sup> There were serious concerns of great power confrontation and militarisation in the region with increased arms supplies to Pakistan by the US. J.N. Dixit, former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan noted Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's, 'reservations about the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979 was tempered by the valid perception that this intervention had taken place only because Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, backed by the US, were trying to subvert a critical exercise being undertaken by a segment of Afghan society to transform their country from its semi-medieval predicament into a modern society.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> George K. Tanham, 'Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay' (Santa Monica: RAND, 1992), [www.rand.org/pubs/reports/2007/R4207.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/2007/R4207.pdf). Accessed on 20 August 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Srinath Raghavan, 'Virtues of being vague', *Asian Age* (7 January 2010), [www.deccanchronicle.com/dc-comment/virtues-being-vague-973](http://www.deccanchronicle.com/dc-comment/virtues-being-vague-973). Accessed on 20 August 2010.

<sup>5</sup> For much of the 20th century, the rulers of Afghanistan highlighted the approach of neutrality, as expressed by King Nadir Shah in 1931: 'The best and most fruitful policy that one can imagine for Afghanistan is a policy of neutrality. Afghanistan must give its neighbours assurances of its friendly attitudes while safeguarding the right of reciprocity.'

<sup>6</sup> Bhabani Sen Gupta, *The Afghan Syndrome: How to Live with Soviet Power* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> Author's discussion with former Indian Ambassadors to Afghanistan, Ambassador J.N. Dixit, (1980-85) in New Delhi (October 2001) and Ambassador I.P. Khosla in New Delhi (January 2011). Also see, J.N. Dixit, *India's Foreign Policy 1947-2003* (New Delhi: Picus Books, 2003), p.137; and *An Afghan: Diary-Zahir Shah to Taliban* (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 2000).

Historical anecdotes, however, suggest that despite India's muted public opposition to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, India did register its displeasure at various private forums.<sup>8</sup> According to former Foreign Secretary, M.K. Rasgotra, 'There was no international support for the Soviet intervention. In fact, Moscow's intentions and motives were suspect even in friendly countries ... Indira Gandhi telling Brezhnev in Moscow in October 1982 that he should withdraw Russian troops from Afghanistan; the sooner the better.'<sup>9</sup>

During the Soviet intervention, ensuring peace and stability in Afghanistan remained important foreign policy objectives for India. Criticising the external powers, for jeopardising peace and development in the region, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, at a joint session of Congress in June 1985, said, 'Outside interference and intervention have put in jeopardy the stability, security and progress of the region. We stand for a political settlement in Afghanistan that ensures sovereignty, integrity, independence and non-aligned status, and enables the refugees to return their homes in safety and honour.'<sup>10</sup> He asserted, 'India could not remain indifferent to the developments which had brought the confrontation of major powers to its doorstep.'<sup>11</sup>

Despite the deterioration of political situation in the region, relations between India and Afghanistan, especially on trade, banking, industry, sports, education and cultural exchanges continued uninterrupted. The signing of an agreement on 20 February 1984 in Kabul between the two countries envisaged several 'measures for expanding and diversifying bilateral trade and for establishing direct contacts between the banks of the two countries.'<sup>12</sup> A cultural exchange programme planned for 1985-87 between the two countries was signed in New Delhi on 7 August 1985. India agreed to provide ten scholarships to Afghan nationals for doctoral studies and other fellowships for visiting scholars for training in public cooperation and child development. India also agreed to impart training to Afghan nationals in repair and preservation of historical monuments and rare manuscripts. Further, both the countries agreed to undertake joint research and teaching programmes. India promised to strengthen the programme of Afghan studies, hold film weeks and supply textbooks.<sup>13</sup> India further agreed to assist Afghanistan in the expansion of its health institutions and provide equipment worth

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<sup>8</sup> G.S. Bhargava, *South Asian Security after Afghanistan* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> Brezhnev had said Taraki had been asking him for ten thousand Russian troops, that for a time he had repeatedly rejected the request but finally sent ten thousand troops and now there were one hundred thousand of them there. He added, 'I do not know what they are doing there, I want to get out of Afghanistan, you know the area better, show me a way.' Indira Gandhi had responded, 'Mr Secretary General, the way out is the same as the way in.' Maharajakrishna Rasgotra, 'Afghanistan: The way out; Give guarantees for its neutrality', *The Tribune* ( 31 December 2009), [www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20091231/edit.htm#4](http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20091231/edit.htm#4). Accessed on 25 August 2010; Maharajakrishna Rasgotra, 'Afghanistan: The March of Folly', *The Hindu* (11 June 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Shelton U. Kodikara, 'Role of Extra-Regional Powers and South Asian Security', in Sridhar K. Khatri (ed.), *Regional and Security in South Asia* (Kathmandu: Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Satish Kumar (ed.), *Yearbook on India's Foreign Policy 1989* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990), p.31.

<sup>12</sup> Satish Kumar, 'India and the World-Trends and Events', in Satish Kumar (ed), *Yearbook on India's Foreign Policy 1983-84* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1986), p.25.

<sup>13</sup> 'Cultural Exchanges with Afghanistan', *Asian Recorder*, Vol.31, No.44, (29 October - 4 November 1985), p.18580.

₹2 million, which included setting up a 300-bed maternity hospital and expanding the India-aided Institute of Child Health in Kabul. India promised to supply medicine worth ₹200,000 every year and assured to add ten more sheds to an industrial estate in Kabul.<sup>14</sup>

As the political reconciliation began to take place in Afghanistan, Foreign Minister Abdul Wakil visited New Delhi on 7 February 1987 and briefed Indian leaders including Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi on the national reconciliation moves.<sup>15</sup> Three months later, in May 1987, the eighth session of the Indo-Afghan Joint Commission was held in Kabul. Both countries decided to establish direct banking arrangements, closer cooperation between trading organisations and intensify industrial cooperation. In addition, India also agreed to set up a cultural centre in the Indian Embassy in Kabul.<sup>16</sup> The Afghan Government endorsed India's role as an important stakeholder in the conflict resolution. On 3 March 1989, Afghanistan's Ambassador to the UN, Shah Mohammad Dost, said in his address to the press at the UN, 'India is a leading country of the region and has a vital stake in what happens there. It has an important role in ensuring that the problems of the region are resolved.'<sup>17</sup>

Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, India continued to support the Soviet-backed Najibullah Government in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> On 4 May 1989, Afghan President Dr Najibullah visited India and held discussions on the Geneva Accords with India's Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, culminating on the calls for implementation of the Geneva Accords. During the visit, an agreement for the supply of 2,000 tonnes of tea packets from India to Afghanistan was finalised. On 5 September 1989, an agreement to establish a Joint Business Council was signed between the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and the Afghan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) with a view 'to provide for an institutional framework for augmenting India's trade with Afghanistan.'<sup>19</sup>

Regular high level exchange visits between India and Afghanistan continued throughout the 1990s. Agreements signed between the two countries included cooperation between agricultural institutes, telecommunications and cultural exchanges and the prevention of trafficking in narcotics drugs and psychotropic substances.<sup>20</sup> With the objective of rebuilding the social and economic fibre of war-ravaged Afghanistan, India announced a slew of new projects, such as the construction of a 300-bed gynaecological and obstetrics hospital, and

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* Also see, Fahmida Ashraf, 'India-Afghanistan Relations: Post-9/11', *Strategic Studies* 27, No.2 (2007), [http://catalogo.casd.difesa.it/GEIDFile/INDIA%C3%90AFGHANISTAN\\_RELATIONS\\_POST-9-11.HTM?Archive=191494691967&File=INDIA%ADAFGHANISTAN+RELATIONS+POST-9-11\\_HTM](http://catalogo.casd.difesa.it/GEIDFile/INDIA%C3%90AFGHANISTAN_RELATIONS_POST-9-11.HTM?Archive=191494691967&File=INDIA%ADAFGHANISTAN+RELATIONS+POST-9-11_HTM). Accessed on 8 November 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Annual Report 1986-87 (India: Ministry of External Affairs), p.9.

<sup>16</sup> Satish Kumar, 'India and the World: Survey of Events', in Satish Kumar (ed.), *Yearbook on India's Foreign Policy 1987/1988* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1988), p.45.

<sup>17</sup> Satish Kumar (ed.), *Yearbook on India's Foreign Policy 1989* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990), p.31.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Crossette, 'India to Provide Aid to Government in Afghanistan', *The New York Times* (7 March 1989), [www.nytimes.com/1989/03/07/world/india-to-provide-aid-to-government-in-afghanistan.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1989/03/07/world/india-to-provide-aid-to-government-in-afghanistan.html). Accessed on 12 August 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Satish Kumar (ed.), *Yearbook on India's Foreign Policy 1989* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990), pp.31-2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.IV.

additional industrial sheds together with enhanced cooperation in agriculture, cartography, metrology and tourism.<sup>21</sup>

The increased bonhomie between the two countries continued until the march of the Taliban onto the Afghan political scene. India shut down its diplomatic mission in Kabul in September 1996, as the Taliban captured the seat of power in the capital. Like most countries, India did not recognise the Taliban's assumption of power. Only Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates recognised the Taliban regime. After the Taliban consolidated their hold on Afghanistan, India maintained minimal contact, mostly through support to the internationally recognised United Islamic Front (UIF), popularly known as the Northern Alliance.<sup>22</sup>

India's brief interaction with the Taliban during the hijacking of the Indian Airlines Flight IC 814 on 24 December 1999, which had landed in Kandahar after originating from Kathmandu, left behind unsavoury memories. The ensuing eight-day saga of hostage swap negotiations was made contingent on the release of the three Pakistani terrorists held in Indian prisons to the Taliban. The protracted negotiation ended with Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh personally delivering the three terrorists in exchange for the passengers.<sup>23</sup> Incidentally, one of the released terrorists, Maulana Masood Azhar, went on to establish the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM). The JeM is said to be involved in several terrorist activities in Jammu and Kashmir and beyond, including the attack on Indian Parliament in December 2001.<sup>24</sup>

### **India's Renewed Interests in Post-9/11 Afghanistan**

Following the ouster of the Taliban due to the military action initiated by the US-led coalition in response to the 9/11 attacks, India renewed its diplomatic ties with Kabul and reopened its mission and the four consulates in Mazar-e-Sharif, Jalalabad, Kandahar and Herat. India adopted the 'soft power approach'<sup>25</sup> in the reconstruction process of Afghanistan. Steering clear of a military role, India's ideational approach included reviving its humanitarian, historical, social, cultural and civilisational linkages for the long-term stabilisation of the war-

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p.75.

<sup>22</sup> The United Islamic Front (UIF) included forces and leaders from different political backgrounds as well as from all Afghan ethnicities including Tajiks, Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Hazaras or Turkmens. From the Taliban conquest in 1996 until November 2001, the UIF controlled roughly 30 per cent of Afghanistan's population in provinces such as Badakhshan, Kapisa, Takhar and parts of Parwan, Kunar, Nuristan, Laghman, Samangan, Kunduz, Ghōr and Bamyan. For further details on the rationale behind India's support to the Northern Alliance, see C. Christine Fair, 'India in Afghanistan and Beyond: Opportunities and Constraints' (Washington, D.C.: A Century Foundation Report, 2010), <http://tcf.org/publications/2010/9/india-in-afghanistan-and-beyond-opportunities-and-constraints/pdf>. Accessed on 11 January 2011.

<sup>23</sup> John Cherian, 'Failure of Diplomacy', *Frontline* (New Delhi), Vol.17, No.1 (8-21 January 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Praveen Swami, 'Terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir in Theory and Practice', *India Review*, Vol.2, No.3 (July 2003), pp.55-88.

<sup>25</sup> Sashi Tharoor, 'Indian Strategic Power: Soft', *The Huffington Post* (26 May 2009), [www.huffingtonpost.com/shashi-tharoor/indian-strategic-power-so\\_b\\_207785.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shashi-tharoor/indian-strategic-power-so_b_207785.html). Accessed on 24 June 2010.

ravaged country (Nehruvian). India's interests in Afghanistan have centred on supporting the nascent democratic regime thereby denying space for the return of the Taliban (Realist). As a major regional and economic power, with ambitions of extending its influence beyond its immediate neighbourhood, India has worked towards reviving the role of Afghanistan as a land bridge thereby connecting South Asia with Central Asia to tap on energy resources and augment trade (Neo-liberal). India has also been promoting economic integration with Afghanistan through SAARC.<sup>26</sup>

With the establishment of an interim government in Afghanistan under President Hamid Karzai and following India's well-received role in the Bonn Conference of 2001<sup>27</sup>, India announced US\$100 million in reconstruction aid to Afghanistan. Since then, India has followed a policy of high-level engagement with Afghanistan characterised by political, humanitarian, capacity-building, cultural, economic rebuilding and infrastructure development projects. Then, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee told the Indian Parliament that India is making efforts to have a 'maximum possible' role in the establishment of a broad-based, non-aligned and fully representative post-Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

In December 2001, India moved in with humanitarian assistance by reopening the Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital in Kabul and sending in medical missions to assist in humanitarian work, donating three Air Buses to enable the state run airline, Ariana, to resume operations and hundreds of city buses for public transit facilities. Subsequently, India expanded its aid coverage to other crucial areas through both short- and long-term projects. India is the sixth largest bilateral donor country having pledged US\$1.3 billion and invested in diverse areas including infrastructure, communications, education, healthcare, social welfare, training of officials including diplomats and policemen, economic development, and institution-building.<sup>28</sup> It would be important to note that compared to India's US\$1.3 billion in aid, Pakistan has invested US\$300 million towards reconstruction and development of its war-ravaged neighbour.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> These views and perceptions were gathered from interactions and discussions with senior Indian government officials in New Delhi and Kabul in October 2010. Also see, Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, 'India' in Ashley J. Tellis & Aroop Mukharji (eds), 'Is a Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan?' (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/regional\\_approach.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/regional_approach.pdf). Accessed on 23 July 2010; C. Christine Fair, 'India in Afghanistan and Beyond: Opportunities and Constraints' (Washington, D.C.: A Century Foundation Report, 2010), <http://tcf.org/publications/2010/9/india-in-afghanistan-and-beyond-opportunities-and-constraints/pdf>. Accessed on 11 January 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Author's discussions with Ambassador Satinder K. Lambah, Prime Minister of India's Special Envoy on Afghanistan (New Delhi, October 2010). See also, 'India seeks larger role', *Asia Times Online* (28 November 2001), [www.atimes.com/ind-pak/CK28Df03.html](http://www.atimes.com/ind-pak/CK28Df03.html). Accessed on 12 September 2010.

<sup>28</sup> External Affairs Ministry, Government of India. Author's field visit to the provinces in Afghanistan in May-June 2007 and October 2010 brought to light the challenges of aid delivery that India faces in the complex, conflict-ridden circumstances of Afghanistan, particularly of increasing aid effectiveness.

<sup>29</sup> *Donor Financial Review*, Ministry of Finance, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Report 1388 (November 2009), [www.undp.org.af/Publications/KeyDocuments/Donor'sFinancialReview%20ReportNov2009.pdf](http://www.undp.org.af/Publications/KeyDocuments/Donor'sFinancialReview%20ReportNov2009.pdf). Accessed on 25 September 2010.

During the two-day visit to Kabul in August 2005, by the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, leaders of both countries reiterated their commitment towards building a new partnership for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These included expanding bilateral cooperation to wide-ranging areas such as development, defence, education, energy, trade, fighting terrorism and working towards greater economic and cultural integration of South Asia. The visit highlighted the edifice of a new democratic beginning in Afghanistan with the foundation laying ceremony of the Afghan Parliament building, a symbolic gesture that the world's largest democracy envisions a crucial role as a catalyst in rebuilding the youngest democracy. India's ongoing support in training and capacity building of newly elected legislators, parliamentary staff and diplomats has been viewed as positive gestures in rebuilding the political sector.

### **India's Strategic Interests and Challenges**

India's interests in Afghanistan need to be viewed in the security paradigm, in the context of India's concerns of terror emanating from the extremely volatile Pakistan-Afghanistan border spilling into India. A strong, stable and democratic Afghanistan would reduce the dangers of extremist violence and terrorism destabilising the region. The Realist line of thinking is driven by 'fear' of security considerations. This could be real or perceived fear of Pakistani military and intelligence agencies regaining their 'strategic depth' by reinstalling a pliant Taliban regime in Afghanistan much to the detriment of India's security imperatives. Thus, this stream of thinking emphasises on the need for India to use military and diplomatic tools to secure its 'outer periphery' or 'extended neighbourhood'.<sup>30</sup>

Since 9/11, New Delhi's policy has broadly been in congruence with the US objectives of decimating the Taliban-Al Qaeda combine and instituting a democratic regime in Kabul. However, nine years later, the Taliban has been able to regroup and resurge, in addition to further intensification of its linkages with Pakistan based anti-India groups. A worrisome development has been expansion of the Lashkar-e-Taiba's (LeT) activities beyond Kunar and Nooristan provinces to other parts of Afghanistan, which could emerge as a base of anti-Indian and anti-Western operations.<sup>31</sup>

While there is no denying the fact that India's strategic interests lie in the long-term stabilisation of Afghanistan, India has invested substantially in power generation, infrastructure development, capacity building and small development projects. One of the

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<sup>30</sup> This stream of thinking is evident in the writings of K. Subrahmanyam, Brajesh Mishra, Ambassador G. Parthasarthy, Brigadier Gurmeet Kanwal and others. For more details see, Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, 'India's Strategic Approach Towards Afghanistan' (8-10 September 2010). Paper presented at the Oslo *IFS-IDSA Conference* on 'India's Grand Strategic Thought'.

<sup>31</sup> Increasingly, as military operations and drone attacks intensify in Pakistan's tribal areas, there has shift in the base of such groups to other parts of Afghanistan. Based on author's discussions with officials and locals from Nuristan province during a field visit to Afghanistan (October 2010).



most visible and strategic projects that has been completed is the 218 kilometre-long Zaranj-Delaram highway connecting landlocked Afghanistan to the Iranian Port of Chabahar. The road reduces Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan by providing a potential alternate route connecting Iran to Central Asia.

One of the crucial foreign and economic policy focuses for India has been the development of a southern trade corridor linking India with Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Russia. The establishment of a bilateral Trade and Transit Agreement between Tehran and Kabul, leading to the creation of the Chabahar Free Zone Authority (CFZA) in 2002, was an important benchmark for the southern trade corridor and in consonance with the Neo-liberal thinking of 'the flag following the trade'. While it provides economic opportunities for India in those countries, it also provides Afghanistan with an alternative in reducing its dependence on Pakistan for transit facility. This is of particular significance given the difficult trade and transit arrangements and bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, it provides the international community an alternative supply route through the north as the present routes through Pakistan are increasingly targeted by the insurgents.

To meet India's burgeoning energy needs, the Neo-liberals emphasise on the need to connect Afghanistan as a potential route for access to rich energy resources in Central Asia. With this objective, India has been seen to be pursuing better relations with Central Asian states. It has provided a US\$17 million grant for the modernisation of a hydropower plant in Tajikistan, and has signed a memorandum of understanding with Turkmenistan for a natural gas pipeline that will pass through Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>33</sup>

While India's involvement in Afghanistan has accrued huge costs, it has generated tremendous goodwill among the locals.<sup>34</sup> Unlike other international donors, who have relied on their own agencies and subcontracting, thereby creating parallel structures of governance while doing little to extend the writ of the Afghan Government, most of India's aid is currently channelled through the Afghan Government and works in conjunction with local needs. Whereas most of the Western aid resources have thus returned to the donor countries,

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<sup>32</sup> The recognition of the Durand Line has remained problematic between Afghanistan and Pakistan. See Ralph H. Magnus and Eden Naby, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx and Mujahid* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 2002); Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Mohib Ullah Durani and Ashraf Khan, 'Pakistan-Afghan Relations: Historic Mirror', *The Dialogue*, Vol.IV No.1. (Winter 2009), [www.qurtuba.edu.pk/thedialogue/The%20Dialogue/4\\_1/02\\_ashraf.pdf](http://www.qurtuba.edu.pk/thedialogue/The%20Dialogue/4_1/02_ashraf.pdf). Accessed on 18 August 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Jayshree Bajoria, 'India-Afghanistan Relations', *Backgrounder* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 22 July 2009), [www.cfr.org/publication/17474/indiaafghanistan\\_relations.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/17474/indiaafghanistan_relations.html). Accessed on 25 August 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Author's interviews and discussions with the Afghan Government officials and locals in various Afghan provinces (May-June 2007 and October 2010) indicated an appreciation of India's role in rebuilding their country. Also see, Tom A. Peter, 'India outdoes US aid efforts in Afghanistan', *GlobalPost* (9 September 2010), [www.globalpost.com/dispatch/afghanistan/100908/india-outdoes-us-aid-efforts-afghanistan](http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/afghanistan/100908/india-outdoes-us-aid-efforts-afghanistan). Accessed on 12 September 2010. For further details see, Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, 'India's Aid to Afghanistan: Challenges and Prospects', *Strategic Analysis*, Vol.31, No.5 (September 2007); Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, 'Change the Pattern of Aid to Afghanistan', *IDSIA Strategic Comments* (28 June 2007), [www.idsa.in/profile/smdsouza?q=taxonomy/term/57](http://www.idsa.in/profile/smdsouza?q=taxonomy/term/57). Accessed on 10 August 2010.

through the phenomenon of ‘phantom’ aid, India’s wide-ranging assistance programme provided directly to the Afghan Government is designed to maximise Afghan participation both at the government and community levels while maintaining low visibility. Moreover, India has actively provided assistance to women’s groups either through self employment generation schemes, health and capacity building not only in Kabul but also in the western province of Herat. Being long-term stakeholders in the rebuilding the social and economic fabric of the war-ravaged society, this mode of aid delivery through women’s groups and tribal organisations has proved to be effective in sustaining and even expanding such programmes.

In the difficult and insurgency prone areas of the south and east, India is investing in small development projects (SDPs) in tandem with the local needs, thereby ensuring greater local participation and ownership. This method of aid delivery finds roots in the Gandhian way of doing things at a local and community level. India’s assistance has broad cultural acceptance given the way aid is delivered within the socio-cultural milieu having shared history, culture and tradition. The Nehruvian school maintains the need to stay out of internal politics of Afghanistan while helping Afghanistan stand on its own feet. Unlike western countries, India avoids taking a judgemental or normative stance on issues of corruption, nepotism, cronyism or ineffectiveness of the Afghan Government, while continuing to aid the Afghan Government in terms of capacity and institution building. Of late, India has been active in reviving the historical and cultural ties with Afghanistan. As a part of cultural diplomacy, Indian musicians have been training young Afghans in musical instruments like the *tabla* and the *sitar*. Such joint musical performances have been occurring both in Kabul and places like Jalalabad, cementing the cultural ties and historical traditions of the region.<sup>35</sup>

### **Indo-Pak Rivalry: ‘Zero-Sum’ Game**

Geopolitical rivalry continues to shape Pakistan’s response to the increasing bonhomie between India and Afghanistan. While Afghanistan looks towards India for greater cooperation, Pakistan appears determined not to allow such a scenario and is continually in search of ways and means to regain its ‘strategic depth’ in Afghanistan. It typically sees any Indian presence and influence in Afghanistan, even those acquired through legitimate means, as inimical to its interests. It views the activities of India’s developmental assistance and goodwill it has generated among the local Afghans with a suspicion bordering on paranoia.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Author’s interview with Gul Agha Sherzai, Governor of Nangarhar Province, and interactions with locals at the India-Afghan musical concert (Jalalabad: 12 October 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, ‘India’, in Ashley J. Tellis and Aroop Mukharji (eds.), *Is a Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan?* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010). [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/regional\\_approach.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/regional_approach.pdf). Accessed on 23 July 2010.; Sumit Ganguly & Nicholas Howenstein, ‘India Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan’, *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.63, No.1., (New York: Columbia University, Fall/Winter2009), [http://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/files/jia/Ganguly\\_Howenstein.pdf](http://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/files/jia/Ganguly_Howenstein.pdf). Accessed on 21 July 2010. Also see, Fahmida Ashraf, ‘India–Afghanistan Relations: Post-9/11’, *Strategic Studies*, 27, No.2 (2007),

Pakistan's military and intelligence establishment has always approached the various wars in and around Afghanistan as a function of its main institutional and national security interests, 'first and foremost, balancing India.'<sup>37</sup> For Pakistan, a pliant regime in Afghanistan under Pakistani influence, or at least a benign Afghanistan, is a matter of overriding strategic importance.<sup>38</sup> For fears of increased Indian influence in Afghanistan and beyond, Pakistan denies any overland trade and transit facilities for Indian goods to Afghanistan thereby compelling India to rely on the Iranian alternative.

The confidential report by former US top commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal summarised, 'Indian political and economic influence is increasing in Afghanistan, including significant development efforts and financial investment.' While acknowledging, 'Indian activities largely benefit the Afghan people', the report pointed out 'increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan is likely to exacerbate regional tensions and encourage Pakistani countermeasures in Afghanistan or India.'<sup>39</sup> Such thinking finds resonance among western analysts, who posit that 'the road to peace in Afghanistan runs not just through Kabul and Islamabad, but Delhi as well.'<sup>40</sup> This, in turn, works well into the Pakistani threat perception that India's presence in Afghanistan is intended to encircle Pakistan.

The Realist school of thought perceives the Indo-Pakistan competition in Afghanistan to be a 'zero-sum' game. Pakistan's quest for 'strategic depth' in the 1970s and its role in the Taliban's advance to seat of power in Kabul (in the 1990s) have been continued with its present policy towards regaining its lost 'strategic depth' by providing sanctuary to the Afghan Taliban leadership in its territory. Its attempts to use its 'strategic assets' by brokering talks between the Afghan Government and sections of the Taliban which could place a pro-Pakistan dispensation in the seat of power Kabul in a scenario of the withdrawal of the western coalition forces from that country, has confounded such fears.

The recurring and lethal attacks by the Taliban and its affiliates on Indian personnel and the resultant insecurity scenario poses a major challenge for investing in large developmental

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[http://catalogo.casd.difesa.it/GEIDFile/INDIA%C3%90AFGHANISTAN\\_RELATIONS\\_POST-9-11.HTM?Archive=191494691967&File=INDIA%ADAFGHANISTAN+RELATIONS+POST-9-11\\_HTM](http://catalogo.casd.difesa.it/GEIDFile/INDIA%C3%90AFGHANISTAN_RELATIONS_POST-9-11.HTM?Archive=191494691967&File=INDIA%ADAFGHANISTAN+RELATIONS+POST-9-11_HTM). Accessed on 8 November 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, 'Saving Afghanistan', *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2007), [www.cfr.org/publication/12363/saving\\_afghanistan.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/12363/saving_afghanistan.html). Accessed on 25 August 2010.

<sup>38</sup> George Friedman, 'WikiLeaks and the Afghan War', *STRATFOR* (27 July 2010), [www.stratfor.com/weekly/20100726\\_wikileaks\\_and\\_afghan\\_war](http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20100726_wikileaks_and_afghan_war). Accessed on 25 August 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Stanley A. McChrystal, 'COMISAF Initial Assessment' (Kabul: ISAF Headquarters, 30 August 2009), [www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2009/090830-afghan-assessment/090830-afghan-assessment.pdf](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2009/090830-afghan-assessment/090830-afghan-assessment.pdf). Accessed on 25 August 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Pakistan is trying to actively project this perceived Indian threat to the coalition through private and public diplomacy and linking the Afghan issue with India-Pakistan relations and the issue of Jammu and Kashmir. See C. Christine Fair, 'India in Afghanistan and Beyond: Opportunities and Constraints' (Washington, D.C.: A Century Foundation Report, 2010), <http://tcf.org/publications/2010/9/india-in-afghanistan-and-beyond-opportunities-and-constraints/pdf>. Accessed on 11 January 2010. Also see, Jeremy Kahn, 'India is Key Player in Afghan Conflict', *Newsweek* (19 October 2009), [www.newsweek.com/blogs/wealth-of-nations/2009/10/19/india-is-key-player-in-afghan-conflict.html](http://www.newsweek.com/blogs/wealth-of-nations/2009/10/19/india-is-key-player-in-afghan-conflict.html). Accessed on 25 August 2010.

projects in insurgency-affected provinces in south and east Afghanistan. The killing of Kasula Suryanarayana, an Indian telecommunications engineer in the Zabul Province in April 2006, and the previous abduction and subsequent killing of Maniappan Kutty, a driver working with the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) project of building the Zaranj-Delaram Highway in 2005, are a few examples. Although such incidents have only been sporadic, they continue to raise concerns about the safety of Indians working on reconstruction projects in Afghanistan.<sup>41</sup>

The gruesome and high profile symbolic attacks on the Indian Embassy in Afghanistan, in July 2008 and October 2009, continue to highlight the challenges and vulnerabilities of India's involvement in Afghanistan.<sup>42</sup> Intended as a warning to India to downsize its role, these attacks are in a way aimed at raising the costs of such a policy of winning the hearts and minds of the local Afghans. After a brief hiatus, India is now set to resume its much-acclaimed medical mission work in Afghanistan which was scaled down following the February 2010 terror attack in Kabul that left nine Indians dead.<sup>43</sup>

With Afghanistan emerging as a potential theatre of rivalry, India signalled that it was ready to discuss the larger Afghan situation with Islamabad during foreign secretary-level talks. During the 1980s, the two sides discussed Afghanistan regularly. However, with the changing geopolitical situation in the region, especially after the ouster of the Taliban regime in 2001, Pakistan has repeatedly questioned India's growing profile in Afghanistan and has launched a diplomatic campaign aimed at reducing New Delhi's influence in that country. While India pursues its aid policy, it has steered clear from any military involvement in Afghanistan, in spite of interest expressed by Afghanistan. In April 2008, Afghanistan's Defence Minister, Abdul Rahim Wardak visited New Delhi and met with his Indian counterpart, A.K. Antony, to discuss possible military cooperation.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> According to the Ministry of External Affairs estimates, there are approximately 3,500 to 4,000 Indian nationals working in various private and public sector reconstruction projects in Afghanistan.

<sup>42</sup> The growing bonhomie between New Delhi and Kabul, coupled with the increased presence of India's development projects in Afghanistan, remains the target of the Taliban-led insurgency, which includes a huge array of insurgent and anti-government forces operating in tandem beyond south and east Afghanistan, with increased symbolic and high-profile attacks around Kabul. While the Taliban-affiliated Haqqani network, aided by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), was blamed for the July 2008 attack on the Indian Embassy, the Taliban claimed responsibility for the October 2009 attack. See Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, 'Securing India's interests in Afghanistan', *The Hindu* (23 October 2009); Emily Wax, 'India's eager courtship of Afghanistan comes at a steep price', *The Washington Post* (3 April 2010), [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/02/AR2010040204313.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/02/AR2010040204313.html). Accessed on 2 September 2010.

<sup>43</sup> India launched the medical missions in Afghanistan in 2001-02 and was operating five such missions in Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Jalalabad and Mazar-e-Sharif. These missions reportedly have treated over 300,000 patients for free, mostly women and children. Though the Mazar-e-Sharif medical mission is functioning normally, the other four missions spread around the war-torn Afghanistan have been temporarily suspended. The Taliban suicide attacks in two Kabul hotels killed six doctors of the 11-member medical team of these missions. 'India to resume medical mission work in Afghanistan', *The Times of India* (20 July 2010).

<sup>44</sup> Wardak also visited the headquarters of the Indian Army's 15<sup>th</sup> Corps located in Srinagar. STRATFOR reported that Wardak was seeking India's assistance in maintaining the Soviet-era helicopter gunships. 'Afghanistan: Why India's Cooperation is a Problem for Pakistan', *STRATFOR* (11 April 2008), [www.stratfor.com/memberships/114567/analysis/afghanistan\\_why\\_india\\_s\\_cooperation\\_problem\\_pakistan](http://www.stratfor.com/memberships/114567/analysis/afghanistan_why_india_s_cooperation_problem_pakistan). Accessed on 15 January 2010.

## Challenges to India's 'Aid Policy' in Afghanistan

India's 'aid policy' has generated intense domestic debate, given the vulnerabilities its projects and personnel face in Afghanistan. While some advocate the need to put 'boots on ground', others propound continuation of the present aid policy vis-à-vis those who call for downsizing in case of US withdrawal. While the latter option would not be in India's long-term strategic interests, an outright military response of troop deployment, apart from its limited utility, would work straight into propaganda of the Taliban and lead to evaporation of the goodwill among the locals. Having steered clear of the military option and provided huge assistance, India is seen as a friendly and neutral country with no ethnic affinities, unlike neighbouring countries who have actively exploited the ethnic affiliations through shared borders to wage proxy wars and subversion.

As the talks of 'end game' intensify, there have been calls from various quarters for India to play a more active role as a 'first tier global economic power, India needs to accept the responsibilities and risks that come with that stature.'<sup>45</sup> Afghanistan is in some ways the test case of the extent to which India is willing to use its hard power to advance its strategic and commercial interests. Rahul Roy-Choudhury of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London says, 'As India's influence grows it will become increasingly involved in the local politics of a foreign country. It cannot afford to see itself as an innocent bystander anymore.'<sup>46</sup> Similarly, former Indian diplomat Rajiv Sikri, criticising India's soft power approach, notes in his writing, 'Although India's security remains deeply affected by what happens in Afghanistan, India's disadvantage is that it is not involved in Afghanistan's security in any meaningful way.'<sup>47</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum, are those who warn India getting into a 'reputation trap' and being overstretched in a region which is perceived as Pakistan's backyard. Western analysts who have internalised Pakistan's concerns do call for downsizing of India's presence to assuage Pakistan's fear and concerns.<sup>48</sup> In Indian diplomatic circles, India's role is increasingly being seen as of 'negative interests' given that Pakistan will continue its proxy war against India from Afghanistan. There have been calls for redefining India's interests in Afghanistan and formulating strategies of engaging Pakistan and using leverages to elicit responsible behaviour given that India's security concerns stem from Pakistan.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Frank Schell, 'The U.S. Needs a New Af-Pak Strategy', *The Far East Economic Review* (10 November 2009). [www.feer.com/international-relations/20098/november53/The-U.S.-Needs-a-New-Af-Pak-Strategy](http://www.feer.com/international-relations/20098/november53/The-U.S.-Needs-a-New-Af-Pak-Strategy). Accessed on 11 January 2011.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Somini Sengupta, 'Afghan Bombing Sends Stark Message to India', *The New York Times* (9 July 2008).

<sup>47</sup> Rajiv Sikri, *Challenge and Strategy: Rethinking India's Foreign Policy* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009).

<sup>48</sup> Barnett R. Rubin and Ahmed Rashid, 'From Great Game to Grand Bargain: Ending Chaos in Afghanistan and Pakistan', *Foreign Affairs* (November-December 2008).

<sup>49</sup> Author's discussion with senior Indian government officials and diplomats in New Delhi (October 2010).

## **In Search of a Political Solution: Reintegration vs Reconciliation**

As instability and violence in Afghanistan intensifies and talks of exit among various western nations gather momentum, the Afghan Government and international community have initiated parallel efforts of reconciliation and reintegration processes. While there is a lack of clarity on the international community's attempts at finding a political solution to the Afghan War, New Delhi has indicated support for the Afghan-led reintegration process. In an interview with the Wall Street Journal on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2009, Indian External Affairs Minister, S.M. Krishna said India did 'not believe that war can solve any problem and that applies to Afghanistan too.'<sup>50</sup> This line of thinking is indicative of New Delhi's recognition of the Afghan Government's efforts to build an inclusive political order as the Indian government has been involved in various such dialogues, negotiation and reintegration mechanisms dealing with myriad insurgencies and conflicts.

There have also been some recent indications that New Delhi is supportive of President Karzai's recent overtures of reintegration of the tribal fighters. India's Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao, addressing a closed door international seminar on Afghanistan in October 2009, declared that India would support the process of reintegrating individuals into the national mainstream, code for dialogue with the moderate Taliban who agree to renounce violence. The Foreign Secretary stated, 'We support the Afghan Government's determination to integrate those willing to abjure violence and live and work within the parameters of the Afghan constitution.'<sup>51</sup> This change in stance, however, came with a qualification. Pakistan, which is widely believed to support the Taliban and provide shelter in Quetta to its leaders, would need to cease assistance to the Taliban. The concerns of New Delhi stem from the fact that the Pakistan military's continued support to the Afghan Taliban leadership, as a 'strategic asset', would make any meaningful reconciliation an exercise in futility.

Recent media reports, however, indicate that New Delhi is keeping its door open towards a reconciliation effort to various elements of the Taliban-led insurgency<sup>52</sup> and is said to have reached out to a faction of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami (HIG). Given that many HIG members are now part of the Afghan Government, such gestures might not be entirely misplaced. New Delhi in its attempt to revive its traditional relations with Pushtuns in the

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<sup>50</sup> 'Indian Minister Urges Afghan Political Settlement', *Wall Street Journal* (23 September 2009), <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125364105273431343.html>. Accessed on 2 September 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Ajai Shukla, 'India supports reconciliation with Taliban', *Business Standard* (8 October 2009).

<sup>52</sup> For further details on the Taliban insurgency, see Seth Jones, 'Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan', *RAND Counterinsurgency Study*, Vol.4 (Arlington, 2008); Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: How the war against Islamic extremism is being lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia* (London: Penguin, 2008), pp.240-261; C. Christine Fair and Seth G. Jones, 'Securing Afghanistan: Getting on Track', *United States Institute of Peace Working Paper* (23 January 2009), <http://library.usip.org/articles/1012068.1022/1.PDF>. Accessed on 11 January 2011.

south is seen to be engaging the second generation Pushtun leaders like Nangarhar Governor Gul Agha Sherzai, and former Northern Alliance leaders like Marshal Fahim, Karim Khalili and Mohammed Mohaqiq.<sup>53</sup>

As the debate on reconciliation gathers momentum, India will have to respond to various gestures made by the Afghan Government, international community and insurgent factions. In contrast to those favouring talks with the Taliban, following the February 2010 attack on Indians in Kabul, thinkers in the Nehruvian tradition like the Indian Vice President Hamid Ansari, Pakistan-Afghanistan envoy Satinder Lambah and Chinmay Gharekhan have urged India to adopt a neutral position in Afghanistan. M.K. Rasgotra favours steering clear of this loose soil of reintegration. 'Wisdom demands that this task of reintegration be left to President Hamid Karzai,' he advises.<sup>54</sup> The Nehruvian school of thought advocates keeping out of internal Afghanistan politics but carrying on the development works in the war-torn republic.<sup>55</sup>

### **India, Af-Pak Strategy and Conditional Withdrawal/Drawdown of Forces**

The Af-Pak strategy of the US heightened hopes and expectations among the Afghans of a renewed American commitment and resources to bring change in the war-ravaged country. The Obama administration's Af-Pak strategy, with its stated goal of 3D's-disrupt, dismantle and destroy of terrorist infrastructure, was seen as a win-win situation in the Indian strategic community. The Indian government has stressed that India and the US share the same goal in Afghanistan, that is, stability of the country.

While it is difficult to fault such admirable ambition, a more mature foreign policy position would require looking at the details of the 'stability' that continues to elude Afghanistan after a decade of a US-dominated policy. There is universal acknowledgement now that security in Afghanistan is at its worst since 2001 even as the western countries are moving towards a disengagement of troops. As a result, 'beyond a general commitment against terrorism, the US notion of "stability" would look very different from that envisaged by India.'<sup>56</sup>

While there seems to be a broad congruence of Indian and American interests in Afghanistan,<sup>57</sup> the US dependence on Pakistan continues to be a constant source of irritant in the relationship. For instance, Brahma Chellaney warns, 'The US can never win in

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<sup>53</sup> Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid has also talked about reconciling with India. Also see, Shishir Gupta, 'India shifts Afghan policy, ready to talk to Taliban', *Indian Express* (29 March 2010).

<sup>54</sup> Maharajakrishna Rasgotra, 'Afghanistan: The March of Folly', *The Hindu* (11 June 2010).

<sup>55</sup> Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, 'India's Strategic Approach towards Afghanistan' (8-10 September 2010). Paper presented at the Oslo *IFS-IDSA Conference* on 'India's Grand Strategic Thought'.

<sup>56</sup> Aunohita Mojumdar, 'India's role in Afghanistan: Narrow vision returns meagre gains', *The Times of India* (17 April 2010).

<sup>57</sup> Sumit Ganguly & Nicholas Howenstein, 'India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan', *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.63, No.1. (New York: Columbia University, Fall/Winter2009). [http://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/files/jia/Ganguly\\_Howenstein.pdf](http://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/files/jia/Ganguly_Howenstein.pdf). Accessed on 21 July 2010.

Afghanistan without first dismantling the Pakistani military's sanctuaries and sustenance infrastructure for the Taliban. The proposed surge could help the already-entrenched Taliban sharpen its claws while strengthening US logistics dependence on the Pakistani military, which fathered that Islamist militia and LeT.<sup>58</sup> In a rather ominous note, Chellaney warns that 'Unless the US reverses course on Pakistan, it will begin losing the war in Afghanistan.'<sup>59</sup> He underlines the futility of the US effort in Afghanistan 'without a fundamental shift in US policy on Pakistan and recognition in Washington that the path to success in Afghanistan lies through Pakistan.'<sup>60</sup> Bharat Karnad, critiquing India's piggy backing on the US Af-Pak policy states, 'Free-riding offers relatively poor and weak countries or states, unwilling adequately to invest in their own defence, security without sweat, but it is something a would-be great power, such as India, should eschew.'<sup>61</sup>

Pakistan seeks reaffirmation of its crucial role in the war on terror, the Obama administration is grappling with how to balance India's role in Afghanistan. Washington is feeling pressure from Pakistan to limit India's role in Afghanistan.<sup>62</sup> There is recognition of India's positive contribution to the 'build and transfer component' of the present US counter-insurgency strategy of clear, hold, build and transfer. As of late, there have been calls for expanding India's developmental role in Afghanistan.<sup>63</sup> In the first Indo-US Strategic Dialogue in June 2010, Afghanistan topped the agenda. The need to work together in building an inclusive architecture and rebuilding Afghanistan was reiterated by American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Indian External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna.<sup>64</sup>

During the visit of President Obama in November 2010, there was reaffirmation of the positive role played by India in Afghanistan. President Obama appreciated India's enormous contribution to Afghanistan's development and welcomed enhanced Indian assistance that will help Afghanistan achieve self-sufficiency. The two sides committed to intensify consultation, cooperation and coordination to promote a stable, democratic, prosperous and independent Afghanistan. In the joint statement, the two sides resolved to pursue joint development projects with the Afghan Government in capacity building, agriculture and women's empowerment.

<sup>58</sup> Brahma Chellaney, 'An Afghanistan "Surge" is a Losing Battle: So why is Mr Obama betting on it?' *The Wall Street Journal* (9 January 2009).

<sup>59</sup> Brahma Chellaney, 'Stop Pampering Pakistan's Military!', *The Christian Science Monitor* (12 December 2008).

<sup>60</sup> Brahma Chellaney, 'Success in Afghanistan lies through Pakistan', *The Hindu* (31 January 2009).

<sup>61</sup> Bharat Karnad, 'Habit of free-riding', *Seminar*, No.599 (July 2009).

<sup>62</sup> Emily Wax, 'India's eager courtship of Afghanistan comes at a steep price', *The Washington Post* (3 April 2010), [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/02/AR2010040204313.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/02/AR2010040204313.html). Accessed on 2 September 2010.

<sup>63</sup> Author's discussions with senior US government officials and diplomats in Washington D.C. (April 2010). Also see, Remarks by Assistant Secretary Robert O. Blake, Jr., 'The Obama Administration's Priorities in South and Central Asia' (Houston, TX : Rice University, 19 January 2011).

<sup>64</sup> Secretary Clinton welcomed India's vital contribution to reconstruction, capacity building and development efforts in Afghanistan and its offer to enhance efforts in this direction. Both sides pledged to explore opportunities for coordination on civilian assistance projects that advance Afghan self-sufficiency and build civilian capacity. See 'U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement', (Washington D.C.: Office of the Spokesman, 3 June 2010), [www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/06/142645.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/06/142645.htm). Accessed on 21 August 2010.



However, this was with a caveat. While talking about India's positive role in Afghanistan, the dependence on Pakistan on the Afghan issue still exists. For instance, the US President underlined that all the countries of the region, including Pakistan, have to share the responsibility of bringing about stability in that nation. 'Pakistan has to be a partner in this process [of bringing about stability in Afghanistan]... We don't think that we can do this alone', he said, asserting 'a stable Afghanistan is achievable.'<sup>65</sup> The US dependence on Pakistan has remained a roadblock for deepening of India-US cooperation on Afghanistan.

### **The 'End Game' in Afghanistan**

As the talks of exit gather momentum among the western nations, the search for an end game has intensified. In his 1 December 2009 speech at the US Naval Academy at West Point, President Barack Obama, in addition to renewing his commitment for the Afghan war by increasing the troop numbers, set a deadline of July 2011 for the conditional drawdown of forces. This arbitrary timetable, however, evoked regional scepticism and concern among the Afghans. In the event of withdrawal or drawdown of forces, in the face of declining support for the war among the domestic constituencies of western nations and the security situation further deteriorating in Afghanistan, there are serious concerns of conflict spillover into India.

In the Indian policymaking circles, debates on post-US exit strategies are gaining momentum. Concerns abound that the US\$1.3 billion aid assistance, which has been the source of tremendous goodwill, may not be enough to sustain the reconstruction and development activities, in the case of premature international withdrawal. Moreover, New Delhi's bigger worries are that Pakistan's military might play a major role in the reconciliation moves in the post-US negotiated settlement.<sup>66</sup> Without a clear, integrated and Afghan-led reconciliation policy and adherence to the 'red lines,' the dangers of subversion of the presently weak Afghan Government by radical elements runs high and could undermine India's interest of maintaining a democratic regime.

The Realists caution against the return of the Taliban or civil war-like conditions of the early 1990s as clearly not in India's interest. According to former National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra:

'India will be one of the biggest losers if Taliban-isation grips Afghanistan and extremism spreads through Pakistan. Therefore, it is imperative that India ramps up its defence preparedness, which has been hopelessly neglected since

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<sup>65</sup> 'Obama appreciates India's role in Afghanistan', *The Hindu* (7 November 2010), [www.thehindu.com/news/national/article872842.ece](http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article872842.ece). Accessed on 9 November 2010.

<sup>66</sup> Pakistan has been positioning itself as a serious interlocutor in the power sharing arrangement in post US Afghanistan. Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, 'Great Game's Endgame?', *Business Standard* (New Delhi: 31 October 2010), [www.business-standard.com/india/news/shanthie-mariet-d%5Csouza-great-game%5Cs-endgame/413240/](http://www.business-standard.com/india/news/shanthie-mariet-d%5Csouza-great-game%5Cs-endgame/413240/). Accessed on 1 November 2010.

the end of the Cold War. India should also expect more terror attacks from Pakistan-based groups if the Taliban finds a high enough space in Kabul. In the Afghanistan game, India stands to be the big loser and Pakistan the big gainer. India will need to think ahead to reverse that situation.’<sup>67</sup>

Similarly, K. Subrahmanyam indicates, ‘The war in Afghanistan is crucial from the point of view of Indian national security. If the Americans withdraw and *jihadis* emerge with a sense of triumphalism, India will face increasing onslaughts of terrorism. The LeT Chief has already declared his goal is to break up India. A US withdrawal will make them feel that they have defeated two superpowers and therefore they can take on India.’<sup>68</sup> Indian diplomacy wants to avoid such a scenario by seeking a long-term international commitment in Afghanistan and strengthening the hands of the Afghan Government that would stonewall against any future return of the Taliban to the seats of power in Kabul.

The talk of US downsizing its troop presence its operations, however, has found resonance among certain sections of the Indian diplomatic circles who view it prudent to wind up India’s development activities. There has been a scathing criticism of India’s aid diplomacy and ‘soft power’ approach whenever India’s mission or personnel are targeted. In times of such attacks, the talks of sending in the army, or ‘putting boots on ground,’ gain credence particularly in the military circles. Thinkers like Gurmeet Kanwal are not averse to putting boots on ground to retaliate and prevent such systematic targeting. Gurmeet Kanwal has written, ‘I wouldn’t use the expression, “flex its muscles”. I would say the time has come to live up to our responsibility. If it involves military intervention, so be it.’<sup>69</sup>

In addition to sending troops there are increased calls for training troops to retain India’s influence in the security sector. According to C. Raja Mohan:

‘Instead of debating whether we should send troops to Afghanistan, Delhi should look at a range of other ways it can help Kabul and Washington make the Afghan National Army a credible and effective fighting force. The best contribution that India could make might be in the areas of combat training and creating capacities in logistics and communications. India could also perhaps help the Afghans in re-building their Air Force.’<sup>70</sup>

Of late, there are talks of training and rearming the Northern Alliance, who have been India’s allies during the Taliban interregnum in Afghanistan. In a scenario of return to the civil war situation, it is not unlikely that India might use its ‘northern card.’<sup>71</sup> In addition, there has

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<sup>67</sup> ‘Talibanization of Afghanistan will hit India hard: Brajesh’, *The Times of India* (13 March 2010).

<sup>68</sup> K. Subrahmanyam, ‘War in Afghanistan’, *National Maritime Foundation* (6 September 2009), [www.maritimeindia.org/pdfs/ksub6sep.pdf](http://www.maritimeindia.org/pdfs/ksub6sep.pdf). Accessed on 21 August 2010.

<sup>69</sup> Somini Sengupta, ‘Afghan Bombing Sends Stark Message to India’, *The New York Times* (9 July 2008).

<sup>70</sup> C. Raja Mohan, ‘Debating India’s stand on military aid to Afghanistan’, *Indian Express* (7 July 2009).

<sup>71</sup> Jayanth Jacob, ‘India shuffles its Northern card’, *Hindustan Times* (9 August 2010).

been increasing moves to revive the traditional and historical linkages among the Pushtuns as a counter-force and protectors to India's development projects in the south and east.

### **Surge of Pakistani Influence in Kabul: Talking to the Taliban**

Critics in India have been quick to point out that fixing of an arbitrary timeframe to the summer of 2011 drawdown of forces, runs the danger of working to the advantage of the insurgent propaganda.<sup>72</sup> New Delhi is concerned about the ramifications of that possible US troop drawdown, which New Delhi feels is accelerating the Afghan Government's efforts to reconcile with the Taliban and America's hurry to hand over responsibility of running the country to the Hamid Karzai administration. India worries that Washington is moving too fast and leaving the door open for Pakistan military's manoeuvres in reinstalling a pliant regime.

The need to painstakingly stick to President Obama's promise of a 'conditions-based process' for leaving Afghanistan is compelling the US to take extraordinary steps to engage the Taliban. Former US Af-Pak envoy Ambassador, Richard Holbrooke, travelled to New York on 6 July 2010 specifically to negotiate the removal of select Taliban members from the UN anti-terror blacklist. Thinkers like Brajesh Mishra observe, 'The worry is caused by a feeling in the policy establishment that the US wants to get out [of Afghanistan] as soon as possible...Pakistan wants to broker a deal. The worry is that would lead us back to the 1990s.'<sup>73</sup>

The Pakistani military is clearly positioning itself as a serious interlocutor in the present reconciliation efforts. Media reports have indicated that in June 2010 secret talks took place between the Afghan President and Taliban affiliate Sirajuddin Haqqani.<sup>74</sup> The fact that Pakistan has successfully resisted attempts of individual Taliban leaders being based in Pakistan to open talks directly with the Afghan Government, since the arrest of Taliban commander Mullah Baradar in Karachi in February 2010, has not gone unnoticed in Kabul. Karzai, seemingly out of desperation, appears amenable to shake hands with Pakistan.<sup>75</sup>

While Nehruvians can still argue that the warmth between Afghanistan and Pakistan will not be at India's cost, it remains a fact that in recent times Karzai has tried to sideline the

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<sup>72</sup> In the Indian context, the COIN campaigns are carried out over a large timeframe under the liberal democratic constitutional framework where the state is ready to 'bleed' to let the insurgent groups engage the state through various dialogue mechanisms and in some cases even political representation. The successful end of the Mizo insurgency in India's northeast is a case in point. Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, 'Obama's Afghan Strategy: Regional Perspectives', *Atlantic Review* (10 December 2009).

<sup>73</sup> Alistair Scrutton, 'In Afghan End-game, India Gets that Sinking Feeling', *Reuters* (29 March 2010), [www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/SGE62B0F9.htm](http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/SGE62B0F9.htm). Accessed on 30 March 2010.

<sup>74</sup> 'Karzai "holds talks" with Haqqani', *Al Jazeera* (28 June 2010), <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia/2010/06/20106277582708497.html>. Accessed on 6 September 2010.

<sup>75</sup> Both countries have signed a series of pacts seeking political, strategic and trade cooperation. 'Afghanistan and Pakistan agree key trade agreement', *British Broadcasting Corporation* (BBC: 19 July 2010), [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-10679464](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-10679464). Accessed on 12 August 2010.

Northern Alliance, a group that not only remains opposed to any form of peace with the Taliban, has not gone unnoticed in the Realist camp. Karzai's dismissal of Interior Minister Hanif Atmar, belonging to the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), and National Security Chief Amrullah Saleh, belonging to the Northern Alliance, citing security lapses leading to an attack on the June 2010 peace *Jirga*<sup>76</sup> has been interpreted as an attempt to remove internal hurdles to the reconciliation plan.

The release of 90,000 classified US military documents related to the Afghan war by the whistleblower website WikiLeaks,<sup>77</sup> vindicated New Delhi's charge that Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, has been playing a double-game in Afghanistan by providing both supplies and sanctuary to Taliban fighters. The documents, now in public domain, substantiated the charge that the ISI continued to maintain liaisons with and support for the Taliban despite claims by the Pakistani Government that ISI was swept clean of pro-Taliban officers years ago. The document revealed that General Hamid Gul, ISI's Director-General from 1987 to 1989, still operates in Pakistan informally serving the agency.<sup>78</sup>

However, it is highly unlikely that the revelations, known to the US policymakers all the while, would bring about dramatic changes in the dynamics of US-Pakistan counter-terrorism cooperation. While Pakistan remains a key ally for the US in the anti-Taliban operations in Afghanistan, the Pakistani military stands to benefit from the huge financial and military aid it accrues as a beneficiary of such cooperation. While US officials privately admit the deep complicity of the Pakistan army and the ISI on maintaining links with top levels of Afghan Taliban leadership, even as they jointly fight the war against terror, they are unwilling to publicly admit or delink from such self-defeating cooperation.

## **Reverting to the Traditional Alliance**

The possibility of US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan and the accommodation of Taliban without strengthening the Afghan Government are could compel India to work towards a coalition with Iran and Russia. This 'self-interested coalition'<sup>79</sup> in the longer run could also include several Central Asian states that fear a Taliban return to Kabul. While the

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<sup>76</sup> Ernesto Londoño, 'Karzai removes Afghan interior minister and spy chief', *The Washington Post* (7 June 2010). [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/06/AR2010060600714.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/06/AR2010060600714.html). Accessed on 12 August 2010.

<sup>77</sup> Robert Winnett and Andy Bloxham, 'Afghanistan war logs: 90,000 classified documents revealed by Wikileaks', *Telegraph* (26 July 2010), [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/7909742/Afghanistan-war-logs-90000-classified-documents-revealed-by-Wikileaks.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/7909742/Afghanistan-war-logs-90000-classified-documents-revealed-by-Wikileaks.html). Accessed on 28 July 2010.

<sup>78</sup> 'WikiLeaks vindicates India's charge of ISI terror network', *Economic Times* (28 July 2010).

<sup>79</sup> Tim Sullivan, 'India, Pakistan face off in Afghanistan: Neighbours' heated rivalry will have a major impact on U.S. plans to deal with Taliban and get out', *Associated Press* (1 May 2010). [www.statesman.com/opinion/insight/india-pakistan-face-off-in-afghanistan-657210.html](http://www.statesman.com/opinion/insight/india-pakistan-face-off-in-afghanistan-657210.html). Accessed on 15 August 2010.

Taliban remain an anathema for Iran, Russia and India who believe that the extremists would pose significant risks to the region if allowed to come back to power, it was Russia's opposition that stalled US moves to remove Taliban from the UN blacklist. Moscow repeated its charges at the Kabul conference in 2010 that any such move to rehabilitate an unrepentant Taliban must be resisted.

After years of chill between India and Iran, since the days when India voted with the US against Iran's nuclear programme, a new warming between both countries was perceptible. In the first week of August 2010, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Ali Fathollahi visited India on a three-day tour to discuss wide-ranging issues including efforts to stabilise Afghanistan. This was the second ministerial visit from Iran to India in less than a month; it followed the 9 July 2010 Joint Commission meeting at which both countries had discussed expediting the expansion of Chabahar Port in Iran, a move that could deepen India's reach in both Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan. This came at a time when the rights of trade and transit through Pakistan's territory are yet again denied to India at the recently concluded Afghanistan-Pakistan Trade and Transit Agreement (APTTA).

India and Iran have also decided to hold structured and regular consultations with regards to closer cooperation in Afghanistan. Both have been seen as inching closer in their assessments of the unravelling Afghan quagmire and both have been seen to perceive a strategic advantage in coordinating efforts against the Taliban. In the days leading to the ouster of the Taliban regime in 2001, both India and Iran backed the Northern Alliance. However, with Iran blocking the transit of fuel into Afghanistan, the difficult US-Iran relations and India and Iran have a deadlocked relationship, most recently hit by an oil payments problem, the workings of this coalition seem mired in problems. Moreover, with India signing an agreement for the 680 km Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline in Ashgabat in December 2010, the 2,300 km Iran-Pakistan-India gas (IPI) pipeline has been put on a backburner. The US backing for the TAPI project and attempts to wean India away from the IPI pipeline is seen as a move to further isolate Iran.

During the first week of August 2010, Ms Nirupama Rao, the Indian Foreign Secretary visited Russia, and held talks with her Russian counterpart, First Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Denisov, and Deputy Foreign Minister Alexei Borodavkin who reiterated Moscow's continued emphasis on the red lines for the reconciliation of the Taliban, drawn at the London Conference on Afghanistan. The security situation in Afghanistan and the need to develop a coordinated strategy between both countries was discussed during foreign office consultations in Moscow. Russia which allowed the US to transport weapons across its territory to Afghanistan in 2009, has been wary of the Taliban insurgency's destabilising effect on Central Asian republics and the spilling over effect of instability into its Caucasus region. During Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's visit to New Delhi last year, both sides agreed to further step up their cooperation for peace and stability in Afghanistan.

## **Future Scenarios and India's Policy Options**

Following President Obama's speech at West Point in December 2009, announcing troop surge with a tentative date for the drawdown of forces, coupled by talks of withdrawal among NATO countries, concerns abound among Afghans and regional countries of the international commitment in stabilising Afghanistan. Though there has been subsequent toning down of the 'withdrawal' talks since then, there has seemed to be a rush to bring the Afghan gamble to an end. However, consensus among the NATO allies and the US on the timeline of withdrawal has remained elusive as much as defining an 'end state', as witnessed during the NATO Lisbon Summit in November 2010. The lack of unified vision and effort among the international community has only contributed to dissipated efforts. Every actor is interested in imposing their own defined 'end state' on Afghanistan, as seen through their national agendas, with little understanding or interest in enabling the Afghans.

As the international community is 'muddling along', India will have to prepare for three scenarios in order to protect its core national security interests which might call for redefinition of its role in the evolving situation. More importantly, in the limited window of opportunity (2011-14), India will have to maximise its economic, socio-cultural and regional leverages for the long-term stabilisation of Afghanistan.

### **Scenario I: US Withdrawal: Return of the Taliban**

In case of complete US withdrawal by the summer of 2011, the probability of the return of Taliban is not far-fetched, thereby relegating Afghanistan to what American analysts term as the 'worst case scenario'.<sup>80</sup> This would also lead to an emboldening of the Taliban-Al Qaeda combine and its affiliates, such as the LeT with instability spreading to Pakistan and Central Asia, reducing the region to becoming a base for Al Qaeda and its affiliates to carry out anti-Indian and anti-western operations.

Though there has been subsequent scaling down of talks by the Obama administration and the probability of withdrawal by the summer of 2011 seems less likely, what remains worrisome, however, is the hurry to bring the Afghan conflict to an end. As the Afghan quagmire deepens and US domestic support for the war in Afghanistan wanes, it is possible that the western coalition in its haste to find 'quick-fix' solutions will not be averse to continuing support for warlords and militias, and accommodating the Taliban, without efforts of instituting checks and balances to check the probability of subversion. In absence of a national reconciliation strategy and without attempts to build a politically inclusive order that calls for political sector reform, the strategy of passing on authority to a weak and discredited

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<sup>80</sup> Andrew E. Axum, 'Afghanistan 2011: Three Scenarios' (Washington DC: Centre for New American Security, October 2009).

civilian government in Kabul seems in danger of failure. If the international forces were to begin withdrawal without ensuring a stable and credible government in Kabul, it is not unlikely that the Taliban would fill in the ensuing political vacuum.

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This scenario could compel India to downsize its operations in Afghanistan. To negate the possibility of this scenario, India might have to rely on its 'northern' card. This time around, India might have to revive its traditional and historical linkages with the Pushtuns as well. This strategy would be adopted by other regional powers that would arm and support their proxies. The Northern Alliance, compared to yester years, is much weaker today and would welcome any assistance in terms of arms and training. Such networks can be revived and can act as protectors of Indian aid projects but mostly in the north and west to which India's presence might be restricted.

Alternatively, India could support the current Afghan-led reintegration process. It can be more accommodating towards the idea of having those factions of the insurgency (those whom have indicated willingness to engage with India) included in Afghanistan's political process and power-sharing arrangement. This, however, would require a stable Afghan Government with constitutional guarantees and adherence to the 'red lines' set out at the London Conference in 2010.

### Scenario II: US Limited Engagement- Intensification of the 'Proxy War'

The most probable scenario beyond the summer of 2011 is the reduced US presence in Afghanistan with troops limited to protecting key cities, a shift from overstretched counter-insurgency to a foreign internal defence (FID)<sup>81</sup> model and a greater reliance on special force operations. This could mean that the countryside would be open to the Taliban's influence – a mixed optimal case scenario for the Afghans and continuation of the present stalemate.

This would allow Pakistan military and intelligence agencies to continue its hedging strategy, whereby it continues supporting the Afghan Taliban and its proxy groups with the eventual goal of reinstating a pliant regime. In this scenario, the geopolitical competition would ensure the continuation of the present quagmire. In the case of intense regional competition and support for proxies continues, the balkanisation of Afghanistan into spheres of influence would not be a distant possibility.

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

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In this scenario, India would be able to continue its aid policy with an objective of preventing Afghanistan's backwards slide into chaos, anarchy and destruction. Capacity building, community participation and local ownership would remain critical tools in sustaining the effectiveness of Indian aid. However, the current level and pattern of assistance programmes would have to be expanded and diversified to increase Afghan ownership by providing incentives. Low visibility projects with greater Afghan participation, both at the government and community levels would be the most feasible option. In the south and east, SDPs could be carried out by reviving support among traditional Pushtun groups and the second generation of Pushtun leaders, given that there is huge appreciation and demand for Indian projects in these areas.

However, much of the large scale aid and reconstruction activity would have to be limited to the north and west, given the insecurity that would continue to prevail in the south and east of the country. To ensure the safety and security of its interests and personnel, it might have to maintain its own security force, much larger than the current state of its paramilitary deployment. However, it cannot be a full-fledged military engagement. Such a measure will be counter-productive and will affect India's image in Afghanistan in the long term. India could alternately play a lead role in training the Afghan national security forces and in developing counter-insurgency capabilities as well as providing defence equipment.

On a diplomatic front, India needs to work towards the creation of a 'concert of powers' – a regional grouping which includes the US, Russia, the European Union (EU), India, Iran, the Central Asian republics and China.<sup>82</sup> India could play a lead role in carving out a greater role for the UN and the deployment of UN forces in Afghanistan symbolising the UN Security Council's endorsement<sup>83</sup> would not entirely be a misplaced policy option.

### Scenario III: US Long-Term Commitment-Building on Afghan State Capacities

This would be a best case scenario for the Afghans, though such a state of affair seems unlikely given the downturn in the US economy and waning public support for the overstretched Afghan war in the US and its NATO allies. This would call for additional resources including troops to train and partner with the Afghan forces and the continuation of institution-building programmes for the next 10-15 years.

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<sup>82</sup> Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, 'Securing India's interests in Afghanistan', *The Hindu* (22 October 2009).

<sup>83</sup> Maharajakrishna Rasgotra, 'Afghanistan: The way out; Give guarantees for its neutrality', *The Tribune* (31 December 2009), [www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20091231/edit.htm#4](http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20091231/edit.htm#4). Accessed on 1 August 2010.



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India could play a lead role in institution and capacity building of the political, security, economic and justice sectors. However, given that such a scenario would not last indefinitely, in the near and medium term, India would need to pursue a reinvigorated policy in terms of protecting its projects and carving out a larger regional role in the stabilisation of Afghanistan. This has to be based on dynamic rethinking of its political, diplomatic and military options for the long term. Most certainly, India will have to make tough policy choices before the summer of 2011.

## **The Way Forward**

As the international community seems to be in a rush to bring its ominous gamble in Afghanistan to an end, India has a limited window of opportunity to enable Afghans to play a lead role in their nation-building efforts. If the stated goal of transfer of authority, as set out by the Afghan President, were to be actualised by 2014, there are opportunities for India to deepen its levels of engagement at various levels in the near to medium term.<sup>84</sup>

1. Security: India can expand its role in training of the Afghan national security force (army and police) and air force. India could play an enabling role in training of the officer corps. As the process of reintegration gains momentum, India's experience of building a counter-insurgency grid in Jammu and Kashmir, and reintegration of the surrendered militants while providing employment opportunities could have some important lessons for Afghanistan. It could also help evolve civil-military relations.
2. Political Reform: India needs to work with the Afghan Government towards long-term political sector reform. The need for a parliamentary system with political parties system to build inclusive political orders is being increasingly felt both by the people and the politicians of other ethnic affiliations. The past presidential and parliamentary elections in Afghanistan have indicated the need for electoral and political reforms. The political impasse following the delay of the inauguration of the Afghan Parliament does not bode well for the long-term stability of the country. India could help in developing a federal polity based on its own experience of carving out and balancing the centre-state relations that represents and accommodates diverse and pluralistic ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic identities.
3. Reviving Traditional Networks: India's policy of over-identifying with the 'Karzai' government in the past few years has alienated its traditional allies, the Northern Alliance groups. There is a need to revive the historical linkages with old networks not only in the north and west but also among the Pushtun networks in south and east. There are

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<sup>84</sup> These views and perceptions were gathered from author's interactions and discussions with senior government officials, provincial governors, policymakers, key interlocutors, academia, media personnel, non-governmental organisations, security personnel and locals during a field visit to Afghanistan in October 2010.

alienated Pushtun communities in south and east Afghanistan are in need of Indian support in building local capacities in agriculture, rural development and alternate livelihoods.

4. Reconciliation and Reintegration: As some local commanders and insurgent faction leaders are sending feelers for reconciliation, India needs to widen its web of engagement. This is a requisite of counter-insurgency of separating the local commanders from the ideologically-hardened insurgent leadership based in Pakistan. However, the adherence to the 'red lines' stated at the London Conference including respect for the Afghan constitution, human and women rights would be crucial to prevent subversion of progress made thus far. Afghanistan's attempts at reconciliation need to be supported by larger political and constitutional reforms which would necessitate provisions for dialogue, autonomy and special representation of minorities, women and marginalised groups.
5. Governance: India could play a critical role in developing the decentralised structures of governance, based on its own Panchayati Raj system. Promoting grassroots democracy and local self-government institutions can emerge as an alternative to the top down approach adopted by the international community. India has worked at strengthening local institutions through the small development projects. These efforts need to be continued and intensified. One of the success stories of Afghanistan is the National Solidarity Program (NSP) that needs greater funding and support. While India has worked towards shoring up the Afghan Government's capacity in aid delivery, improving aid effectiveness would remain a critical goal. Towards this end, the participation of the local civilians in identifying and prioritising aid projects would remain crucial.
6. Economic: There is an immediate need for development of alternate livelihood programmes as well as reviving Afghanistan's traditional artisan and agricultural base. India's rich experience with Green Revolution could be usefully replicated in relatively stable northern parts of Afghanistan. Saffron cultivation in poppy-growing areas would be useful means of alternate livelihood project as part of an effective counter-narcotics strategy. Natural resource exploitation and industrial development in the relatively stable north and west provide opportunities of employment for the youth. Moreover, it would help Afghanistan graduate from being an externally dependent 'rentier state' to a self-sustaining economy. Indian business houses could be encouraged to invest in the mineral and energy sector in the relatively stable north and west.
7. Employment Generation and Industrial Base: There is also an urgent need for establishing an indigenous economic base to spur economic independence and generate employment, which would actively engage the youth of the country. Afghanistan, due to its very low tax regime, is swamped by foreign goods mainly from Pakistan, China and Iran. This inhibits the growth of local indigenous industrial base. India could contribute to establishing small-scale industries such as a carpet industry along with ornaments and handicrafts industry to help artisans, weavers and craftsmen. Follow-up studies on these projects, assessing their usefulness and linking with the development strategy of the Afghan Government, would be extremely critical. India's role being well received by the Afghans provides it with opportunity to invest actively in agriculture, rural development

and small-scale industries and mining which would provide employment generating opportunities.

8. Social and Cultural Capital: India needs to further capitalise on its traditional, historical, social and cultural capital in Afghanistan. As part of the counter-radicalisation campaign, messages of moderate Islam from the Deoband would be a good counter to neutralise the radical Wahabi messages. There is also a need to further expand the cultural, sports and educational exchanges between the two countries. Cricket is an important and popular sport that needs promotion within Afghanistan. The success of conducting Indo-Afghan musical concert in Jalalabad needs to be replicated in other regions as well. Music, art and poetry could be a binding chord for the peoples of the region. Setting up Pushtun centres in India and cultural centres in Afghanistan would be an important step.
9. Education: While there has been an appreciation of the educational scholarship programme, there is a need to ensure that deserving and meritorious students are selected. Setting up a board with Afghan and Indian observers for the process could be a step in ensuring that quality and transparency is maintained. Emphasis needs to be on vocational and 'hands on' technical training programmes that would help the Afghan youth find employment in their country.
10. Strategic Communications: Most of the international media puts out pessimistic stories from Afghanistan. It influences not only domestic public opinion but also works into the Taliban propaganda. It is crucial to build on the strategic communications to publicise positive stories through the radio, television and local print media, newsletters and leaflets. In places like Jalalabad, there have been requests for broadcast of programmes on history, culture, education and sports from India. There have also been requests for training of journalists and technicians to build the local media in Afghanistan.
11. Public Diplomacy: New Delhi needs to play an active role in public diplomacy campaign to highlight the rationale behind its developmental role. There is a need of active interface and exchange of ideas between the academia, non-governmental organisations, media, the youth, civil society and women groups as part of Track II initiatives.
12. Regional Cooperation: There is a demand for seamless information sharing, joint patrolling, border regimes and confidence building measures amongst the regional powers in addressing the challenge of terror in the region. On the economic front, India needs to work through SAARC to ensure better economic integration of Afghanistan with the region, which would accrue huge economic benefits and help build the 'peace constituencies' in the region.
13. Engaging Pakistan: India will need to explore the option of engaging with Pakistan's military directly in addressing the issue of sanctuary in that country and at the same time prevent its slide to instability. New Delhi will need to work on confidence building mechanisms and opening channels of communication not only with the civilian leadership but also with the Pakistan military, given the leverage the military has in dealing with the insurgency.

These goals, however, will have to be achieved within the limited window of opportunity of two to three years (2011-14). If New Delhi is unable to help the process of 'Afghan-isation' to enable Afghans take a lead role, and the western coalition quits without addressing the long-term stabilisation concerns in the region (Scenario I), the prospect of Indian downsizing its presence Afghanistan will not be entirely farfetched.

In the event of US limited engagement in Afghanistan beyond 2011 (Scenario II), India could continue with its assistance programme in Afghanistan. It would prevent Afghanistan's slide backwards into chaos, anarchy and destruction. The need would be to increase Afghan participation by raising the stakes and providing incentives. Low visibility projects with greater Afghan participation, both at the government and community level, would help in capacity building and ownership of the projects.

The complexity of the rapidly shifting dynamics in Afghanistan poses the greatest challenge for policymaking. The task of India, being outside the military operations, is even more difficult. It has to resist the temptations of military involvement and, at the same time, will have to protect its interest and personnel from systematic targeting. The expansion of Afghanistan's economic footprint is in India's long-term strategic interests. Thus, a lonesome policy of generating goodwill through aid diplomacy needs rethinking and possible expansion within the next two to three years. As developments in Afghanistan will directly impinge on India's security, and the search for the 'end game' quickens, New Delhi will have to position itself as a serious stakeholder in the long-term stabilisation of Afghanistan.

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