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Afghanistan: A Theatre of Absurd

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Abstract

A sad state of affairs prevails in Afghanistan today due to outsiders' meddling in its internal affairs. It is indeed unsettling to note that outsiders – the US, Pakistan, India for instance – continue to abuse weaknesses of Afghans to preserve self-serving geopolitics. It is because of such politics that Afghan people have consistently been deprived of deserving golden opportunity to put their own house in order, as they wish. Surprisingly short-sighted Afghan leaders have acted as collaborators and offered Afghan territory to outsiders in the hope that it would preserve existing power relations. This is what actually made the job (nation-building from within) difficult and common Afghans are paying the “high” price and Afghanistan now looks like ‘a theater of absurd’. The most significant imperative Afghan people need at this juncture is a complete end to outside interference in their internal affairs. However this seems to be too much for us – the peoples living outside Afghanistan.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, United States, External meddling, Absurdity

Introduction

Afghanistan today has become a ‘theater of absurd’. Strictly speaking, it has been a theater of absurd ever-since physically invaded by the Soviet Union in 1979. It is very hurting that Afghanistan is being converted into the one all over again, by regional as well as global players for their self-serving geopolitical goals. The same old players are involved and the difference is that of the leader – earlier it was Soviet Union and now it is United States of America (US), which is leading the chess-game. The same regional players – Pakistan, India and Iran are playing the role of complementary companion, as in the past. The same old-story is being re-played again. However the moot questions are – as to why these players take so much interest in that country? What are the actual intentions of them? What have been the consequences of their

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maneuvers? And more importantly, as to why Afghan people allow themselves to be used by outside players and suffer so much? These are the themes this paper attempts to handle and argues that the most significant imperative Afghan people need at this juncture is a complete end to outside interference in their internal affairs, clear and simple.

Just to reiterate again, the main outside players in Afghanistan are – The US, Pakistan, India and Iran, besides Russia and China.

The United States of America

The US today is the global power but on the verifiable way of decline, economically and politically both. America is no longer the world's biggest economy; collectively the European Union is bigger. America depends hugely on imported oil: in 1940, she produced two-thirds of the world's oil but now she produces less than one-tenth, and currently imports well over half of its requirements. Further it is importing cheap goods from China and the dollar is being propped up by Asian investments in US treasury bonds. This does not however mean she is going to be poorer in next year or decade: the US still remains the undisputable military superpower – she spends more on 'defense', than all the rest of the world's 200-plus nations put together.¹ Yes there has undoubtedly been the rise of other powers such as China, Germany, Japan, India and Brazil however no one including China seems to be willing to challenge hegemony of the US. In fact, Germany, Japan had always been and still continues to be an integral part of the league of its military alliance and India and Brazil are too weak to take on the US. Though capable of challenging, Beijing apparently is more interested in capacity-building and spreading its influence.

Realizing that its potential global rival is China, the US is busy chasing her almost everywhere but in a pacified manner (so far). However, erecting ring of military bases in the Pacific and securing an edge over the game seems to be the long-term policy of the US. In the words of the US President:

*“With most of the world's nuclear powers and some half of humanity, Asia will largely define whether the century ahead will be marked by conflict or co-operation, needless suffering or human progress...As we end today's wars; I have directed my national security team to make our presence and missions in the Asia-Pacific a top priority. The United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay”.*²

A senior US defense official clarifies what actually that mean:

“The Pentagon is looking at how we can make sure our forces are not just oriented in north-east Asia, but are looking down to south-east Asia and then into the Indian Ocean as this part of the security environment becomes more important”³

Actually China needs the resources like crude oil, iron ore, coal, natural gas and of course markets to sustain growth and therefore has been on the lookout for countries who can provide these and other things (like access to critical ports). This is indeed a challenge for the US and her allies. As a response, the US with active support from allies is encircling China from as closely as possible and fragile Afghanistan figure prominently here. A promising and real opportunity of re-colonizing Afghanistan came however in the form of 9/11 attacks on US soil in 2001.

When 9/11 happened, targeting key commercial and military monuments of US dominance, it castigated the ruling Taliban in Afghanistan for sheltering the Al-Qaeda - the mastermind of 9/11. Given the past track record, everyone knew that the US would not sit quiet and takes the attack in its stride passively - the world was expecting some sort of retaliation by the US on suspected people behind. Moreover, there was huge popular anger against the attack and the world offered unconditional support to track the perpetrators down and bring them to book. More noteworthy was the fact that the Islamic world had openly sided with the US against the terrorists. Even states that the US viewed as hostile – Libya, Syria, Sudan, Iran had not only condemned the attacks but also offered every possible help in efforts against international terrorism. It was indeed a historical moment for the US to cease and usher-in a new era of intentional affairs by taking the world bodies on its side and strengthening their effectiveness.

But unfortunately, the US spoke of unilateral military response. The US Congress on September 14, 2001 authorized the President George W. Bush to use force by a legislation titled “Authorization for Use of Military Force against Terrorists”. This legislation authorized the use of United States Armed Forces against those responsible for the attacks on September 11. The US bombardment resumed, targeting Taliban training sites and defenses. The bombardment then shifted onto command, control, and communication centers which weakened the ability of the Taliban and eventually collapsed and the remaining forces fled the city of Kabul on 12 of November under the cover of darkness. The attacks expectedly took thousands of innocent Afghan lives and destroyed livelihoods – the Project on Defence Alternatives estimated that in a 3-month period between October 7, 2001 and January 1, 2002,

at least 1,000-1,300 civilians were directly killed by the U.S.-led aerial bombings, and by mid-January 2002, at least 3,200 more Afghans had died of starvation, exposure, associated illnesses, or injury sustained as a result of the U.S. war and air strikes. Several thousands more had left Afghanistan and became refugees in neighboring Iran and Pakistan.

Factually, the US and its allies successfully removed Taliban from power and one hoped that they might just pull out their boots with a durable commitment to rebuild socio-political and economic infrastructure as it was imperative for preventing re-takeover of the country by Taliban. However, the US chose to stay in Afghanistan in the name of stabilizing it and practically got into the business of putting together a political dispensation with a clear eye on geopolitical gains. The sane voices of leaving Afghan internal affairs to Afghans themselves were ignored and the re-colonization of Afghanistan kicked off.

To be more precise, the US has three main geopolitical goals – (a) converting Afghanistan into a permanent regional military base to keep close watch on neighboring countries, China and Iran in particular; (b) making Afghanistan a friendly transit point to extract huge energy resources in Afghanistan and elsewhere in Central Asia – a erstwhile Soviet backyard; and (c) forging a democratic-cum-nuclear alliance in Asia to protect the US's commercial and economic interests. According to a retired USAF Lt. Col. Karen Kwiatkowski, Washington didn't have any intention of allowing the Afghan people to choose for themselves:

*"If they were allowed to choose, I think we would be long gone... It is about big cover. They cannot kick us out and we are going to stay. We build permanent bases and we want to terrorize Pakistan, Iran, and be there to look over the mountains into China."*⁴

This is what perhaps is driving the US to leave behind a huge contingent of its force in Afghanistan even after an impending formal pull-out in 2014. The US, it seems, is the new member of South Asia and well aware of the fact that Asia pacific is going to be world's power centre and wants to remain relevant - Asia is the economically happening place and hence future political theater of the world and the US wants to become a critical component of it all. On a more general level the US has to be in the drivers' seat to ensure safer future for capitalist project in Asia, pegged on the notions like freedom, democracy, human rights and globalization. Besides, its old-time regional friends – Japan, South Korea and Australia need the US to ensure their sovereign security from ever resurgent China and counter balance growing Chinese influence in the region.

If taken a closure re-look at the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan we would encounter striking similarity of reasons, if not design. Like the US now, the Soviet Union wanted to (a) convert Afghanistan into a permanent military base to keep watch on the region; (b) Make Afghanistan a transit route for its trade and commerce; and (c) expand the horizons of communist empire. More importantly, like the US now, the Soviet Union went into Afghanistan because it wanted to demonstrate that it still has the fire in the belly not only to sustain gigantic empire but to expand its borders. But actually, like the US now, the Soviet Union was on decline and Afghanistan eventually became the graveyard of communist empire. Whether the same fate waits for the US? Well only the time can answer. However, there are noteworthy signs of US decline. Skepticisms and doubts apart, history is repeating itself in Afghanistan: the US and its allies are there on Afghan soil for their own share of pie of the energy resources of Central Asia and this can be quickened by making Afghanistan a critical part of its military alliance project. What is imperative for this project is enrolment and support of the key regional players – Pakistan and India for instance.

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is one of the key regional players who share porous border and historical-cultural linkages with Afghanistan. Before we go into details of Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan let's put the issue in proper perspective: Pakistan is a creation of bitter fighting between Hindu and Muslim elites of British India for economic, political and cultural ascendancy. Eventually, this fight was settled by instituting two separate states – India for Hindus and Pakistan for Muslims but leaving sizable co-religionists behind. Even after achieving separate statehood they continue to fight on the host of excuses ranging from geographical disagreements to demographic exchange. In fact, India and Pakistan have fought not one but three all-out wars and several other low-intensity ones; and proxy war of inflicting damage still continues. In the meanwhile Pakistan faced a huge popular uprising in East Wing (1971) which ended with East Pakistan becoming separate sovereign state – now known as 'Bangladesh'. India actively encouraged and supported the birth of Bangladesh which Pakistan considers as a 'clinching evidence' of New Delhi's intention of seeing Pakistan wiped out from the face of the earth. The former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto once said:

"It's our history: A history of three wars with a larger neighbor. India is five times larger than we are. Their military strength is five times larger. In 1971, our

country was disintegrated. So the security issue for Pakistan is an issue of survival.”⁵

Given such historical hurt and doubts about India's regional hegemonic maneuvers Pakistan considers Afghanistan a 'strategic-depth' area. Actually Pakistan's interest in Afghanistan begins and ends with 'strategic-depth' doctrine. Afghanistan is strategic for Pakistan because in the event of facing extinction due to Indian aggression, she can withdraw into Afghan territory. This would be a tactical retreat; not a surrender. Pakistan would actually survive on Afghan territory as nation-state in exile. She will re-group re-organize, re-energize and re-launch counter attack on India and re-win Pak territory and re-store honor. For Pakistan considers Afghanistan geo-politically very attractive for others too and hence perceives that any outside power not friendly to Pakistani interest if come to dominate Afghanistan would gravely harm Pakistan. And therefore Afghanistan should always be free from outside influence except her own. If there happens to be outside influence (if any) it should take place on her terms. It is because of such perspective that Pakistan orchestrated Mujahedeen assault against Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and almost succeeded in installing a puppet political dispensation in the form of 'Taliban'.

Moreover the 'strategic-depth' doctrine has one more critical component and it revolves around (arch enemy) 'India'. Pakistan, as stated earlier, thinks that India does wish her dismemberment and needs to be tamed - in the sub-continent and elsewhere. Pakistan believes that if India ever were to earn influence over Afghan affairs by whichever way and succeeds in getting Afghan government by her side, it would be suicidal for Pakistan - it would box-in Pakistan geographically from east and west and render extremely vulnerable, militarily. J. Alexander Thier, director for Afghanistan & Pakistan at the Washington-based United States Institute of Peace echoes this reality thus:

“Pakistan has existential concerns about Indian involvement in Afghanistan; they see it as a form of encirclement aimed at the weakening or dismemberment of Pakistan. Pakistan relies on Afghanistan for 'strategic depth' – it would support Pakistan in the event of another war with India, including providing a retreat area for overwhelmed conventional forces”⁶

Therefore, preventing / restricting Indian influence in Afghanistan is an unavoidable security imperative she has to perform.

It is this strategic and geopolitical calculus that drives-n-thrives Pakistan in Afghanistan and in the region. In fact, Pakistan considers

Afghanistan a natural backyard and wishes to suitably influence its internal and external affairs. Further Pakistan believes that India is employing 'soft power' tactics in Afghanistan to preclude a pro-Pakistani Afghan government taking shape. Islamabad sees this pursuit by India as a means to gain strategic advantage and if successful, would facilitate conditions India needs to secure in case of war with Pakistan. Adding to Pakistan's concerns is the fact that India has opened up six consulates throughout and an embassy in Kabul since the beginning of NATO operations in Afghanistan. India is the fifth largest international donor and employs more than 4,000 personnel to work on development/reconstruction projects. Pakistan perceives these projects as double edged sword which also serves strategic goal of installing a pro-Indian dispensation in Kabul.

The Republic of India

India's interests in Afghanistan are essentially two-fold (a) strategic and (b) geopolitical. Both of these interests are driven by political necessity and economic compulsion besides being a serious security concern. Let's consider the security concern first. From security perspective India believes that Afghanistan ought to be socially cohesive, politically stable and economically sufficient in order to enable her to thwart meddling by outsiders – Pakistan and China being the main culprits in mind. In order to comprehend Indian security concerns surrounding Afghanistan, we would have to put the issue in proper context because here context is as important as the issue of security.

Contextually speaking, India has a border dispute with Pakistan – over Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). J&K is the sole majority Muslim state of India bordering Pakistan. According to the principle of partition – Muslim majority areas contiguous would form territory of Pakistan and the J&K being one such area would have become so. However J&K did not become part of Pakistan because of a conscious conspiracy against her. Immediately after becoming separate, a war broke out between the two over the accession of J&K to India in 1948, as a consequence. The noteworthy fact of the dispute is - India administers approximately 43% of the region, including most of Jammu, the Kashmir Valley, Ladakh, and the Siachen Glacier whereas Pakistan controls approximately 37% of Kashmir, and the northern areas of Gilgit and Baltistan. China controls 20% of Kashmir, including Aksai Chin, which it occupied following the Sino-Indian War of 1962, and the Trans-Karakoram Tract, which was ceded by Pakistan in 1963. This division of J&K is not the result of any mutually agreed proposition between New Delhi and Islamabad but the result of externally imposed 'ceasefire' and unfortunately they did not

resolve this issue amicably to this day, chiefly because both of them lay claim to the whole territory of J&K.

For India J&K is an 'integral' part - the Indian Parliament resolution of February 22, 1994 for instance reads,

*"(a) The State of Jammu & Kashmir has been, is and shall be an integral part of India and any attempts to separate it from the rest of the country will be resisted by all necessary means; (b) India has the will and capacity to firmly counter all designs against its unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity; and demands that - (c) Pakistan must vacate the areas of the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir, which they have occupied through aggression; and resolves that - (d) all attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of India will be met resolutely."*⁷

J&K is an 'unfinished' agenda for Pakistan. A press release from the National Assembly of Pakistan reads thus:

*"India made Kashmir an international issue by taking it to the United Nations, which passed 18 resolutions calling for plebiscite in the State of Jammu & Kashmir so that the Kashmiri people could decide their future. However, when the Indian leaders realized that the Kashmiris wouldn't join India, they reneged on their promise to hold the plebiscite. India has tried its level best through their puppet governments in Occupied Kashmir to cajole the Kashmiris, so that they might forget their right to self-determination. The farcical elections were also held. Similarly quite a few interlocutors were sent to trap the Kashmiris in the name of dialogue. But India failed badly to this effect. The Kashmiris are struggling for freedom from India since 1947...Pakistanis will not leave the Kashmiris in the lurch and continue their support. It is not possible that the Kashmiris sacrifice their lives and honors for freedom and we don't support them."*⁸

To put it differently, India prefers the status-quo and Pakistan wish it to be radically altered. However J&K's demographics illustrate the complexity of the issue - the territory has three regions - Jammu, the Kashmir Valley, and Ladakh - each of which is dominated by a different ethnic group. Jammu is inhabited mainly by a Hindu majority, the Kashmir Valley is inhabited by Muslim majority, and a Buddhist

majority resides in Ladakh. While there is an identifiable Kashmiri ethnicity, the three groups are ethnically distinct. Given existing strategic advantage to India in J&K and India's huge geographical, economic and hence military back-up, Pakistan finds it difficult to take on India directly and instead takes her on by 'proxy'. Pakistan has been actively aiding and abetting insurgency in India administered part of J&K. Subversive violent activities against Indian security forces is a routine occurrence today and India has, as a result, have lost thousands of security personnel besides losing sympathy and trust of the people of J&K. This is very worrying for India and figures as a top political priority. In other words, dealing with Pakistan sternly by using both diplomatic and military means is a task India has to perform and has been performing very faithfully. India also strongly feels that Pakistan needed to be paid back for what she has been doing in J&K and elsewhere, by whichever way possible. And Afghanistan figures prominently here.

Indian perspective is: if Afghanistan is a strategic-depth for Pakistan; she must be a close-friend and India has actively been backing those Afghan factions that display overt anti-Pakistan orientation – Tajiks, Usbeks, and others, collectively known as 'Northern Alliance'. A senior political scientist explains thus,

*"India has had a longstanding relationship with the Northern Alliance. Pakistanis view the Northern Alliance and its offspring as Indian proxies... When the Northern Alliance was handed the keys to Kabul, despite promises from Washington that that would not happen, that changed the way Islamabad viewed things.... Pakistan has chosen to respond through the support of militancy and terrorism."*⁹

India has learnt the hard-way, what happens if there is a Pakistan friendly political dispensation in Kabul. For instance, when Indian Airlines Flight – IC-814 had hijacked by Harkat-ul-Mujahideen militants based in Pakistan from Nepal (Dec. 24, 1999) and eventually landed in Afghanistan, the ruling Taliban did not allow any playing-field for New Delhi which eventually ended after India met their demands, including release of few dreaded terrorists languishing in Indian jails. Furthermore India has also found that ever-since Taliban took over Afghanistan, insurgency in J&K got boosted. The Indian security agencies have repeatedly suggested that weapons and men are being flown into J&K from Afghanistan to sustain violence. An Indian Army Chief General says:

"The fact is when insurgency in J&K was at its peak, we knew of a number of militants with foreign nationalities,

besides our neighbors, operating here. When the militants get into a radicalized or fundamentalist mode, I do not think they worry about national boundaries or nationalities at all. They will go and wage so called Jihad anywhere alongside Taliban in Afghanistan or in Jammu and Kashmir...If there are foreign militants operating in Kashmir, there is always this possibility of some Kashmiri militants operating within Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan or anywhere else (J&K). ”¹⁰

Afghanistan is strategic for India because of political reasons also. India perceives that stability in Afghanistan is an unavoidable imperative for stability in the region as well as in state of J&K besides being good for Pakistan also. However, stability in Afghanistan must be achieved and sustained without meddling in internal affairs by outside players – Pakistan and China being the main suspects in mind. If Pakistan were to get disproportionate influence due to any reason over Afghan affairs, India believes that political dispensation would simply toe Pakistani dictate which would obviously be anti-Indian. What happened when Taliban was in power is a case in point. Therefore exposing and challenging Pakistan’s meddling in Afghan affairs is what India wants to achieve the minimal. Further if she succeeds in having even modest military relations with Kabul it would be an added advantage. In other words, stabilizing Afghanistan on her terms with the help of willing outside player is the main Indian objective. The million dollar question however is – how to do it without getting involved in Afghan affairs. And if India itself gets involved in Afghan affairs then that would be nothing short of meddling in internal affairs which she intends to avoid. This is a paradoxical situation and herein lays the ‘absurdity’.

Afghanistan is geopolitical to India chiefly for economical reasons. India is one of the fastest growing economies and as such she needs energy resources, besides needing dependable access to markets in developing countries. India also requires access to routes and networks for facilitating trade and commerce with several developing countries in the region. The Central Asia region figures prominently and India has been trying hard to establish relations with countries there in view of growing importance of that region due to competition from China, Russia, Pakistan and the US. Nonetheless India has had its eye on Central Asia for a long time. Its primary interests are in energy, minimizing Pakistani influence, and establishing itself as a significant player in the interplay of outside powers.

Energy co-operation is at the heart of India’s engagement of Central Asia. Kazakhstan has substantial oil; Turkmenistan has gas;

Uzbekistan has more modest hydrocarbon resources; and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have surplus hydro power. In fact, the international arm of India's public sector energy company, ONGC Videsh (Oil and Natural Gas Corporation), already has a 15 percent ownership stake in Kazakhstan's Alibekmola oil field and has announced a \$1.5 billion investment in the joint Russian-Kazakh Kurmangazy oil field in the Caspian Sea. ONGC Videsh has also expressed an interest in investing heavily in Uzbekistan's oil and natural gas fields.¹¹ Outside the energy area, transportation infrastructure is a major focus and India has made substantial contributions to the trans-Afghan roadway and railroad. India is also interested in the proposed North-South trade corridor, which if it is completed would build road linkages from the Iranian port of Chabahar through Afghanistan into Tajikistan. It has also signed a deal to fund an Iran-Turkmenistan-India roadway. India's trade with Central Asia is to the tune of approximately US \$200 million, a negligible portion of India's overall international trade. India is also trying to foster bilateral economic relations with several Central Asian states. It has extended lines of credit to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and has supplied 30 percent of Kazakhstan's pharmaceutical needs.¹²

For this economics-driven-geopolitical-compulsion she believes good and dependable relations with Afghan government are as an imperative. Because Afghanistan can be a vital transit route for trade and commerce besides being a transit territory for any prospective supply of natural gas from Central Asia. When Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Kabul in August 2005, Afghan President Hamid Karzai repeatedly referred to the economic opportunities that are opening up for India in Central Asia, with Afghanistan acting as the 'land bridge' to the region. He has promised to help India by turning Afghanistan into a transit point to Central Asia. India also officially expressed an interest in the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas line, which would be in addition to the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline.¹³ Further India also perceives Central Asia as one of the prospective regions where she can spread her political influence in collaboration with big geopolitical projects propounded by the US and Russia – the 'New Silk Road Project' and 'Eurasian Union' respectively. Friendly Afghanistan could be a vital link in India's plans in future.

India's interest in Afghanistan is an amalgamation of these three elements – security concern, strategic importance and geopolitical transit point. India therefore is pursuing what is being called 'development diplomacy' in Afghanistan. Given fragility of her relations with Pakistan and nuclear dynamic in the region, India could not directly place her forces on Afghan territory and therefore she is trying to use "money" to regain trust of Afghan government and people. India has extensively

engaged with infrastructure development – roads, electricity, telecommunications etc. In fact, India has recently concluded a strategic pact with Afghanistan (October, 2011) which has a substantial military exchange and training component. In other words, India has definite presence in Afghanistan and deepening by every passing year.

The Islamic Republic of Iran

Iran is another close neighbor of Afghanistan which shares a small but porous border and has had political, cultural and ethnic relations with Kabul dating back hundreds of years. Iran and Afghanistan share a 582-mile (936-km) border along a plain in western Afghanistan. The Iranian-Afghan border crosses through several deserts and marshlands and the Afghan provinces of Herat, Farah, and Nimruz border Iran. As we already pointed out Iran has close linguistic and cultural ties to Afghanistan, particularly with Tajiks, Persian-speaking Afghans in Herat Province, and the Hazara, a Shiite minority residing in central and northern Afghanistan. Iranian influence in this region runs deep - the city of Herat served as the capital of the Persian empire in the early fifteenth century, and remained a center of Iranian power and culture until it was taken by Dost Mohammed Khan in 1863 and made a de facto Afghan border state. In modern times Iran opened its borders to millions of Afghan refugees during the war against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Later in the 1990s it worked with various mujahedeen groups, including the Northern Alliance of Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara militias, to undermine Soviet influence and later Taliban rule. After the Taliban took power in 1996, Iran's supreme leader denounced the group as an affront to Islam. Iran has three political interests in the main – (a) Afghan refugees, (b) containing radicalism (Sunni-Wahabi), and (c) drug trafficking.

Therefore, it is but natural for Iran to be wary of socio-political instability in Afghanistan – whenever there is trouble she receives thousands of refugees. Iran has received nearly 1 million refugees since Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, only next to Pakistan. Iran too has a stake in Afghanistan and has been supporting suitable ethnic factions to ensure political stability there. Wary of a Sunni-fundamentalist Pashtun state on its eastern border, Iran viewed the rise of the Taliban in 1994 and their seizure of Kabul in 1996 as a serious security, ideological, and economic threat. Thus, Tehran supported the formation of an anti-Taliban coalition composed of mostly Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara factions. This United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, also known as the Northern Alliance, was led by deposed ethnic Tajik President Burhanuddin Rabbani and his military commander Ahmad Shah Massoud. Other important leaders included Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum and Tajik warlord Ismail Khan, a member of Rabbani

and Massoud's Jamiat-e-Islami. Iran, along with Russia, provided arms and funding to the Northern Alliance throughout the civil war (ISW). But arguably the most pressing concern for Iran is gaining the upper hand in Afghanistan's booming drug trade. Iran serves as the major transport hub for opiates produced by its neighbor, and the UN Office of Drugs and Crime estimates that Iran has as many as 1.7 million opiate addicts.

More significant is the fact that ever since Islamic revolution in late 1980s, Iran has become political untouchable in Western capitals. Tehran's open and active support for Palestinian cause has further infuriated the West in general and the US and Israel in particular. The pursuance of nuclear energy by Tehran has added new dynamic to her relations with the West. In fact, the US and Israel has declared Iran as 'rouge' state and eyeing for the tiniest opportunity to demonize Tehran and brand her all maneuvers as directed against Israel and the West and hence against 'world peace'. It is in this background we need to assess and analyze Iran's interest in Afghanistan.

From Iran's perspective Afghanistan must be insulated from any outside meddling in her internal affairs particularly by the US. For Iran there is no difference between the US and Israel as far as their regional perspective goes. Iran believes that if there happens to be military presence after its formal withdrawal (read combat role), under any pretext and under any format, is potentially dangerous not only for herself but for the wider region also: the US most certainly use Afghanistan as an active surveillance base and spy the neighbors including China, Pakistan, Iran and several other Central Asia republics that Russia considers natural backyard of its political influence. This could certainly create geo-political tsunami across the Asia-Pacific and destabilize regional and global security. Therefore, Iran would like to see Afghanistan free from Western influence and specifically would like to see every last NATO troop pulled out of the region. However, Iran's influence over Afghan Taliban (the trouble maker) is provably marginal and it is unlikely that Iran would at any point get involved herself beyond a degree. But surely it is very worried because of the presence of NATO troops in Afghanistan and the prospects of a permanent US military base there.

The Russia and China

Russia and China are the other outside players in the region who has been, involved in Afghan internal affairs due to several reasons - some strategic and some geopolitical. Russia once again trying to put together a regional forum called 'Eurasia Union' and reclaim, its erstwhile influence over Central Asia - exploring political, economic, social and foreign policy issues in the geopolitical regions of Central Asia and the

Caucasus are stipulated objectives of the Union. It is widely believed that if implemented, the Union would come as a geopolitical challenge to the new world order, to the dominance of NATO, the IMF, the EU and other supranational bodies, and to the undisguised US primacy. Alexander Rahr, Director of the Berthold Beitz Center Program at the German Council on Foreign Relations says:

“Eurasia is developing and is emerging. Eurasia will be the term which we will use while talking about energy security, this term will be connected with the fight against international terrorism in Afghanistan and in Central Asia.”¹⁴

Afghanistan, closely adjoining to Central Asia could potentially be a transit component for Eurasian Union. However, Russia is also very concerned of the US geopolitical maneuvers in the region because pretty much like she, the US too is working on a geopolitical project called the ‘New Silk Road Project’ (securing energy resources being the critical component). The U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, while rolling out the plan – the New Silk Road Initiative articulated:

“Turkmen gas fields could help meet both Pakistan’s and India’s growing energy needs and provide significant transit revenues for both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Tajik cotton could be turned into Indian linens. Furniture and fruit from Afghanistan could find its way to the markets of Astana or Mumbai and beyond.”¹⁵

In fact the US has already sponsored projects to tie the electricity networks in Central Asia to those in South Asia, and in a bureaucratic but pointed move, reorganized the regional bureaus in the State Department so that Central Asia was grouped with South Asia, rather than with Russia and the rest of the former Soviet Union.¹⁶ Moreover it is consciously pointed out that project in all likelihood entails new infrastructure – highways, railroads, electricity networks and pipelines; besides reducing legal barriers to trade, by getting the countries surrounding Afghanistan to reduce customs duties and ease onerous border crossings. In several statements, U.S. officials have cited a handful of current or potential projects that the New Silk Road would build on – an Afghanistan-Pakistan free trade agreement, a U.S. government sponsored project to transmit electricity from hydropower plants in Central Asia to Afghanistan, and a pipeline that would ship natural gas from Turkmenistan to India via Afghanistan and Pakistan. In total, the U.S. government reportedly has identified 30 to 40

infrastructure projects that it sees as potential elements of the New Silk Road.¹⁷

More significant is the fact that US has made no bones in clarifying that Central Asian region is one of the prominent parts of its new Asia-Pacific policy. The US is as pointed out earlier, mulling over converting Afghanistan into a permanent military base which potentially be used to spy the neighbors including Russia. The fact that the US actually trying to challenge Russia into her erstwhile backyard by extending its military presence and who knows, some of the Central Asian republics may actually become NATO allies one day.

China, an undisputable economic powerhouse of the world, is also watching very carefully the US regional geopolitical maneuvers. Essentially China's has three-fold interests in Central Asian region – (a) energy security, (b) geopolitical influence and (c) combating extremism/terrorism/nationalist or separatist forces. In the words of a Chinese security official:

*"Amid the ongoing globalization it is just as important to have a certain (Central Asia) exclusive zone of influence or in Chinese terminology, living space, which can be used for economic, scientific and technological development as well as in the interest of ensuring the country's security".*¹⁸

China, being the world's second-largest oil consumer is, attaching high priority to accessing oil and gas reserves across the world and Central Asian Republics are no exceptions. China's energy security is chiefly comprised of - (a) to diversify the sources of energy imports and increase the share of oil and gas imports from Russia and Central Asia; (b) increase overseas investments by state oil companies; (c) broaden ways of trade to avoid transactions risk; (d) enhance the investments in oil and gas infrastructure and open more channels to imports; (e) establish government controlled strategic petroleum reserves; (f) adjust energy consumption and production structure and reduce dependence on oil through coal gasification; (g) liquefaction and development of nuclear power; (h) and actively participate in the formation of a regional community and establish a regional energy system.¹⁹ Therefore China is consciously making efforts of investment in several regional infrastructural projects – having potential of economic transformation of the region.

Moreover, China too sees Central Asia geo-politically vital and wishes to stitch a regional alliance for insulating it from outside meddling particularly from the West. Afghanistan, being a geographical transit point to Central Asian region obviously figures in calculations.

‘The Shanghai Cooperation Organization’ (SCO) is a case in point – Kazakhstan, China, Kirgizstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan are member states of the SCO and India, Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan enjoy ‘observer’ status besides Sri Lanka and Belarus are dialogue partners. Consolidating of positions on responding to common challenges is a driving force for cooperation among the six member states besides strengthening SCO’s role as a positive factor in international and regional politics and a mechanism of creating an auspicious external environment for ensuring security, stability and economic growth are its goals.²⁰

The priorities of SCO in economic realm include – (a) speeding implementation of major projects to ensure expansion of transport and communication capabilities in the region and access to world markets, (b) development of social infrastructure, (c) formation of modern international centers for logistics, trade and tourism, (d) construction of new factories, (e) introduction of innovative and energy-saving technologies including renewable sources of energy. Further, arrangement of international transport corridors, modernization of railways and motorways are also auxiliary items.²¹ Afghanistan-Pakistan in particular is being made a critical link in this Chinese geopolitical maneuver in Central Asia. Though Chinese may not be as visible as others in Afghanistan but Beijing surely watching the NATO’s military strategy and if Afghanistan becomes the US regional military base, Beijing most likely see it as yet another attempt of the US to encircle her. It goes without saying that Beijing would not sit quiet and take it. A politically stable and peaceful Afghanistan is what Beijing may look forward – devoid of the US military presence on its territory.

In a nut shell, Afghanistan once again is at the centre of it all and on the brink of becoming a ‘theater of absurd’; it is as if the history is repeating itself in Afghanistan – the same old-story!

Why Afghan People Continue to Suffer?

Now we would turn to addressing a basic and natural question as to why Afghan people allow themselves to be used by outside players and suffer so much. Afghanistan is profoundly conservative, faction-driven and deeply religious tribal society. As such there is no singular ethnic and cultural unity converging over one-unifying-point. Afghan society is disproportionately diverse but strikingly secular in terms of socio-political preferences. The only apparent thread pulling them together is Islamic dominance. However, Islam in Afghanistan over the centuries has acquired a peculiar orientation of its own and it cannot be taken as the same, as, for instance in West Asia. Islam in Afghanistan has successfully gelled in, between and among several tribal cultures and has

acquired localized spin-offs that differ region by region in the same territory. The visible attire difference between Afghan Muslims and Muslims in West Asia is a strong pointer. The difference does not end just with attire. Islam and Muslims in Afghanistan have unique socio-cultural practices and festivals also not known in other Islamic nations. The way marriage ceremonies happen in Afghan society is a strong pointer in this regard.

More significant than any other, Afghan people are warriors by blood – history is a testimony to this fact. Differing perspectives over host of cultural issues leading to occasional flare-ups between two or more tribal clans in Afghanistan is routine. However, this does not mean such flare-ups end in bloodshed always. In fact, there is a strong presence of social mechanism by which they try to resolve the issue. Afghan people are as peace-loving as any other peoples and they are in no way war-lovers or war-mongers as often projected by the media. Most disappointing however is the fact that Afghan society rarely achieved socio-economic modernization and did not keep up the pace with rest of the world, chiefly because of short-sighted leadership.

As Afghanistan was coming to terms with largely self-imposed constraints over full realization of potentials, the Soviet invasion happened (1979) which actually exuberated inter – and-intra tribal rivalries. Now we all know well that Soviet invasion was a military intervention to favor some particular tribal faction – the Northern Alliance, while systematically targeting and decimating opponents. Afghan occupation by Soviet troops which lasted almost a decade, more than anything else, destroyed tribal mechanism of redressing socio-cultural issues, which has not been fully stored till date. What Soviet invasion did to Afghanistan in terms of politics and economy is a familiar story by now. When the Soviet forces were pulled out (in defeat) in 1978 all hoped that Afghanistan would take a good turn towards peaceful prospects. However a new monster called ‘holy warriors’ better known as ‘Taliban’ emerged on political horizon and Afghanistan was turned back to ages – medieval times. The gruesome attacks on 9/11 and a consequent retaliation by the US, fortunately ended Taliban rule in Kabul however Afghanistan was again deprived of that golden opportunity of running its own affairs by same old actors – regional as well global.

Concluding Comments

In a nut-shell, Afghan people have consistently been denied that golden opportunity of putting their house in order. Some time by their own short-sighted leaders and other times by outsiders – both very near and far. This is what actually made their job (nation-building from within)

difficult and they are again and again being asked to pay very 'high' and 'huge' price (for the sake of others). The most significant imperative Afghan people need at this juncture is a complete end to outside interference in their internal affairs. However this seems to be too much for us - the peoples living outside Afghanistan.

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