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INDIA'S SECURITY OBJECTIVES IN AFGHANISTAN SPELL TROUBLE FOR PAKISTAN

Introduction

In August 2018, after helping in the construction of Salma Dam in the western Herat province of Afghanistan - known poignantly as the Afghan-India Friendship Dam – it was announced that India had now taken up the task of building another Dam worth an estimated \$300 million for the Kabul government. The Shahtoot Dam situated in the Kabul river basin upon completion will hold 146 million cubic meters of potable water for two million people in Kabul and irrigation water for over 400,000 acres of land.

The Shahtoot dam is proposed to be built on a tributary of Kabul river in Chahar Asiab district near the capital of Afghanistan.

The Pakistan Economy Watch recently said that Islamabad must lessen its dependence on arch-rivals India and Afghanistan for water by constructing dams and water reservoirs. With projects such as the Shahtoot Dam it is expected that the flow of Kabul River into Pakistan would be reduced, triggering a potential water crisis in the country.

An observatory glance at the geography of the area reveals that the Kabul river originates from the Hindu Kush mountains and flows through Kabul, Surobi and Jalalabad in Afghanistan before flowing into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan and joining the Indus River near Attock, northwest of the county's capital Islamabad.

The Kabul River Basin extends over nine Afghan provinces and two Pakistani provinces. Nearly 25 million people live in this basin and the Kabul River and its tributaries play a significant role in their lives and livelihoods. It is the sole source of drinking water for almost 7 million Afghans and Pakistanis.

Unfortunately, like the rest of war torn Afghanistan its water infrastructure is also in decrepit conditions, which make the Kabul River all the more valuable as a source of fresh water for the country. According to Afghanistan's Urban Water Supply and Sewerage Corporation, 68 percent of Kabul's population doesn't have access to piped water supply and just 10 percent of its residents have access to potable water.

In view of the severe water crisis that has gripped Afghanistan over the last several decades, the value of India's helping hand will be a unique gesture for the Afghans.

More significantly, what then becomes of Pakistan and its potentially water-stressed economy?

The Indus River is the most important source of water for the Punjab and Sindh, which form the backbone of agriculture and food production in Pakistan. At the same time the importance of the Kabul river to the country's KPK and North Waziristan region cannot be underestimated. With Kabul River supplying the Indus with approximately 20-28 million acre feet of water, it allows the country to power the 250-megawatt Warsak Dam, which generates 1,100 gigawatt hours of electricity per year. (Please check these figures)

For Pakistan, the fear of losing this critical supply of water and power is wholly legitimate. According to media reports, Afghanistan plans to build 12 hydropower projects with a capacity to generate 1,177 MW of electricity – the same amount provided by the River to Pakistan - at various points on the Kabul River.

When and if completed, the storage of water for Afghanistan's use will result in "squeezing the flow in the river reaching Pakistan" hard-hitting KPK's water-based economy, by reducing crop productivity in the three currently fertile districts of Peshawar, Nowshera, and Charsadda.

New Delhi's decision to aid the construction of dams in Afghanistan comes at a time when there are concerns in the Indian establishment over the violence unleashed by the Taliban in the war-ravaged country. Press reports have suggested that more than half of the area of the Khak-e-Jabbar district, which is just 45 KM from Kabul and the proposed site of the dam, is under militants' control.

How then does India seek to counterbalance the risk of doling out millions of dollars' worth of investment for development in a war-torn country still undergoing a vicious civil war?

The message emanating from India's foreign policy objectives with regards to Afghanistan clarifies that to New Delhi, the benefit of strengthening ties with Kabul, far outweighs the risk of allowing space for Pakistan to do the same.

Afghanistan features high on India's national security radar, and has direct and indirect repercussions for Indian interests.

It is telling that the country shares no direct border with Afghanistan although as per its official stance, New Delhi claims that it has a boundary with Afghanistan due to its disputed claim on Jammu & Kashmir in the area that is part of Gilgit-Baltistan region controlled by Pakistan.

Ties with the Kabul regime allow India not only to keep the weak incumbent government under check and push back Taliban militia hostile to Indian territory, with Modi regime's objective of being able to circumvent any major Pakistani influence in the Afghan peace process.

With no direct access to Afghanistan's territory and the premise that Indian military presence in the country is neither advisable nor possible given Pakistan-backed US assurance of not allowing New Delhi to jeopardize or threaten Pakistan's geo-strategic location in the region in any way, India's domestic policy in Afghanistan has been to woo the government by doling out huge sums of money under the guise of developmental and humanitarian aid.

India's current policy line has taken note that neither the US nor any other international actors have been able to find any viable solution to the 17-year long war and thus New Delhi maintains an essentially hands-off approach to a conflict that involves no risks and therefore no gains. The approach nevertheless ensures that apart from leveraging its role by being indispensable to the Afghan economy, its limited military assistance also allows it to maintain a presence in Kabul through transfers of military helicopters and training imparted to Afghan Security Forces (ASF)

Last year, news of a mid-September visit to India by a joint U.S.-Afghan military delegation to see whether the model of the Indian Territorial Army could work in Afghanistan was immediately shot down given Pakistan's reservations on any Indian involvement.

Pakistan has resolutely shut down the idea of such an event happening. If earlier pro-government militias created by the US did not keep the Taliban and Islamic State at bay, how would yet another militia achieve it?

The chances of India resorting to hybrid war indirectly against Pakistan's role in Afghanistan, instead of a conventional war, to counter Pakistani influence in the region is not an unlikely prospect and may already be underway.

Pakistani Intelligence officials along with the Foreign Office and Interior Ministry have long stated on record that Afghan soil along the Af-Pak border is being utilized by India to destabilize Pakistan not only by disrupting the country's domestic stability during its fight against national terrorism, but also by forcing Islamabad to bear heavy military expenditures for the 200,000 security personnel deployed at the Western border to repel Indian-backed attacks.

An analysis of India's anxieties with regards to any progress in Af-Pak relations is reflective of the fact that India dreads the current policy shared by both by US and Pakistan, which is to recognize that the Taliban are inextricably wedded into the political structure of Afghanistan and have a role in the political, security, and foreign policy decision-making of the country.

The United States engaged the Taliban directly for the first time in July 2018 in a dilution of its commitment to the "Afghan led and Afghan owned" process. This October, U.S. Special Advisor for Reconciliation in Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad reportedly met the Taliban directly without allowing President Ghani to be a part of the talks.

India's outreach or any support to the Taliban is not an option and even if it were to ever toe that line it would not only be very limited but would also be inevitably circumscribed by the fact that Pakistan has more leverage with the Taliban than India ever will.

Despite what logic would dictate, Kabul's relations with New Delhi, in spite of these natural problems, have never been better.

In part due to the failure of Pakistan to fulfill its promises, first made in bilateral meetings and then at Quadrilateral Cooperation Group meetings, a natural alliance based on security and strategic reasons appears to have emerged between India and Afghanistan. The rise in insecurity, the highest-ever number of civilian casualties, and the fall of many Afghan districts into Taliban hands plus the timing of the attacks on Pathankot air base and Uri army base in India became magnetic reasons for closer Indo-Afghan relations where both sides see Islamabad as the aggressor.

More recently, the signing of the Chabahar transit and trade agreement, along with Iran, as a way of marginalizing and bypassing Pakistan ensured that mutual bilateral interests paved the way for both New Delhi and Kabul (along with Bangladesh and Bhutan) to miss the 19th SAARC Summit, set to be held in Pakistan in 2017.

In this period, India not only delivered four Mi-25 attack helicopters to Afghanistan, but Kabul, once again, turned to Delhi for heavy artillery in a wish list handed over by the Afghan Chief of Army Staff to the Indian side recently. The bilateral exchanges between Kabul and Delhi also increased; since December 2015, Ashraf Ghani and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi have met more than five times.

In addition, during this phase, President Ghani has also harshly criticized Pakistan toeing New Delhi's line of blame-game rhetoric for security lapses in Afghanistan. He was reported to have said publicly that "the biggest challenge for Afghanistan is not the Taliban or al-Qaeda but the state-to-state relations with Pakistan."

India in the short span of the past decade has emerged as one of the largest donors for the Central government in Kabul, investing in health, education, Infrastructure and defense sectors. This investment helped a lot in a powerful projection of India as a close ally of Afghanistan-- but the whole policy was centered on the Central government of Kabul.

Indian investment it appears has thus paid off: In September 2018, India, Iran and Afghanistan held their first tripartite meeting in Kabul during which implementation of the Chabahar port project and a host of other issues including ways to deepen counter-terror cooperation were discussed.

The port is easily accessible from India's western coast and is increasingly seen as a counter to Pakistan's Gwadar Port, which is being developed with Chinese investment and is located at distance of around 80 km from Chabahar.

Moreover, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani had decided on opening a direct air corridor in 2016. The purpose of the air connectivity established through air freight corridor is to provide landlocked Afghanistan greater access to markets in India and also allow businessmen from Afghanistan to leverage India's economic growth and trade networks for its benefit. Earlier this year, India-Afghanistan International Trade and Investment Show held in August saw more than 600 representatives from Afghanistan, India and international businesses to feature Afghan goods, in reminiscence of the success of the first phase of the event held in 2017 that led to contracts between Indian buyers and Afghan vendors worth \$27 million.

In March 2018, reports emerged that India had already succeeded in penetrating into Kabul slashing the market share of Pakistan by more than 50 per cent in the last two years, according to the Chairman Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Previously under the Afghanistan–Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement, Afghan trucks were allowed to transport goods via a land route to the Wagah border. However, the trucks were not allowed to transport Indian goods to Kabul. Afghan traders had historically suffered heavy demurrage, detention and overstay charges owing to the frequent closure of the Pak-Afghan border.

It must be noted that Afghanistan was Pakistan's second-biggest export destination after the United States until 2011. Historically, Kabul has been the natural market for Pakistani exports but that is changing as cheaper products from China and India flood the country.

Pakistan's trade with Afghanistan has fallen to \$1.2 billion from \$2.7bn within in the last two years and the country has been losing even the traditional markets of flour, men and women's clothing and red meat. This development has assumed significance in the backdrop of Pakistan's denial to use its land for trade between India and Afghanistan.

India meanwhile has been providing goods at subsidized rates to capture the market and is providing air tickets with a 75 per cent rebate so that Afghans find it easy to travel to India with cheap tickets and free multiple visas without police checks.

Assessing Pakistan's Policy

On a multilateral level, Pakistan's policies in Afghanistan have not produced desired results. US allegations against Pakistan for its lack of active participation in the Afghan peace process make sense when Pakistan's domestic policy of alienating Kabul, treating Afghan refugees as pariahs and relying on the Taliban to provide leverage are taken into account.

Pakistan's Afghanistan policy has also been unnecessarily India-centric. This alienates Afghan political opinion and ensures that Pakistan will lose zero-sum games with India inside Afghanistan.

Despite the warming of relations between New Delhi and Kabul, it must be realized that the two countries are not natural allies unlike Pakistan and Afghanistan that share water, border and cultural connections.

Afghan goodwill for India is based on opportunism and may not translate into ill-will if Pakistan assumes its natural role as the mediator and facilitator for a solution to the Afghan war.

Another facet of Pakistan's regional strategy is its inability to generate Afghan trust in its policies and in allowing America and even Saudi Arabia to complicate its relations with neighboring Iran. This has facilitated the growth of Indian political influence in both countries, as is evident with the rapid progress of the development of the Chabahar port. Former President Hamid Karzai spoke of Af-Pak as "conjoined twins", however opportunities available to the civil-military leadership in Pakistan to warm up to its neighbor and not leave a caveat open to Indian exploitation, were not fully exploited. Demonizing current Afghan regimes as 'Indian puppets' despite the matter of truth in the subject, only breeds more hostilities.

What is required in Afghanistan is not a continued American military presence, but Pakistan's unqualified support for Kabul's search for a broad-based political settlement. An unstable Afghanistan will inevitably negate all the gains claimed for the various counterterrorism operations inside Pakistan.

On many occasions, Pakistan much like the US has totally neglected engagement with other stakeholders in Afghanistan. Since 2014, the US and NATO have been trying to empower the central coalition government, but due to incapability and bad governance it failed to fulfill the expectations of the Afghan nation.

Conclusion

In some of Pakistan's policy circles, there is also reluctance to acknowledge another emerging key player in the Afghan conundrum: China.

Reports of China's million dollar investments have collided with news of Beijing's plan to build its first military base in Afghanistan for hundreds of troops carrying out counter-terrorism training missions across the border from its western Xinjiang region.

However, China's growing involvement in Afghanistan may create tensions in the Sino-Pak relationship and is reflective of certain divergent strategic objectives with Pakistan.

While China's main goal in Afghanistan is to keep any separatist militants from Xinjiang's Uighurs or Chinese nationals from joining the Islamic State supporters entrenched in Afghanistan, it must be remembered that in order to keep its economic plans worth \$12 billion for the Silk Road away from jeopardy, China will use all the resources at its disposal to achieve its ends in Afghanistan. And this includes India. In April 2018, Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi agreed to cooperate in Afghanistan, by launching joint economic projects to spur growth and stability. At some point, China may ask Pakistan to curb what some allege is its tolerance of militants in Afghanistan.

Independent of what the Chinese, Americans or Indians want, the question must be asked: Does Pakistan derive any substantial advantage from allowing the Afghan Taliban leadership – if any - on its soil? Is it worth jeopardizing Pakistan's innumerable sacrifices - in both blood and resources over the past decade - in its fight against terrorism? The Taliban need to be nudged back into Afghanistan to be part of the peace process and the eventual political structure that emerges.

Pragmatic thinking would suggest that if things were to continue the way they are going – with a ruthlessly ambitious India and an economically powerful China and US wooing Afghanistan's weak leadership – Pakistan may not just end up losing its pivotal place as a state critical to the Afghan peace process but may also lose its strategic leverage with Taliban, as an impoverished Afghanistan without US boots on ground would inevitably end up with a strong Taliban control seeping into the provinces bordering Pakistan.

History shows that the Taliban's natural allies may be the TTP – decimated but not destroyed – alongside whom they had fought against the Soviets and

then the Rabbani-Hikmatyar governments. All that will result is turbulence in both Afghanistan and critically damage Pakistan's internal stability - a move that is set to give an advantage to India without much cost, effort or strategy of its own. Pakistan must put its own interest above everything else.