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GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF AFGHNAISTAN: A STUDY INTO REGIONAL DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

This research paper attempts to briefly describe the importance of Afghanistan's geographical location and natural resource. This paper also attempts to highlight the interest of regional neighbours in Afghanistan and see how Afghanistan deals with regional neighbours by offering the best prospect for the future of Afghanistan's security and economic progress. This paper will also focus bilateral relations of Afghanistan with its regional neighbours as well the implications of its domestic instability on regional dynamics. Specificity of this paper is to look into that how each regional neighbour influence its engagement to manipulate location of Afghanistan in its own interest.

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan, a landlocked country of approximately 250,000 square miles (650,000 square kilometers), is located at the tri-juncture of the Iranian Plateau, the Central Asian Steppes and the Indian Subcontinent (Akrishnan, 1982, p. 02). Its boundaries are stretched to the borders of Iran in the West (936 km), Pakistan in the South and East (2,430 km), Turkmenistan (744 km), Uzbekistan (137 km), and Tajikistan (1,206 km) in the North and China is its Easternmost region (76 km) (McLachlan, 2007, pp. 82-96). Afghanistan is abundant in natural resources, for instance, petroleum and natural gas and so forth. However, there are still mineral resources lying untapped worth of three trillion dollars that contain various kinds of minerals. For instance, provinces like *Jawzjan* and *Balkh* possess around 3.8 billion US barrels oil. Afghanistan still has undiscovered crude oil and natural gas deposits including 1,596 million barrels oil and 444 billion cubic meters gas respectively in the northern

region. These undiscovered deposits of natural resources are located in the basins of the Amu Darya and Afghan-Tajik areas (Hauner, 1990, p. 140).

Though, landlocked and resource poor, however, Afghanistan's location always attracts attention of the regional neighbours and it thus exposes to their adverse influence. Infact, these neighbours have their respective greed and infightings for capturing land of Afghanistan throughout the history. Their rivalry has at times enabled Afghanistan to enjoy their mercy and kindness on one hand, however, it has also more frequently affected at their hands on the other (Weinbaum, 2006, p. 02). The location of Afghanistan broadly influences the political stability and economic potentials of the region. Opportunistic nature of regional neighbours impels them to intervene in Afghanistan on plea to facilitate, provide shelter and reconstruct the country. The central argument of this paper is that intrusion of regional neighbours into Afghanistan owing to the geographical location and natural resources of Afghanistan that has mostly arisen the interest of China, Russia, Central Asia, Iran and Pakistan (Weinbaum, 2006, pp. 1-3). Moreover, this paper also attempts to assert that Afghanistan and regional neighbours are closely related and bound as their collective constructive thought is essential for the regional stability and economic progress for future. Moreover, the foreign policies and domestic stability of the regional neighbours will have deep impact on Afghanistan's peace and progress. While on the other, Afghanistan has remained a persistent source of regional instability by exporting drugs, arms and ideology. The regional neighbours have always kept on readjusting their strategic approach to Afghanistan as no single neighbour is ready to accept the predominance of the influence of another regional neighbour over Afghanistan. However, each neighbouring country maintains its links to the client-network to bifurcate and weaken Afghanistan to emerge.

Afghanistan is stretched across the South, Southwest and Central Asian regions. These regions share their roots and, to a larger extent, interconnect with one another in Afghanistan, hence, the location of Afghanistan is lying within these dangerous neighbours. Political instability and wretchedness of Afghan people can be traced to regional neighbours who look for to materialize their own economic, strategic and ideological interests. Various regional neighbours, such as China, Central Asia, Russia, Iran, India and Pakistan, have different geo-strategic, economic and ideological interests in Afghanistan. For instance, China is concerned to get rid of the elements supporting Islamic secessionist movements, and also have concerns over New Silk Road crossing through Afghanistan and Pakistan; Russia is interested to contain hegemony of USA to counteract the world terrorism; the Central Asian Republics (CARs) are interested to defeat Islamic extremism in the their republics and thus considered stable Afghanistan in their favour, however, it also allowed USA to deploy military troops, and provide air bases (Buzan, 2006, pp. 1101-1118). Whereas Iran, India and Pakistan are also interested to gain benefits of oil and gas pipelines stretching through Afghanistan (Olimat, 2013, p. 160). Subsequent paragraphs will highlight the regional dynamics of Afghanistan.

People's Republic of China and Afghanistan

China and Afghanistan have historical ties through the golden bond of the Silk Route. China has only a short border with Afghanistan, however, it has lot of stakes in Afghanistan so far as security of its western autonomous region i.e., Xinjiang is concerned, which is one of the most significant of Chinese regions. The extremist group of Xinjiang and separatist group the East Turkistan Islamic Movement have become lethal to the internal security of the region. The stability and peace in Afghanistan has prime significance for the creation of stability inside of China and the likely collaboration of Afghan radicals with Islamic Uighur separatists in its North-western region of Xinjiang might endanger stakes of China in future (Alikuzai, 2013, p. 279). Primarily, the geopolitical and geostrategic interest of China in Afghanistan includes to maintain regional stability; to access the regional oil; to preserve territorial integrity of Pakistan; to work together with Russia to neutralize US and Indian influence; to ensure security; and of course, to secure greater interest of China (Olimat, 2013, pp. 160-162).

China's interest in Afghanistan is mainly motivated by its energy concerns as the utmost ambition of China is to have easy access to the deposits of the Central Asian mineral and other natural resources. It also exports an increasing amount of goods to Afghanistan alongside its increased its support to restore stability in Afghanistan. Being the intimate friend of Pakistan, both countries intend to set off an economic corridor to revive and improve the trading relations in this region, however, stability of Pakistan is closely associated with Afghan's stability (Olimat, 2013, pp. 160-168). Moreover, it is also in the greater interest of China to secure the position of Pakistan in the region because Pakistan is its prime ally in South Asia and a transit country for energy and trade. Whereas China is also fully engaged in supporting Afghanistan in the process of its reconstruction, moreover, both the countries frequently discuss their border issues as well as the prolonged US presence and hasty withdrawal from the region, and Afghanistan's help to China against the Islamic militants of Uighur (Handa, 2014, p. 22). For instance, China has offered US \$ 50 million aid to assist and reconstruct Afghanistan (Safi & Alizada, 2018, p. 6).

Moreover, China's \$3.5 billion investment in Afghanistan for the development of *Aynak* copper field and oil tracts in *Faryab and Sar-i-Pul* during 2007 is the largest direct investment of China in history (Opacin, 2017, pp. 46-47). It began to extract oil from the *Amu Darya* basin, situated at north of Afghanistan. Similarly, the role of China has been seen mounting in telecommunication sector, for instance, it had invested to supply telecom equipments to Afghanistan in 2007 as well as to manufacture fibre in 2017 (Khana, 2019, p. 114).

Furthermore, Afghanistan has an aim to construct a direct road to connect Afghan-China border through *Wakhan* Corridor stretching over about seventy six km between the two countries as the *Wakhan* border is situated in the close proximity of economic zone of the Kashgar city (Demout, 2015, p. 280). This

could be considered the largest foreign direct investment so far in Afghanistan's history (Klassen, 2013, p. 421). China is also interested to re-establish the pivotal role of Kashgar as it used to be in the past and, consequently, this would bring to the light the status of China and thus enables it to connect to Central Asia, Europe and warm waters of Gulf through Afghanistan. Thus, it would be the Silk Road of the world that would play as a new China's Eurasian Land Bridge (Star, 2004, pp. 217-218).

An enduring and stable Afghanistan is crucial for China facilitating it to access Eurasia directly and, moreover, it could not thus remain isolated from Afghanistan even after the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Conclusion of military collaboration between China and Afghanistan in 2012 indicates deep interest of China in post-US withdrawal Afghanistan (Kamath, 2013, pp. 43-44). China shows some reservations regarding replacement of US-sponsored Afghan government by Taliban as it is frightened the impeding influence on the separatist group i.e., the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in China (Utley, 2012, pp. 94-95).

Taking aside from military involvement in Afghanistan, interest of China is to primarily focus on Badakhshan province to extend its sphere of influence in Afghanistan. For instance, Chinese diplomats at Kabul are entrusted with the task to engage in capacity building alone so far as the province of Badakhshan is concerned. Moreover, China's main objectives include to offer Afghanistan a gesture of friendship and cooperation; to fight against terrorism; to create stability in Afghanistan; to keep it away from becoming safe-haven for religious fundamentalists; to ensure safety measures to its grand Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); to stop the hatchery of terrorist groups that might be proved hazardous to its projects running under title of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); and to prevent increasing US influence in Afghanistan. It is an undeniable fact that China has already invested \$ 150 million in Afghanistan in 2005 and rapidly increased the process of reconstruction in recent years in comparison to its role in Afghanistan in the past (Saud & Ahmad, 2018, pp. 127-138).

Russian Federation and Afghanistan

The supremacy and hegemony of the former Soviet Union lost her ground with the collapse of communism in the region. With the disintegration of Soviet Union in 1991, Bi-polar World power politics was thus changed into Uni-polar world politics. Subsequently, Russia has been re-treated from global politics and it has thus less direct influence in Afghanistan, however, Russian federation is well-acquainted with the fact that Afghanistan occupies an important geo-strategic, geo-political and geo-economic position in the region (Bugeja, 2014, p. 25).

Moreover, the geopolitics of Russia in Afghanistan includes to reassert its politico-economic influence in the region; to build regional alliance with Iran and China; to stabilize its hegemony and prevent external influence from USA; to defeat terrorism; to restrain opium production; and to access natural resources of the region. Due to Russia's existing dominating influence in

Central Asian countries, it expects Afghanistan to play the role of a buffer zone to protect its vulnerable Southern border from illegal narcotics smuggling and intrusion of Islamic extremism, which intimidate the stability of Russia and its military allies in Central Asia (Meher, 2008, pp. 218-219). It is evident that, Afghanistan is cardinal to Russia's extensive Central Asian policy and its allegiance to a super power position. The geo-economic interest is demonstrated by Afghanistan as a source of vital hydro-carbon deposits, iron-ore reserves, copper, gold, lithium and many more. Russia will have to keep an eye on terrible economic competitors in Afghanistan like China, which has currently out-bided Russian companies on the *Aynak* copper deposits that is one of the biggest mineral deposits of the world (Boon, 2012, p. 217).

Afghanistan can also enhance Russia to expend its energy exports by providing direct access to South Asia and China through its territory. The socio-cultural relations between Northern Afghanistan and Central Asia are also of Russia's concern as both these regions are dominated by Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmen ethnic groups. For instance, the socio-cultural connection was substantiated by the strategic support, provided by the Central Asian countries and Russia to the Northern Alliance (an alliance of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmen against the Taliban) (Iug & Hong, 2010, p. 113).

Russia has imperative strategic interests in Afghanistan to curtail the movement and activities of Islamic insurgents, terrorist activities, and to curb the increasing drug problem within its own population. Moreover, it has also taken a step to resolve regional issues particularly Afghanistan's internal chaos as well as instability, and to re-establish its control over CARs (Blank, 2010, pp. 62-64). The instability in Afghanistan poses a number of threats to the Russian security and, as a result, Russia has come to realize that anarchy in Afghanistan would leave a variety of security loop-holes in Afghanistan i.e., the proliferation of weapons at grand scale, corrupt police, drug smuggling and fundamental Islamists.

Moreover, many Russians have observed that increasing Western military influence in Central Asia and their access to the energy-rich region of mineral deposits has mitigated Russia's sphere of influence at the same time (Hynek & Smetana, 2016, p. 217). According to this view, the war on terror has been just an excuse for an implicit greater agenda. Afghanistan is at the apex on the foreign policy agenda of Moscow and it has also struggled to topple down the subversive policies to secure its interest in the region. Russia has diplomatically supported Iranian Nuclear issue against all the sanctions by the US and European Union. Russia is persuaded that a continuing deadlock on the nuclear issue will weaken US stance and thus reduce its influence in the region. Hence it is evident that Iran and Russia have same perception of US plans in the region (Fedorov, 2009, pp. 311-313). According to Stanford Scientist Kathryn Stoner, Russia is neither in favour of US stay nor in its withdrawal from Afghanistan lest there would be an anarchic situation in Afghanistan under Islamic extremists (Stoner, 2015, pp. 398-419).

Under changing geopolitical situation in Afghanistan in 2017-18, Russia took interest to distance from the prolonged conflict in vogue in the Asian country.

In recent past, Russia established contacts in 2007 with the leadership of Taliban with regard to drug trafficking via CARs. Moreover, Russia was also interested to establish contact with Taliban to prevent US influence in Afghanistan. Secondly, it is also interested to enter in Afghanistan again to stop creating safe havens for supporters of Islamic state (IS) in Afghanistan owing to its proximity to Central Asia. On the other, increasing ties of Russian with Taliban exacerbate the situation for USA even after US withdrawal from Afghanistan as the famous phrase “enemy of my enemy is my friend” is still spinning in the air. It is still unknown to USA to presume about the rationale behind Russia's commitment with the Taliban.

It is geo-strategic prerequisite for Russia to keep its southern borders safe and sound from aggression or infiltration of any kind after US leaving Afghanistan in hast. Hence, Russia's engagement with the Taliban is to ensure policy for the future (Saifullah, 2017). Similarly, Taliban has been assessed by Russia as genuine stakeholder the affairs of Afghanistan. To secure Russia and its citizens, it is incumbent upon Russia to be engaged with the Taliban and encourage the latter to come on common terms through means of dialogue with the government.

Republic of India and Afghanistan

The geopolitical interest of India in Afghanistan includes to access natural resources of the region; to counteract Pakistan; and to combat China. Afghanistan and India share common history of subjugation and intervention of imperialist Britain, Therefore, both countries have psychological, emotional and social proximity. After partition, democracy had been flourished and it thus established a consolidated governmental system in India that made foster economic, social and political stability in Indian society.

During Soviet invasion in 1979, India was taking more interests in the politics of Afghanistan because Pakistan has strained relation with Afghanistan for cross border terrorism. India adopted the policy, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, and it thus took the side to support Afghan interest. India also intended to secure and retain Afghanistan as a friendly state in order to monitor Pakistan and possibly even influence the events occurring inside it (Mazumdar, 2015, pp. 73-74). Furthermore, India is emerging as a regional neighbour due to its economic stability and the aim of India is to create the role of Pakistan as party in regional peace in general and Afghanistan in particular (Scot, 2011, p. 109). Significantly, Afghanistan, Iran and India are associated in alliance to gain domination in the Central Asia for the control of natural resources. India has been investing a huge amount in Afghanistan to enhance interests in the region. India could understand the strategic importance of political existence in the light of its never-ending dispute with Pakistan, however, it looks beyond than that. Due to its geographical location, Afghanistan has always been an indispensable for India's quest for energy and mineral deposits as well as for rising trade with Central Asian countries (Bakshi, 2002, pp. 128-29). However, India's relation with Afghanistan would be determined in the context of the geostrategic interest of Pakistan because

both the states are eager to exploit land of Afghanistan as transit route to Central Asia.

India has used political, diplomatic and developmental means to establish long lasting relations with to Afghan government (Trivedi, 2008, pp. 71-73), for instance, it has signed a strategic alliance with Afghanistan in 2011. India has also helped Afghanistan in building roads and other infrastructure in Afghanistan; in restoring and upgrading the Chabahar port in Iran in 2009. It has also built the road from there to the Afghan border town of Zaranj in order to mitigate Afghan dependency on Pakistan, and has still been sponsoring Afghanistan's membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) since 2006 (Upadhyay, 2013, pp. 1-12). Indian companies have successfully made possible of more than \$2 billion investments in Afghanistan and the example of the successful bid for the investment of the Hajigak iron ore in Bamiyan can best be cited in this regard. The Hajigak bid is the focus of an expected \$10.7 billion investment for the next 30 years including more than one billion dollars in aid since 2011 (Castillo, 2014, p. 251).

Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) is another multilateral initiatives that is aimed at passing gas pipeline through Afghanistan, therefore, India is needed a stable Afghanistan for securing its economic and energy interests in the region (Sharma & Kar, 2015, p. 399). In 2016, India took keen interest in investing: \$300 million in Salma Dam project at Chaste Sharif district of Herat province; in building transmission lines and substations at the North of Afghanistan; in bringing electricity from Uzbek to various cities of Kabul; in constructing the 220 KV line over the Salang pass; and in building facility of cold storage at Kandahar- centre of producing over 35,000 tons of pomegranates and India is the major importer (Nader & Scotten, 2014, p. 18).

Moreover, Indian army is entrusted with the task to provide military training to Afghan army along with techniques and skills to be employed in guerrilla warfare; to conduct counterinsurgency operations; and to play noteworthy role in developing National Directorate of Security (NDS) of Afghanistan. Moreover, an accord of strategic partnership was also concluded in 2011 between Afghanistan and India. India trained approximately 350 Afghan armed persons, on annual basis since 2003. Another agreement has also been concluded between the both that almost 1,000 Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) members would be entitled to receive training from India every year. These training facilities would be provided in Rajasthan desert. On the other, Pakistan has criticised India for its infiltration through its secret agencies in Baluchistan and tribal belt of Pakistan. Similarly, deployment of troops at Indian consulates in Herat is another matter of concern for Pakistan (Paliwal, 2017, pp. 238-39).

India has invested more than \$565 million for the development and reconstruction of Afghanistan and it is thus enumerated as the sixth largest contributor in various areas such as humanitarian assistance, institutional and human resource development and infrastructure repair (Palrecha & Tourangbam, 2018). India needs a stable and peaceful Afghanistan and it is thus wishful to

have leadership role in resolving multifarious conflicts that affect India directly. However, situation in Afghanistan would further be deteriorated following withdrawal of US forces in swiftness along with negotiated deal with the Taliban and, a result, democratic institutions would be weakened that leading to create a permanent security vacuum to be filled by supporters Islamic State in the future. India would be adamant to stop resumption of role of any fundamentalist regime in Afghanistan as it might also create a serious threat to India's internal security. Moreover, unstable Afghanistan would hinder India to access energy and oil rich Central Asia and to stimulate its mounting economy (Jalalzai, 2017, pp. 61-62).

For that reason, India is interested to maintain long-term security and stability in the region and also favours to complete U.S-led peace process successfully with the Taliban. In the same connection, India still intends to incessantly provide assistance for developmental and economic projects in Afghanistan.

Republic of Tajikistan and Afghanistan

Tajikistan, the Central Asian neighbour of Afghanistan, is directly affected from the instability of the Afghanistan. Tajikistan and Afghanistan have deep rooted relations of ethnicity because the twenty seven percent of the Afghan population is composed of Tajiks. This is the second largest ethnic group in Afghanistan residing at the North Eastern Afghanistan alongside the border of Tajikistan (Nichol, 2009, p. 49).

Moreover, the incursion of refugees from Afghanistan and drug smuggling alongside the Afghan-Tajik border is another problem for Tajikistan. After the independence, Tajikistan underwent through a civil war during early 1990s, which was supported by Islamic Militants from Afghanistan. They established Islamic Renaissance Party to confront the government of President Rahmanov. Civil war broke out in 1992, however, it was ended after the conclusion of agreement of the Renaissance Party in 1997. Later on, Tajikistan supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban (Jonson, 2006, pp. 50-52). Moreover, after 9/11, Tajikistan supported the coalition forces to topple down the Taliban, wherein, Tajikistan received military and humanitarian aid from the US (Lansford, 2012, p. 104).

Furthermore, Tajikistan government was damn serious to control drug trafficking and thus confiscated a massive quantity of drug including opium. Drug smuggling through the Afghan-Tajik border has also been an issue in Russo-Tajik relationship. Allegation of drug trafficking was one of the reason that Tajik president demanded the Russian border must be sealed. However, the problem has not been resolved yet and, at the same time, refugees' problem create an challenges to the Tajik government in terms of governance, economy and security matters. Hence, stable Afghanistan is in the deep interest of stable Tajikistan. Stable Afghanistan is also indispensable for the Central Asian countries as far as water disputes are concerned (Alkuzai, Vol. 14, p. 422).

Tajikistan has rich water resources and her plan to construct new hydropower plants have frequently been opposed by Uzbekistan. Tajikistan is also anxious about her vast cotton production. Afghanistan has the right to use nine million cubic meters of water per year from the *Pyanj* River, bordered Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Currently Afghanistan is using two million cubic meters of water each year. If Afghanistan begins to use full allocation of water from the river, it would get severe response from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Similarly, USA is also interested to make the trade relationship possible between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, for instance, USA has funded to construct a bridge in 2007 across the *Pyanj* River with a view to enhance flow of Tajik goods into Afghanistan as well as facilitate to provide commercial opportunities on both sides of the river (<http://www.rferl.org>). Moreover, three countries, such as Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, concluded an agreement to form the Economic Council of the Persian-Speaking Union (ECPSU) in 2008. They are about to develop transportation links, such as roads and railways, to import energy from Tajikistan and to explore to transfer 500 KW of energy, through a Joint Commission, from Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Iran (Joharifard, 2010, pp. 72-74).

However, it is not an easy task to accomplish their objectives in the presence of representatives of the IS in the region, for instance, flag and presence of representatives of IS in some of the northwest and northeast districts of the country including: Faryab, Jowzjan and Saripul, Badakhshan, Takhar and Kunduz provinces bordering Tajikistan. Secondly, smuggling the drugs and weapons, by armed groups, alongside the Afghan border to cross over the border of Tajikistan, is another issue of apprehension in this regard. Clash over these issues might also ruin economic ties between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. For instance, a clash between militants and Afghan forces at Kunduz in July, 2017, resulted in damaging electricity supply line from Tajikistan to Afghanistan. Thirdly, blocking main high ways from the port of Shergan-Bandar on the border with Tajikistan to Kunduz by the militants is another hazardous issue that has resulted in declining goods transport owing to the hindrance in the way of the free movement of people and cargo. However, Tajikistan along with other Central Asian Republics has reached to a conclusion that without taking these internal actors into confidence, no objective of peace talk could be achieved (IWPR Central Asia, 2017).

Republic of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan

Uzbekistan has racial relations with Afghanistan because seven percent of Afghan population is composed of ethnic Uzbeks residing at Northern provinces. The country has offered its help, as an influential partner, for the stability of Afghanistan, and hosted an air base of the German Bundesweher in Termiz after US invasion of Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has particularly been concerned about the rising influence of Taliban in the region and the Uzbek government has also provided support to all those forces who aim to overthrow the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan enthusiastically supported the US war on terror and offered its territories for the US military and, as a result, Uzbekistan had eventually received huge aid as security assistance (Lansford, 2012, p. 104). After the Andijan Massacre in May 2005, the US criticism of Uzbekistan changed the whole scenario and substantially

Uzbekistan closed the USA base (Peimani, 2009, p. 88). Furthermore, the Uzbek government was particularly annoyed by the terrorist activities of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Later on, IMU joined the war in Afghanistan and began to support Taliban.

The US-led operation in Afghanistan after September 11, 2001 was proved helpful to reduce the major security threats for Uzbekistan, which enhanced opportunities for mutual co-operation between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. This partnership did not work out for longer as they had aspired for (Hanks, 2010, p. 130). Notwithstanding, Uzbekistan continued to pursue its interest in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan took keen interest in restoring power supply to Afghanistan in 2002, furthermore, Uzbekistan also constructed eleven bridges between Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul (Adamec, 2012, p. 46).

In 2016, trade turnover of Uzbekistan was about USD 520 million, moreover, it also signed agreements to extend cooperation in fields of transport infrastructure, security and combating drug trafficking. In January 2017, the Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan, Mr. Abdulaziz Kamilov, paid an official visit to Kabul and, during this visit, both the countries signed a bilateral trade and economic 'Road map' for increasing the bilateral trade up to one billion USD. A power transmission project, the *Surkhan-Pul-e-Khumri*, was settled in November 2017 between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan and, as a result, the first flights, between Kabul and Tashkent, had regularly been begun (Kaura, 2018). Though, Uzbekistan is worried about the presence of Islamic militants in the North-east of Afghanistan, however, new President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has shown interest to work together towards the end of peace process in the region (Rashid, 2018). For instance, both the countries agreed to combat terrorism of all kinds; to stop illegal trade, migration, drugs and human trafficking; and to ensure peaceful settlement of Afghan issue under fundamental principles of the Charter United Nation. Nevertheless, Uzbekistan is also interested to provide assistance to develop physical infrastructure by integrating Afghanistan into the regional economic process (Koparkar, 2018).

Republic of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan

Turkmenistan, an important Afghan neighbour, also closely observes the socio-political and economic developments in Afghanistan. After 9/11, Turkmenistan officially declared herself a neutral country, and asserted that it would not involve politically in the Afghanistan. In addition, Turkmenistan has always been highly concerned about opium smuggling from Afghanistan. Her rich energy resources are highly significant to Afghanistan and, similarly, the project called TAPI is also important for the countries involved in the project as member-countries. However, in March 2012, after twenty years continuous negotiation, the state company Turkmen at last signed deals for gas pipeline with India and Pakistan running partly through Afghanistan (TAPI Pipeline), though, a pipeline is yet to be built. After the death of President Saparmyrat Niyazov in 2006, the new government renewed contacts with NATO and, similarly, Turkmenistan has also offered the use of her military bases, though, slightly deviating from its neutral stance (Frappi&Garibov, 2014, p. 146).

Drug trafficking is not only restricted to Afghanistan only; it has also effected almost all the northern neighbours of Afghanistan. They are also anxious about the possible resurgence of Islamist military spring and the tricks played by the regional players for extraction of the Central Asian gas and oil resources including gas pipeline (Thachuk, 2007, p. 102).

In 2018, two important electricity projects were signed to promote stability, namely Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) and Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TUTAP). The aim of these projects is to increase access of urban and rural areas to electricity to households and small and medium-sized businesses of the entire region. Similarly, Afghanistan-Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey trade and transit corridor and Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Turkmenistan (TAT) railway projects were also signed to have alternative trade routes in the entire region (Haidari, 2017).

Issue of constructing TAPI pipeline has been intensified because one group of Taliban, led by Rasul Akhund, has shown willingness to construct this national project, however, the management of TAPI pipeline still requires some guarantor to smoothly run the project. Afghan government urged that TAPI would bear prosperity and stability in Afghanistan, however, security concerns of militancy in Afghanistan could not easily be ignored (Pannier, 2018).

The government of Turkmenistan has supported Afghan government through building schools and hospitals on humanitarian grounds in different provinces of Afghanistan. These included: Balkh, Herat, and Faryab provinces. On 18 February 2017, President Gurbanguly Berdymuhamedov has approved the concept of foreign policy for Turkmenistan for 2017-2023. It comprised on various principles including: neutrality on permanent grounds, and improving cooperation with neighbouring countries including Afghanistan. Hence, Turkmenistan aims to create better conditions for Afghan people to lead a happy life and, therefore, it has tried to strengthen peace and security in Afghanistan (Admin, 2017).

Islamic Republic of Iran and Afghanistan

The geopolitical approach of Iran (previously Persia) in Afghanistan includes to preserve Islamic Republic; to preserve Iranian territorial integrity; to offset US influence; to ensure friendly governments in Kabul and Herat; and to access the natural resources of the region. Afghanistan shares a relatively long history with Iran. When the Safavid dynasty came into power in Persia, part of what is now called Afghanistan was ruled by the Khanate of Bukhara on the one hand and Zaheeruddin Babur from *Kabulistan* on the other hand. The first Persian Safavid king called Shah Ismail I was able to expand his empire in all directions including nowadays Afghanistan. They ruled the region for centuries and they could not have any problems in their reign over the eastern most territories, however, their policies towards non-Shia communities became worsening with the passage of time. Their decline began towards the end of 17th century when they appointed their Georgian subject the Gurgin

Khan as governor of Kandahar in order to forcefully convert the Afghans from Sunni Islam to Shia Islam.

Following collapse of USSR in 1991, interest of Iran towards the region had been expanded particularly in Central Asia using Afghanistan as a gate way to Central Asia. On the other hand, South Asia was also emerged as one of the biggest markets for Central Asian natural resources and, therefore, a destination for Iran's economic interests (Maley, 2001, p. 129). In order to play an impressive role in the wider region, Iran casted off its support for only the Shiite factions and lengthened its support to other groups in Afghanistan as well (Goodson, 2001, p. 165). Iran also became suspicious of the role, played by US, in the region. Iran provides the shortest and the most economic routes for the transfer of Central Asian energy resources and, therefore, it aims to play a vital role in oil politics. Containment of Iran was so important for the US that pipeline projects like the TAP and the pipeline through Turkey were given utmost importance despite their commercial non-viability. The US administration exerted huge pressure on oil companies to accept these projects (Qaseem, 2009, 160).

Apart from Iran's interest to supply oil to the world market, the US believed that Iran, being a Rimland / marginal crescent country, could develop continental and naval strategies simultaneously unless it is effectively controlled. Iran's ambition to play a greater role in the wider region and US containment strategy got reflected in Afghanistan (Brown, 2015, p. 334).

In May 2010, General Stanley A. Chrystal, the then NATO Commander in Afghanistan blamed Iran for training and sheltering Afghan fighters inside Iran. Iran was also thought to be engaged in the financial and logistic support to the Afghan fighters. On the other, Iranian government blamed the US for assisting the Balochi Sunni insurgent group Jundullah, which was responsible for killing several senior-Revolutionary Guards Corps officers (Hart, 2010, p. 28). Iran urged UN to play larger role in Afghanistan; it continued its close relationship with Russia and allegedly maintained secret links with the Taliban to balance US influence in Afghanistan (Chopra, 2003, p. 207). In a visit of UN Secretary-General's Special Representative, Deputy Foreign Minister for legal and international affairs, Sayyed Abbas Araqchi, highlighted significant role of the regional neighbours in resolving issue of Afghanistan and also expressed its willingness to contribute to the relating efforts. Iran invested in the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Afghanistan with a purpose to keep the Western Afghanistan predominately under the Iranian sphere of influence (Wright, 2010, p. 157).

According to the chairman of Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries, Iran's exports to Afghanistan in 2008 stood at \$800 million. The official news agency of Iran i.e., Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) quoted Mohammad QorbanHaqju that "*Iran imported \$4 million worth of products like fresh and dried fruits, minerals, precious stones, and spices from the neighbouring country*". He said that Iran exported oil products, cement, construction material, carpets, home appliances, and detergents. Iran imported

nuts, carpets, agricultural products as well as handicrafts from Afghanistan. Afghanistan imports 90 percent of its needs, except agricultural products.

Afghanistan is a major opium producer as it also produces 90% of world's heroin, whereas, some of these drugs are smuggled into Iran and from thence onward to European countries. Tehran is worried about rising opium production in Afghanistan on one hand and its failure to stop cross-border drug smuggling. In 2017, narcotics, including opium, had become an alarming issue for Iran as 2.8 million Iranians were recorded drug users on regular basis. Apart from it, Iran is also concerned about the spread of Sunni extremist movement in Afghanistan. Similarly, announcements of President Ashraf Ghani for initiating several dam projects and interrupting water flow from Afghanistan into Iran would further exacerbate relationship between the two countries. On one hand, Iran aims to have peace in Afghanistan by cooperating with the Taliban as multi-pronged strategy. Ironically, Iran's deteriorating relation with USA by supporting Taliban at Farah, to combat US-led forces, would contribute to create instability in Afghanistan (Worden, 2018).

The rationale behind supporting Taliban is tied with water security issue of Iran as flow of Afghanistan water, via constructing dams, would cause a serious threat to national interest of Iran. Hence, Hassan Rouhani, the then President of Iran, expressed that "*We cannot remain indifferent to the issue (water dams) which is apparently damaging our environment*". Thus, Iran is willing to maximize flow of water from Afghanistan to Iran to avoid ruining its population on eastern areas. If so, Iran would retaliate in supporting Taliban to attack the construction of dam in Afghanistan.

Similarly, Iran's gesture on, regional economic projects such as the Chabahar Port, has proved double standard policy of Iran by connecting with the Taliban on one hand and on the other maintaining its official ties with Kabul. The importance of Iran in the region cannot be overlooked by USA and, as a result, it has decided that Iran to be included into the peaceful process of dialogue in settling Afghan issue.

Islamic Republic of Pakistan and Afghanistan

Pakistan and Afghanistan has geographical, cultural and ideological intimacy since long, however, their relations have seen many turfs and crusts. Pakistan has concerns are from Afghanistan as well as from regional neighbours and global powers. Pakistan considers itself to be the immediate neighbour that has suffered the most due to Afghanistan's turbulent history and is thus the most demanding neighbour to urge for a stable Afghanistan (Misra, 2012, p. 121). That is why Pakistan favours a Pashtun or pro-Pakistan government in Afghanistan pursuing its interests.

Apprehensions and interests of Pakistan, with regard to Afghanistan, have been modified after September 11, 2001. For instance, incident of 9/11 and War on Terror, Pakistan was determined to play a frontline state role for its survival, and is still actively combating the militants inside its own land (Hubris, 2015, p. 88). Pakistan considers all its foreign activities in

Afghanistan significant in the light of its conflicts with India. Preventing India from gaining significant grip in Afghanistan, it has remained one of the top preferences of Pakistan to get away India as it has always been remained doubtful about India's influence in Afghanistan (Centlivres, 2015, p. 173).

Cross-border insurgency in Afghanistan has always directly affected Pakistan's northern territory in many ways. These include: increasing extremism and militancy in the Pashtun belt; challenging attitudes on Durand Line and Afghan Diaspora in Pakistan, vulnerable Afghan-Pakistan border, continuous Indian interruption, India's escalating malicious designs overwhelming Pakistan's political, economic and strategic supremacy, ever rising extremism and suicide attacks on pro-western government within Pakistan, colossal economic depression, political and public damage, uncertainty about the future of Pakistan among its public. Furthermore, the strategic interest of Pakistan was to maintain territorial integrity of the country and to secure its eastern and western borders. Pakistan strongly believes in securing and integrating Afghanistan under a pro-Pakistan government (Rehman, 2018).

Pakistan's economic interests in Afghanistan are profound and based on firm futuristic outlook. In current years, the largely unexploited energy deposits in Central Asia have prompted a race amongst the super powers including the major players in the region to get access to gas and oil resources. Besides, Pakistan is in dire need of energy for its own economic development and TAPI, with all its impediments, it provides an energy source that will boost up Pakistan's capital stock for fifty more years (Kaw, 2010, p. 129). Moreover, a peaceful Afghanistan ensures successful construction of oil and gas pipelines from CARs and Pak-Iran-India pipeline project. In this way, Pakistan could be able to fulfil its increasing demand of industry at home. Moreover, CARs represent a huge market for Pakistani goods. Hence, the security situation in Afghanistan, whether worsened or stable, directly impacts Pakistan's economic interests (Paimani, 2003, p. 40).

Moreover, Pakistan also required energy to revitalize its economy and develop the project of TAPI and this pipeline was expected to be completed in 2019. Similarly, another economic project, CPEC also carries significance for Pakistan in Afghanistan as it aims to bring together Pakistan with Afghanistan and beyond Afghanistan i.e., Central Asian Republics. Though, friendly government in Afghanistan is in the greater interest of Pakistan, however, the instability in Afghanistan would tremendously effect Pakistan by means of maximizing its own internal challenges. These internal challenges include: fear of Pashtun ethnic group from terrorist policies; internal instability in Pakistan especially at tribal areas; and presence of India in Afghanistan. The successful negotiation of Taliban with USA on Trump administration's terms would consolidate anti-Pakistan elements and weaken the security of Pakistan and thus it would put Pakistan into an awkward position. However, Pakistan appreciates to support talks between Kabul, Islamabad and USA. Similarly, Pakistan also appreciated the then Afghan President Ashraf Ghani for his efforts to end of hostilities by the offer to begin talks with the Taliban in June 2018. Pakistan, together with Russia and China, was interested to end the

presence of USA in Afghanistan, however, these regional neighbours suggest for the facilitation of Afghan peace. On the other, prolong stay of USA was looked suspicious both by Russia and China and thus they considered US presence in Afghanistan as interfering in their sphere of influence (Ashraf, 2018). However, situation has dramatically been changed after the sudden departure of USA from Afghanistan.

As a result of instability in Afghanistan, socio-economic structure of Pakistani society has been militarized. A stable Afghanistan is in the greater interest of China, India, Russia and the United States and Pakistan that could contribute to bring together these regional and major actors along with Kabul and the Taliban on table talks to stabilize the country.

CONCLUSION

No one can blink the fact that the geographical position of Afghanistan is very important in the interest of the global powers and regional neighbours. The people of Afghanistan predict another civil war after US departure, like the one that followed after Soviet withdrawal. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan will shape the uneven balance amongst the Central Asian States that would have negative impact on Afghanistan. Disputes in Afghanistan could also spill over to unstable Central Asia. Russia could play a major role in Afghanistan soon after the departure of US forces. China could also be pushed to take up a military role to protect its energy interests in these regions. Pakistan has also been preparing herself to shelter strategic interests in Afghanistan with the eventual departure of USA from Afghanistan. Iran, on its own part, would not like to have the Sunni influence in Afghanistan and therefore, it would act to curtail it. India and Pakistan would counteract each other. US withdrawal from Afghanistan could not only create a power vacuum in Afghanistan, but it would also disturb the situation in Central Asia. It would also encourage the dangerous regional neighbours, such as Russia, China, India, Pakistan and Iran to emerge to intervene in Afghanistan.

The regional neighbours would strengthen their roles and become more active. In short, presently region is in very complicated situation because of different conflicts and contradictory interests. Since the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan has been suffering from foreign interference in one or other shape. For instance, Pakistan and Iran suggest Afghanistan the most impressive and critical bilateral relationships in the region. The emergence of Afghanistan as a crossroads of the region for resource sharing and trade, even in post-Taliban era, would remain a far-away though optimistic prospect. The widespread economic constraints and dearth of physical infrastructure as well as backward political developments hinder development toward the region and keep Afghanistan away from becoming an essential economic unit.

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