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# Afghanistan: now you see me?: Afghanistan – the regional dimension

## Report

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## Afghanistan – The Regional Dimension

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In the eighth anniversary year of the removal of the Taliban regime many hard facts have come to haunt the international community. The most critical of this is the reckoning that instead of getting better, the country has slowly slipped into a maze of violence. Outwardly the country survives on a large and continuous dose of foreign aid and the presence of a massive external military machine. Perhaps it is time to take stock of the situation and ask what is ailing the country? There are a number of factors contributing to this situation. Some of it owing to the situation in Afghanistan itself and some others that have impacted upon it from outside.



In this piece, I explore the role of Afghanistan's immediate neighbours and inquire where they stand when it comes to the long-term survival and viability of Afghanistan. In particular, I probe if its immediate neighbours are a force for progress or a cause of Afghanistan's slow and steady decline.

Afghanistan is a landlocked Central Asian country. It is surrounded by Uzbekistan in the North, China in the East, Iran in the West and Pakistan in the South. When one entertains questions about regional impact on a country's socioeconomic and political process one naturally turns to its immediate neighbours with whom it shares land corridors and frontiers. However, in the case of Afghanistan we ought to include another country which does not actually have a common border with the country but nonetheless features prominently in its everyday functioning. The country in question is India. Not all of the countries mentioned pull equal punches. Though Afghanistan has strong ethnic and cultural ties with Uzbekistan, the latter has only a marginal impact on what goes on in Afghanistan. Similarly, although an emerging superpower, China's influence in Afghanistan is limited to say the least.

Thus, one is left with Iran, India and Pakistan. It is the role and influence of these three regional powers in Afghanistan's current crisis that I am going to discuss and reflect upon. Now let us concentrate on Iran.

### IRAN – WAIT AND SEE

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What are the current terms of engagement between Kabul and Teheran? How different is it from the ties that bound these two in the past? What is the nature of influence that Iran exerts on Afghanistan? Afghanistan was once part of ancient Persian Empire, and so Iran shares strong cultural and linguistic ties with Afghanistan. In addition, a sizeable number of Afghans are followers of the Shi'a faith. In more recent times, i.e. 1979-2002, Iran was home to the second largest Afghan refugee population (amounting to a figure of over 2 million). In spite of these ties, Teheran has had less influence in Afghan politics vis a vis other neighbours than one might expect. For a start, its involvement



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in providing support and assistance to the country was erratic. At one point it supported the Northern Alliance and other times an assortment of Shi'a rebel groups. But overall compared to other big players Teheran's involvement in the conflict during Soviet occupation of the country or during the civil war years was negligible, to say the least. In addition, it never made good use of the linguistic and cultural ties, and when it came to hosting the Afghan refugee population it did not receive any international assistance and met the expenses economic and otherwise from its own coffers.

Teheran was not particularly interested in rushing into the new political process that emerged following the end of Taliban rule in 2001. What it oversaw, however, was the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees who had been living in the country – some for close to three-quarters of a century. And it was not particularly keen to exert its cultural influence in the country as Turkey tried to do in Turkic-speaking Central Asian countries following the collapse of the Soviet Union.



If anything, Teheran has been a quiet player in Afghanistan's recent history.

While its actions and involvements would appear passive it has nonetheless been couched in studied expediency. For a start, Teheran has realized the negative fall-out of the conflict in its neighbouring state and its long shadow. Thanks to the refugee presence the country did not only find itself drained economically, the situation also led to the breakdown of law and order in its eastern frontiers. But more importantly the Afghan conflict brought with it drugs and a made a significant portion of Iranian citizens drug addicts. It is still suffering from these effects.

But Iran is likely to take a front seat in Afghan affairs in the future. It sits in an enviable position as a fast-emerging trading partner with Afghanistan. More Afghan trade has been done through Iran in recent years than through any other country. Teheran has been instrumental in building several power transmission lines between Torbat-e-Jam in northeastern Iran to Heart in western Afghanistan. But most significant of all it has built the 122 Doqarun-Heran highway at a considerable cost. It has also taken an active step in Afghanistan's banking system by opening the Ariyan Bank in Kabul.

In recent years, both Teheran and Kabul have entertained the idea of establishing a free trade area in the form of trade league between the two. Iran is likely to emerge as one of the most active economic-trade partners of Afghanistan.

Iranians and Afghans share cordial relationships both at the government and civilian levels. There are a whole host of strategic, economic and political issues which connect these two neighbours. Both consider each other as strong allies. If there have not been any high profile photo-opportunities between the two it is primarily because Iran, owing to its own tense relations with the West, does not want to complicate it further by meddling directly with the United States or the NATO in Afghanistan. Thus it would be an understatement to suggest that Teheran is a reluctant player in Afghan affairs. If anything, it is going to matter more than perhaps Pakistan in the years to come.

## INDIA – NERVOUS OPTIMISM

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In spite of having no land-corridor with Afghanistan, India has always been a key player in Afghan politics. Why so? Cultural linkages and some shared historical experiences contributed to a close relationship, and following its independence, New Delhi started to look at Kabul for both diplomatic and strategic partnership. Thus India has always supported the status quo in Afghanistan, with the exception of the period when the Taliban was in power.

New Delhi's charm offensive in Afghanistan has led to the largest ever Indian reconstruction aid to the country. Between 2001 and 2008 India provided around \$1,300 million to Afghanistan, most of it for infrastructure development in the country. In particular, this aid has been geared towards building of roads, power plants, telecommunications, educational support, and health care. Among other symbolic use of this aid has been the construction of the new Afghan parliament by Indian economic aid and assistance. On the diplomatic and bureaucratic front New Delhi has been instrumental in training the Afghan police force, diplomatic personnel and civil servants.

Released from the close constricting grip of the Taliban, Afghans have flocked in large numbers to Indian cultural exports to the country. This includes Indian TV soap operas, musicals and Bollywood movies. Given that both countries have shared linguistic and cultural ties this would come as no surprise. But the ability to appreciate these cultural imports has most certainly endeared India much closer to the Afghans. More than the economic aid and nurturing of the bureaucracy and the police service this cultural export will prove crucial in Afghan-India relations in future.

In the post-Taliban phase New Delhi's cozying up to Kabul would appear to be based on two specific interests: first, to curtail the influence of Pakistan in the region; and second to use Afghanistan as a gateway to the energy-rich Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

Is this a one-way relationship? Perhaps not. Kabul on its part looks to New Delhi for both economic assistance (it is confident of India's long-term assistance even after the departure of allied powers); and more importantly, Kabul aims to use New Delhi as a bulwark against Islamabad – as a counter-weight in its relationship with Pakistan.

## PAKISTAN – THORN IN THE FLESH?

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Of all the countries in the region, Pakistan features prominently in Afghanistan's recent history. Its ties are like the roots of a giant tree spreading across the geographical divide that demarcates Pakistan and Afghanistan. The past three decades of Afghanistan's past is deeply intertwined with that of Pakistan. Suffice to say one cannot understand Afghanistan without immersing oneself in to the goings on in Pakistan in the recent past. Thus it is natural that we spend a little extra space to discuss the Islamabad-Kabul connection in the current context in order to make some credible prognosis on Afghanistan's future.

It is in this context that we need to assess the bilateral relationship between Islamabad and Kabul. It was long argued by the Kabul government that the military regime that ruled Pakistan until recently was lukewarm to its espionage agency Inter Service Intelligence (ISA) providing crucial logistical and military support to the insurgent Taliban. With the coming to power of a civilian government in Islamabad there has been some thawing of the relationship between the two. In December 2008 President Zardari paid a visit to Kabul to meet his counterpart Hamid Karzai where the discussions

were said to be cordial.

Notwithstanding these improved relations deep tensions remain between the two. Some of it has to do with the internal situation in Pakistan itself, over which the government has very little control. The Taliban's supposed claim that they have "nothing to talk about" (so far as some form of reconciliation and rapprochement with the government in Kabul is concerned) draws its strength directly from what is happening across the border in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP). In this largely ungoverned part of Pakistan the Taliban has now managed to establish its stronghold from where it operates and raises strikes against Afghan interests. This region of Pakistan is at best ungovernable and at worst anarchical, and remains the key factor in relations both between the two governments and their relations with international powers.

### THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME...

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Of the three key players discussed above Iran seems likely to emerge as a soft good neighbour. By contrast Pakistan and India - owing to their own traditional rivalry - may push Afghanistan in different directions.

As Robert Kaplan has noted, Afghanistan has been a prize that Pakistan and India have fought over directly and indirectly for decades. If anything, this competition over Afghanistan and the resulting fireworks are likely to intensify in future. These in turn will endanger Afghanistan's future stability and prosperity. Thanks to New Delhi's aggressive overtures Pakistan feels isolated from Afghan affairs and has pointed time and again that New Delhi's 'growing influence in Kabul' aims to isolate Pakistan and encircle it by constructing a host of strategic partners all around it. This apprehension has not gone unnoticed in New Delhi. The Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has gone on record suggesting that the Indian-Afghanistan relationship is 'not only beneficial to the two countries but vital for peace and stability in the entire region'. Reading between the lines this would imply reducing Pakistani power in the region. It is precisely because of this fear that Islamabad has such an ambivalent relationship with the neo-Taliban. Plenty of hawks in Pakistan believe it is only by supporting the neo-Taliban that it can curtail India's influence. It does not matter if the clock is turned back for Afghanistan.

In the end, while Islamabad views Afghanistan as the pawn that can balance India, New Delhi sees the country as a counterweight against its arch rival. It will be interesting to see which of these two powers gain an upper hand in Afghanistan, and more importantly, who succeeds in maintaining their elevated status.