

The New Great Game and Continuing Stalemate in Afghanistan

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Abstract

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Afghanistan became a theatre of a new Great Game. During the Cold War, the Great Game in Afghanistan between Czarist Russia and the British Empire gave way to another Great Game, this one between the Soviet Union and the US. The Great Game has historically referred to the competition between two Empires (British and Russian) or two superpowers (US and Soviet) for geopolitical supremacy in the regions between the Eurasian Heartland and the Indian Ocean. These regions were not only considered important for the development of land strategies but they were also treated equally important for developing naval strategies. Furthermore, these areas provided access to key resources for the sustenance of a global power, such as minerals, gas and oil. The objectives of the players of the new Great Game that ensued after the disintegration of the Soviet Union contained both the strategic and resource ambitions of the former participants of the Great Game. However, there are certain changes in the new Great Game that make it more complex. There are not only more participants in the Game, the character of the Game has changed. The paper argues that this new Great Game might make solutions to Afghan problems a difficult affair and precipitate another Civil War after US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014.

Key words: *Great Game, New Great Game, Strategy, Central Asia, Natural resources, Alliance*

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Email:manojhyderabad@gmail.com, The author wishes to thank Prof. Prithvi Ram Mudiam, University of Hyderabad and Prof. Niranjana Barik, Ravenshaw University for their valuable suggestions.

Introduction

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Cold War alliance structure in various parts of the world crumbled. Various previous allies of the superpowers, like Iran and Pakistan assumed more prominent roles in their respective regions. They began to play an independent role without being formally allied and committed to any particular power. India lost an important ally with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and therefore was forced to take up an independent role in regional affairs. While in the earlier Great Games, access to a passive Central Asia was the lure for the players, the Soviet disintegration led to the emergence of many independent states in Central Asia who aspired to play an independent and active role in international politics. While the Cold War tight alliance structure put a lid on terrorist groups and prohibited them from becoming very powerful organisations except for being used as strategic weapons, the demise of the Soviet Union has resulted in the emergence of these groups as powerful non-state actors in international politics. The more independent regional powers have therefore maintained strong links with these non-state actors for their geopolitical interests. The independence of various regional powers is also ensured by the growing economic interdependence between various states and the availability of nuclear weapons in these states. Thus, Afghanistan witnesses a new Great Game characterised by more independent regional powers, a secret and shifting alliance system between the regional powers and radical groups, and the inability of America to determine the course of events through coercive diplomacy.

Strategies of major powers in Afghanistan

American Strategy in Afghanistan

American interest in Afghanistan and the former Soviet Republics became more pronounced after the disintegration of the USSR. With the emergence of many newly independent states a power vacuum was produced in the Eurasian Heartland which prompted the US to begin developing continental strategies there. American attention was also increasingly focused on the volume of natural resources hidden in the Central Asian

region, which was much advertised in the 1990s. In order to reach out to the former Soviet Republics in the post-Cold War period, the leadership in the US developed the doctrine of enlargement in place of the containment strategy (Shen, 2010). The doctrine of enlargement which was based on the principles of democracy, human rights and a market economy proved to be unsuccessful in the authoritarian Central Asian states. The US could not also resort to coercive diplomacy as it needed Russia's support to deal with new conventional threats like Iran and Iraq. In this context, terrorism appeared to be a global-scale overriding threat around which it could organise its geopolitical interests immediately after 9/11 (Buzan, 2006). Afghanistan was not only the centre of terrorism, it was also vital for the US to transfer Central Asian energy resources to the world market while bypassing Russia and Iran. Moreover, Afghanistan was central to the American 'Greater Central Asia' project of moving the Central Asian states away from the Russian and Iranian orbit of influence towards Afghanistan and Pakistan (Menon, 2003). The War on Terror in Afghanistan provided the US an entry to the Central Asian states and helped in establishing military bases and securing transit rights in Central Asia for the military and non-military supplies to the American and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

The Clinton Administration fostered regional cooperation with Central Asia relying on multilateral institutions such as NATO's Partnership for Peace initiative (PfP) and the Central Asian Economic Community. The PfP allowed the partner Central Asian countries to build up an individual relationship with NATO, choosing their own priorities for cooperation. Starting from the late 1990s, the US Congress passed bills that called for the diversification of energy supplies from the Central Asian and Caspian regions (Yang, 2008). After assuming office, the Bush Administration released an energy policy report indicating that the exploitation of Caspian energy resources could not only benefit the economies of the region, but also help mitigate possible world supply disruptions, a major US security goal. Both the Clinton and Bush Administration considered Afghanistan vital for the American Central Asian strategy.

The US tried to shape the Afghan war unilaterally according to its own geopolitical interests, and it tried not to give Iran and Russia any major role in developing Afghan war strategy. It tried to secure most of

the military bases and supply routes for western troops in Pakistan and Central Asia. The US also tried to temper its overtly unilateral policy by using 'divide and rule' tactics. To do this, it began to engage Central Asian states bilaterally. It was argued that once Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the two key players in Central Asia, stepped out of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and began directly dealing with the US and NATO that these two organisations would be effectively kept out of the Afghan cauldron. The US allowed NATO at the same time to negotiate with Russia for transit route facilities. Therefore, the US engaged the regional powers bilaterally, robbing them of the collective strength that could have been expressed through organisations like the CSTO and SCO (Bhadrakumar, 2008).

The US's unilateral role was also facilitated by the political problems that characterise the bilateral relationships between India and Pakistan, India and China, Iran and Pakistan, and Russia and China. To gain Pakistan's cooperation, the US has used the 'India card', asking India at times to play a larger role in Afghanistan. Similarly, to contain India, it tried to raise the Chinese specter (Bhadrakumar, 2008).

According to a former diplomat of India, by the end of 2008, the US was taking advantage of the interconnectivity that Afghanistan provides to begin developing an altogether new land route through the southern Caucasus to Afghanistan which steered clear of Iran, Russia and China. He believed that the materialisation of the project would be a geopolitical coup – the biggest ever that Washington would have swung in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus (Bhadrakumar, 2008). At one stroke, the US would be tying up military cooperation at the bilateral level with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and at the same time would be able to consolidate its military position in the southern Caucasus. Furthermore, Washington was looking for new supply routes from and militarily bases in Central Asia, even though its close partnership with the Pakistani military was ongoing. He said: "the US has done exceedingly well in geopolitical terms, even if the war as such may have gone rather badly both for the Afghans and the Pakistanis and the European soldiers serving in Afghanistan" (Bhadrakumar, 2008).

S. Frederic Starr, Professor of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University articulated the vision of a Modern Silk Route realising the enormous trade potential in the region. In the first half of 2009, the US established several new transit corridors to deliver non-lethal goods to its forces in Afghanistan. These routes, put together, are termed as the Northern Distribution Network. Many US officials are interested in seeing this network transformed into a Modern Silk Route (Kuchins, 2010). It must be noted that many political ideas like the Greater Central Asia project are justified through this economic logic, but in reality, the supply routes and ports once put in place can be used for dual purposes—both civilian and military.

Pakistan was considered the key for the realisation of the American plan in Afghanistan and Central Asia. After Osama bin Laden was found and killed in Pakistan, the US-Pakistan strategic relationship began to show the signs of strain. It lay bare the divergences of interests that both states pursued in Afghanistan. However, it is believed that both states would try to balance their relationship as they are interdependent in the formulation of strategies to realise their respective objectives in Afghanistan. The US has rarely any chance of making its plan of reconciliation with the Taliban successful without Pakistan's assistance. Pakistan's military and intelligence wing, the ISI, reserves strong connections with the top Taliban leaders and the Haqqani network. Similarly, Pakistan's objectives in Afghanistan would remain a distant dream without American military aid and economic assistance.

The Lisbon Summit of November 2010 between NATO and Afghanistan and the Strategic Partnership Agreement of May 2012 between the US and Afghanistan, foreground the long-term American interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia (Parthasarathy, 2012). Before the US begins to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan in 2014, it wants to sign a bilateral security agreement (BSA) with the Afghan regime on the basis of which it can station its forces in Afghanistan for an indefinite period. The American plan to withdraw from Afghanistan is more a result of rising domestic pressure, huge financial loss, military and civilian casualties than any kind of realisation that Afghanistan is geopolitically unimportant for US foreign policy objectives.

Russian strategy in Afghanistan

Russian President Michael Gorbachev found in Iran a strategic partner with which Russia could work to counter the American strategy in Persian Gulf and Central Asia. They also developed strategies together in Afghanistan by arming and aiding the Northern Alliance forces against the Taliban. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia's role became more defensive in relation to Afghanistan and offensive in relation to Central Asia. Russia became busy in finding ways and means to keep the divided heartland under its control. Russia seemed neither interested in nor capable of securing a pro-Russian regime in Afghanistan, as had been the case during the Cold War. Russia, to contain the two non-conventional threats emerging from Afghanistan, namely drug-trafficking and Islamic fundamentalism, required the American presence - a conventional threat in the region. Therefore, it facilitated the American presence in the region to conduct its War on Terror, though not unconditionally. Nevertheless, Russia seemed to be aware of the American plan to install a pro-US regime in Afghanistan.

In response to the American role in the region, Russia accentuated its military role in the region. In October 2003, Russia established its first new regional military base since the Cold War at Kant, Kyrgyzstan. Russian and Kyrgyz officials also discussed the establishing of another major Russian military facility in southern Kyrgyzstan. Tajikistan granted Russia's 201st Motorised Infantry Division a permanent base near Dushanbe in October 2004. In June 2004, Russia and Uzbekistan signed a Treaty on Strategic Cooperation which provides for additional Russian military assistance to Uzbekistan and the creation of a joint anti-terrorism institute (Baksi, 2008).

In May 2005, the US critically responded to the Uzbek government's excessive use of force to suppress a violent uprising in the city of Andijon. It called for an independent investigation into the issue with international involvement and aligned its long-term interest in Central Asia with the promotion of democracy and human rights. Before the Andijon incident the US's policy in the region had been directed at strengthening the role of authoritarian leaders in order to get facilities to establish military bases. However, the Andijon incident led to a downturn in the bilateral relation-

ship between Uzbekistan and the US. The Russian ideology of 'sovereign democracy' and the continued policy of supporting the leaders in Central Asia reaped better results, and in November 2005, Russia and Uzbekistan signed a treaty on Allied Relations that pledged mutual military assistance in the event either becomes a victim of "aggression".

To secure an American withdrawal from the region, Russia initiated the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) declaration in 2005 to fix time limits on the temporary use of infrastructure and on the length of military contingents by the anti-terror coalition. The SCO was formed in June 2001 when Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Five – Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan – which had first met in 1996. Uzbekistan, which strongly resisted the Russian effort to bring Central Asia into closer security cooperation, joined the SCO because Russia's presence there is balanced by China. Currently, India, Iran and Pakistan enjoy observer status in the group. The SCO's declared purpose was security cooperation in relation to terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, and separatism. However, after September 11, the organisation has also sought to counter Western influence in the region. America's withdrawal from the Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan became a priority of Russian policy. The Kyrgyz President, Bakiyev, speaking in Moscow after a lengthy haggling session in which he had secured a \$2 billion loan from Russia, said that the Americans would be given six months to withdraw. Since the mid-2000s, the Manas airbase had been under attack in the Russian and local press, which succeeded to a large degree in shaping public sentiment against the presence of the US in Kyrgyzstan. In April 2009, Russian television broadcast a documentary alleging that Manas was a cover for a large-scale US spying mission on Russia (Bohr, 2010).

The Russian aim of ending US use of the base was frustrated by the fact that US payments for use of the base represented a substantial financial assistance to Kyrgyzstan. Instead of opposing the US and Kyrgyz government, Russia looked for a new military base in the city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan, which was to be a key component of the new Collective Operational Reaction Forces (CORF) under the auspices of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). In June 2009, the CSTO formally created CORF as part of its ambition to cre-

ate forces 'on par with NATO forces' and in view of the unstable situation in Afghanistan. However, Uzbekistan has objected to the opening of this military base. The Uzbek leadership has argued that the continued destabilisation in Afghanistan is largely in Russia's interest, in so far as Russia has used the conflict there to justify an expansion of its military presence in Central Asia. (Mishra, 2013).

Perhaps because of Russia's overriding influence due to its monopoly in oil supplies, the Central Asian states have agreed to strengthen CSTO as an alternative to NATO. In one of the top-level summit meetings, the CSTO leaders unanimously agreed that countries outside the regional security bloc would only be able to establish military bases on the territory of a member-state with the consent of all member-states. The Russian president Medvedev said "the decision we have made with regard to military bases in a third country is very important for the consolidation of positions within the CSTO" (Upadhyay, 2012). Such a decision by the CSTO member-states assumes significance in view of the reported American plans to redeploy to Central Asia some of the forces that will be pulled out of Afghanistan in 2014.

Russians claimed that Central Asia's borders were their southern borders and that Russia was vulnerable to a wide range of security threats within Central Asia. Not all of these threats concern America. It was argued that the Afghanistan campaign might have actually exacerbated the security problems by dispersing Taliban groups into Central Asia. Moreover, the issue of drug-trafficking, which the Russians insisted be firmly dealt with, was not seriously taken up by the Americans. The warlords on whom the American-led Afghan operation depended never wanted drug production and drug-trafficking to be part of the operation.

Diplomatically, Russia has supported Iran in its nuclear programme and opposed heavy sanctions against it. Russia believes a continuing stalemate on the nuclear issue will sap American energy and weaken its role in the region (Fedorov, 2009). Iran and Russia share a common perception of American intentions in the region. Both countries agree that any reconciliation strategy to include the Taliban must be Afghan-led rather than American-led. Russia perceives a threat from the long-term presence of American forces in Afghanistan and the existence of military bases in Central Asian states.

Pakistan's Afghan Strategy

To make its Afghan strategy successful, Pakistan on the one hand supported the US mission in Afghanistan and on the other hand, provided recurring support to the Afghan Taliban surreptitiously. Cables sent by the US ambassador, Anne Patterson, stated that Pakistan supports at least four terror/insurgent groups to strengthen its position in Afghanistan: the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani network, the Hekmetyar network and Lashker-e-Teiba (Gregory, 2010). Pakistan led a selective military operation against the radical groups who had turned against the Pakistani state. It harped on the issue of violation of its sovereignty to curtail the American operation on its territory so as to shape the operation suitable to its own needs. Despite the odds, America has continued to supply a huge amount of economic and military aid to Pakistan because it is vital to Washington's grand designs in Central Asia, whereas India's role for America is vital in the Asia Pacific region to contain China. The chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, who accompanied US Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke to New Delhi in July 2010, wanted India to focus on its military-to-military cooperation with America and, of course, to work hard with the US to counter China's "assertive ... territorial claims and aggressive approach to the near-sea area recently" (Bhadrakumar, 2010). At the same time, Mr. Holbrooke advised India not to worry about the future of Afghanistan, where New Delhi would have a role to play (Bhadrakumar, 2010).

Pakistan's complaint that it faced a dual threat coming from its eastern and western frontier during the War on Terror led the Obama Administration to develop the AfPak strategy, which envisaged that the territorial integrity of Pakistan had to be maintained for success in Afghanistan. According to an Indian scholar, "The US to stabilise Afghanistan, is unlikely to favour a genuine Pashtun nationalist movement given the obvious adverse consequences it would imply for Pakistan's territorial integrity" (Singh, 2009).

Pakistan has received substantial aid from the US in order to combat terrorism on its soil as part of the War on Terror. After the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, Pakistan got more "war aid" than "developmental aid" from the US. According to Akbar Zaidi, "The war aid

disbursed to Pakistan's military, the ISI, and the Afghan mujahideen - although intended to serve America's purposes more than Pakistan's - ironically nurtured the very entities that were to cause serious problems three decades later" (Zaidi, 2011). The War on Terror reinforced a substantial amount of American "war aid" to Pakistan. From 2002 to 2010, the US provided almost \$19 billion to Pakistan which did not include commitments such as the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan act of 2009. Over the period of 2002-2008, only 10 per cent of this money had been explicitly designated for development purposes whereas 75 per cent had been explicitly set aside for military purposes (Zaidi, 2011). However, Pakistan used the military aid for purposes other than combating terrorism. According to Azeem Ibrahim, "The Pakistani military did not use most of the funds for the agreed objective of fighting terror. Pakistan bought much conventional military equipment. Examples include F-16s, aircraft-mounted armaments, anti-ship and anti-missile defence systems, and an air defence radar system costing \$200 million, despite the fact that the terrorists in FATA have no air attack capability. Over half of the total funds-54.9 per cent-were spent on fighter aircraft and weapons, over a quarter-26.62 per cent on support and other aircraft, and 10 per cent on advanced weapons systems" (Ibrahim, 2009).

Pakistan, in order to control the outcome of the War on Terror has at times denied its territory to NATO convoys to undertake civilian supplies. It has condemned American drone strikes on the Pakistani side of the Durand Line (the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan) and complained that they violate Pakistan's sovereignty. Moreover, it maintains links with the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network to shape the War on Terror according to its objectives.

While Pakistan desperately needed the US arms and aid to strengthen itself against India and to play a greater role in Afghanistan, it has had to contain the regional ambitions of Iran, Russia and India and extra-regional ambitions of the US to secure its influence in Afghanistan and, through it, in Central Asia.

In the post-Cold War era, there have been marked changes in the relationship between Pakistan and Russia. While India has moved away from the Cold War time strategic relationship with the USSR, Pakistan

and Russia have come closer, as the former is thought to be vital in stabilising the situation in Central Asia and other parts of the former USSR. The long-term relationship between Pakistan and the extremist Islamic groups has given the former the leverage to broker peace in various regions on the Asian continent. Whether Pakistan exercises enough control over these groups is questionable, the synergy between the Pakistani military and ISI with the extremist groups has induced various countries to engage Pakistan to broker peace (Bhadrakumar, 2009). The quadripartite summit of Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan in Sochi, hosted by President Dmitry Medvedev, points to a redefining of the relationship between the two countries in the post-Cold War era. According to Vladimir Radyuhin, what has made Moscow change course is the realisation that “seeing Islamabad as part of the region’s problems does not help to advance the Russian goal of playing a bigger role in the region. The Kremlin finally decided that Pakistan must be part of the solution. The format of four-way cooperation with Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan should help Moscow prepare for the eventual pullback of the U.S.-led forces from Afghanistan: engage Pakistan, return to Afghanistan and tighten Russian hold over the former Soviet Central Asia” (Radyuhin, 2010). He further argues that the Sochi summit “dimmed India’s hopes of gaining a strategic foothold in Tajikistan. India and Russia had planned to jointly use the Ayni airfield, which India helped to renovate, but Indian presence there looks very doubtful in the context of the emerging Russia-Afghanistan-Pakistan-Tajikistan axis. India will, of course, remain Russia’s close friend and strategic partner, but it will have to learn to live with the new Russian-Pakistani bonhomie, just as Russia has taken in its stride India’s entanglement with the U.S.” (Radyuhin, 2010).

Iranian Strategy in Afghanistan

After the disintegration of the USSR and emergence of the Central Asian states, Iran’s conception of region expanded. It saw its interests not only in the Persian Gulf or in the Shia populated states, it had also an increasing interest in Central Asia and in using Afghanistan as a corridor to Central Asia. South Asia also emerged as one of the biggest markets for Central Asian resources and therefore a destination for Iran’s commercial

interests. In order to play a major role in the wider region, Iran shed its support for only the Shiite factions and enlarged its support to other groups in Afghanistan. Iran also became wary of the American role in the region. Though Iran provides the shortest and cheapest routes for the transfer of Central Asian energy resources and therefore aspires to play a major role in oil politics, containment of Iran was so important for the US that pipeline projects like the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) and the pipeline through Turkey were given utmost importance despite their commercial non-viability. The US administration exerted pressure on oil companies to accept the projects. The pipeline through Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan route was estimated to cost nearly four billion dollars and the financial companies found unjustifiable if the US and Turkish government did not pay part of it. The TAP pipeline project, on the other hand, involved the risk of insecurity as that was to pass through unstable Afghanistan and Pakistan and Unocol Vice President Marty Miller said that the project at that moment was not financeable (Mishra, 2012a). Apart from Iran's interest to supply oil to the world market, the US believed that Iran, being a Rimland country, could develop continental and naval strategies simultaneously unless effectively contained. Iran's ambition for a greater role in the wider region and US containment strategy got reflected in Afghanistan.

In May 2010, Iran was accused of training Afghan fighters inside Iran by General Stanley A. McChrystal, then the NATO commander in Afghanistan. Iran was also held responsible for supplying arms to the Afghan fighters. For example, in March 2011, Admiral Mullen told Congress that sizable weapons shipments from Iran had been intercepted though these charges were refuted by Iran. In July 2011, David S. Cohen, the Treasury Under-Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, announced that Iran had entered a secret deal with an al-Qaeda offshoot that provided money and recruits for attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Mishra, 2012a).

The Iranian government accused the US of aiding the Balochi Sunni insurgent group Jundullah, which was responsible for killing several senior Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps officers. Iran tried to substantiate its accusations with statements from the Jundullah leaders. For example, in an Iranian state television broadcast a captured Jundullah leader, Abdolmalek

Rigi, made a statement that he received support from the US. Although the US denies any such claims, the continuation of the Balochi insurgency with an impact on Iran's territorial integrity will most likely result in furthering Iranian actions that undermine US goals in Afghanistan. It is argued that potential U.S. or Israeli military actions against Iran's nuclear facilities could result in more significant Iranian aid to the Taliban (Mishra, 2012a).

It was reported by the New York Times that in August 2010, on Afghan President Karzai's personal aircraft, Iran's ambassador to Afghanistan, Feda Hussein Maliki, handed over a bag filled with euros to Karzai's chief of staff, Umar Daudzai. The alleged purpose being, to promote Iran's interests and to counter US and other western influence in Afghanistan. It is argued that in the 2010 parliamentary elections, Iran apparently provided monetary support to the Hazaras who have gained considerable prominence and clout in the Afghan political scene (Mishra, 2012a). Iran argued for greater UN role in Afghanistan, continued its close relationship with Russia and allegedly maintained secret links with the Taliban to dilute American influence in Afghanistan. Iran invested in the reconstruction of Afghanistan in a way that western Afghanistan remained under the Iranian sphere of influence.

On November 24, 2013, the G-6 countries (US, UK, Russia, China, France and Germany) and Iran reached an understanding in Geneva that the West would lift sanctions partially with the temporary suspension by Iran of its nuclear programme (Aneja, 2013). However, such an understanding may not remove their mutual suspicions which lie in their adversarial geopolitical objectives. It would also be far-fetched to believe that the US would alienate its allies like Saudi-Arabia and Israel and cooperate with Iran beyond a limit.

Indian Strategy in Afghanistan

India has shunned any kind of large military role in Afghanistan and confined itself to reconstruction activities. It opposed the American plan of reconciling with the Taliban and saw the distinction between the good Taliban and bad Taliban as a flawed exercise. It is argued that India in its declaration of unequivocal support for the US led War on Terror put all

its eggs in the American basket. The Indian government cooperated with the US to a surprising degree, dovetailing their Afghan policy with the US's AfPak objectives by breaking down walls and bureaucratic obstacles between the two countries' intelligence and investigating agencies. China, with its ideology of non-interference has refrained itself from taking up any major anti-Taliban role, on the plea that it would affect the Uyghur insurgency in Xinxiang province. Iran and Russia, with American withdrawal from the region as their priority would slowly tone down their opposition to the proposal of the Taliban's inclusion. India has so far diplomatically failed to engage these two countries in serious discussions on this issue.

India's opposition to Iran's nuclear programme and support for sanctions against it and India's lack of interest in the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline issue, have hampered the strategic relationship between Iran and India. India has backed three US – supported resolutions against Iran in the International Atomic Energy Agency and is enforcing UN Security Council sanctions against Tehran. On the other hand, Pakistan showed keen interest in the proposed pipeline and has been witnessed taking some concrete measures regarding this. There has been a growing closeness between Afghanistan's three immediate neighbours – Pakistan, Iran and Turkey. At two significant summits India was not invited for assisting in resolving the Afghan crisis - the trilateral summit held in Islamabad for discussing future roles of Afghanistan's immediate neighbours, and second, the security conference on Afghanistan hosted by Turkey. India was left with no choice but to rethink its policies along with the shifting roles (Iqbal, 2010).

The American and Iranian understanding that Iran would temporarily suspend its nuclear programme with the temporary lifting of American sanctions has apparently released new energy in Indo-Iranian cooperation. Iran has expressed its willingness to go ahead with the pipeline project alongwith India undercutting Pakistan's mere interest in the pipeline without financial ability.

While Pakistan moved closer to Russia in the post-Cold War era, India came closer to the US with robust economic engagement. Strategically, India has received a de-facto nuclear power status and has made significant deals on civil nuclear energy which Pakistan was unable to procure.

However, it is noteworthy that America's Central Asian strategy has been more dependent on Pakistan than India. While all sorts of favours that India received from the US were aimed at balancing China, it has been Pakistan's concerns in Central Asia that have been respected by the US. India never took note of the US's role in Afghanistan to forge its Central Asian strategy which does not co-opt Indian interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia. America's Greater Central Asian strategy seeks to place Afghanistan and Pakistan in the framework of Central Asian geopolitics. It is interesting to note that in India both the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the Ministry of Defence (MOD) in their annual report 1995-96 referred nowhere to the US role in Afghanistan. Its singular obsession with Pakistan emerges as a recurring factor. The MEA says that the situation in Afghanistan "continues to be unstable", and goes on to say that it has been "further exacerbated by the interference of Pakistan directly and more so through its creation of the Taliban" (Navlakha, 1996). Taking this a notch higher, the MOD says that the Taliban "were armed and trained by Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence" and goes on to say that "Pakistan's attempts to install a pliable government in Kabul would have serious security implications for us" (Navlakha, 1996).

It is argued that India's greater dependence on the US regarding the Afghan operation blinded it from taking more seriously other countries sharing common concerns on the Afghan issue. India failed to engage Iran, on which its Central Asian strategy depends, in discussions on the future of the Afghan issue. Rather, it has estranged its relationship with Iran on a number of issues already mentioned. Russia was also not taken seriously by India on the Afghan issue, even though Central Asia is considered to be Russia's strategic backyard and any Indian strategy to expand influence beyond Afghanistan into Central Asia has to depend on Russia.

Factors that make the New Great Game complex

Erosion of American Soft-power

There is the question of legitimacy involved in such kind of wars like the War on Terror in Afghanistan in which civilians die in numbers. The War is not against the state but against a group of people. If the enemy

is no longer the opposing state and its people but a regime or leadership, then bombs that miss their targets do not still hit the 'enemy' but rather, innocent civilians. In the Second World War there were few qualms about causing collateral because ultimately it was still the enemy that suffered. But when bombs missed their targets in Belgrade or Baghdad or in Afghanistan, it was the innocent and the vulnerable that suffered (McInnes, 2003). The Afghan case reveals how civilians may go to the extent of supporting the forces waging war against alien powers. Furthermore, the 'War on Terror' has widened the gap between international law and legitimacy. Legitimacy provides the necessary flexibility to law when the latter is relatively fixed and rigid. In this context, legitimacy can be understood not as deviation from existing law, but rather making the law more relevant to the changing conditions. The preemptive use of force against groups of people (terrorists), however, put international legitimacy in jeopardy (Byers, 2002). First, international law is based on the logic of self-defence, and secondly, states are the sole units of action. Preemptive attacks can be self-serving and actions against groups undermine the territorial integrity of states within which such groups operate. Military operations against such groups foreclose the policing and extradition options on which international law is based without there even being anyone to decide that there is sufficient evidence of state complicity in harbouring terrorists.

To gain a quick victory in the war against Al Qaeda, the US, along with violating international law, took the support of warlords who had no less violent objectives than did Al Qaeda or the Taliban. It is reported that the US still maintains relationships with various warlords to make its counter-insurgency strategy effective. The strengthening of warlords would lead to a more conflict-prone Afghanistan than a peaceful one. Even the problems of poppy cultivation and drug trafficking have been overlooked by the US to achieve its geopolitical objectives (Mishra, 2012b). The US's increasing emphasis on a military perspective on security is reflected in its highly technocratic view on war, its scorn for nation-building, and its prioritising of ends over means. All these factors will erode the soft-power resources of the US in the long-term.

In the post-Cold War period, it is being increasingly acknowledged that wars cannot be won militarily. Cold War politics was refrained from

a direct use of force and coercion due to parity of power between the two superpowers. With the end of the Cold War and the dismantlement of the Warsaw pact, American foreign policy makers assumed that coercion and use of force if necessary could serve US foreign policy objectives. However, the post-war situations in Iraq and Afghanistan are difficult to be managed by America alone. More importantly, they require long-term and socio-economic engagement rather than military operations alone.

Contrary to their actions, the US officials admit that wars cannot be won militarily. For example, the US former secretary of defence Robert Gates observed that “one of the important lessons of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is that military success is not sufficient to win: economic development, institution-building and the rule of law, promoting internal reconciliation, good governance, providing basic services...along with security, are essential ingredients for success.” (Fair, 2010). In the absence of these basic requirements, non-state actors like terrorists, warlords and civil war groups move from strength to strength. Realising that there is no military endgame to the Afghan problem, the US has looked for political solutions like talking to the Taliban to stop attacks on US and NATO forces in return for their reconciliation into the Afghan political mainstream. However, many analysts believe that it is a hasty decision on the part of the US. The American plan for withdrawal of its forces by the end of 2014 is considered premature, as the Afghan security forces are still not strong enough to protect the Afghan nation from the future security threats and the Taliban has not completely abjured violence and accepted the Afghan constitution in principle.

Assertive Regional Powers

The involved states have entered into deep economic and cultural relationships which are mutually beneficial and any conflict on the military and strategic front would cost them more, as they would then have to bear the accumulated cost of disrupting the chain (Basrur, 2009). As economic security has begun to play a more important or at least as important role as does the military security perspective, some scholars have defined the world as militarily unipolar but economically multipolar. The global financial crisis points to the extent to which financial markets have

been integrated. To tone down the crisis required joint efforts on the part of major economic players and members of the G-20, and both developed and developing countries debated to develop a common strategy to deal with the crisis. Containment of Iran, which has been one of the primary objectives of American strategy in Afghanistan, may run into difficulties in an ever-increasing inter-dependent world. Even after Bush included Iran in his description of the “Axis of evil” in his State of the Union address of 29 January 2002, the European Union foreign ministers reached an agreement just five months later to open talks with Iran on a trade and cooperation pact. When the Sheer Energy Company of Canada agreed to a US\$80 million development project with the National Iranian Oil Company, the US objected to it categorically. Similarly, Moscow has a major investment in Iran’s nuclear programme. The Russian Ministry of Atomic Energy was closely involved in building Iran’s \$1 billion Bushehr nuclear power plant, and the Russian nuclear industry has continued seeking for more such projects (Fedorov, 2009).

Neither has the world emerged as completely unipolar, nor has any world society become firmly established. In between the two perspectives on the post-Cold War era, there remains a large grey area where states move from a pro-US foreign policy or clear anti-US or restricted foreign policy to a more independent foreign policy. For example, Iran pursued a cautious foreign policy in the Cold War period due to the presence of the Soviet Union near its border and America’s policy of sanctions after the hostage crisis. After the disintegration of the USSR, Iran has on several occasions expressed its will to play the role of a regional power. It is developing nuclear plants with Russian assistance despite American sanctions. The coercive diplomacy of the US against Iran is ineffective so long as Russia does not agree to it. Growing interdependence and the availability of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction to large number of state actors have granted such independence to them. In the aftermath of 9/11, though the Iranian President Syed Mohammad Khatami condemned the attacks and sympathised with the American people, he favoured a UN led ‘anti-terror coalition’ to take on the terrorists, and noted Iran’s willingness to participate in such a coalition. But the unilateral American attack on Afghanistan led to Iran’s accusation that the move was part of a long-

term US plan to dominate different regions of the world. Similarly, while India and the US have developed a strategic partnership in the post-Cold War period in the form of civil nuclear deal, Pakistan and Russia tried to improve their relations as the Summit in Sochi indicated (Radyuhin, 2010). In the case of Afghanistan, regional powers like Iran, Pakistan, India and many Central Asian states are trying to pursue their strategic interests more independently. Central Asia, which until the disintegration of the Soviet Union, had a clear anti-US thrust in its relations with other countries because of the Soviet Union's foreign policy making, tried to move away from Russia's orbit but never wanted to replace Russian hegemony with any other power's hegemony. They preferred independence to any other kind of regional security arrangements centering around a hegemon. Therefore, they played one power against the other to secure independence.

A zero-sum Game between the players of the New Great Game

A military and strategic perspective on security is based on a zero-sum game. Gain is ensured by defeating the enemy. The states which fight the enemy have different military-strategic objectives. When the end objective is military-strategic in nature, the immediate objective of member-states is bound to be military-strategic with the same logic of a zero-sum game. For example, the US call for the 'War on Terror' has been conjoined by many states, but their military strategic objectives substantially differ as they belong to different geopolitical realities. While Pakistan is more inclined to defend its interests against India, Russia wants to maintain its interests in Central Asia by not allowing Islamic forces in. The 'War on Terror' would help Russia in its fight in Chechnya but it is worried about NATO's presence in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Iran wants to defend its geopolitical interests in Central Asia and maintain its traditional sphere of influence in western Afghanistan, and the Central Asian states understand the spread of Islamic fundamentalism across their territory and to get rid of the Russian monopoly over energy politics in the region they invite in a US presence. According to Farkhod Tolipov, the operation in Afghanistan is essentially leading to the juxtaposition of two realities: the international and unifying fight against terrorism on the one hand, and the conflict prone, disuniting geopolitical rivalry in the Central-South Asian macro-region, on the other (Tolipov, 2004).

Growing challenges from Non-state actors

There are likely to be fewer cases of conventional warfare among the integrated members of the Europe, less US capability to engage militarily without the co-operation of other powers, and more economic engagements among the states, all of which raise the cost of military engagement and mitigate the chances of symmetrical warfare among nation-states. On the other hand, the rise of international terrorism and civil war situations in the post-Cold War era has increased the cases of asymmetric conflicts. In the era of globalisation, the “democratisation of technology”, the “privatisation of war” and the “miniaturization of weaponry” embolden radical groups vis-a-vis state actors (Mc Donough, 2009). Asymmetric wars cannot be won. The nuclear missile defence technology developed by the US will not be able to detect such operations if planes and buses are used for terrorist operations and people sneak in to the country using fake passports and visas. Unlike a conventional regular army of the opponent, there is no identifiable enemy in such asymmetric warfare. They mingle with civilians and they can even enter into the territory of some other states from where they can wage war. The difficulties in the counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan revealed that the US Army was still embracing a big-war paradigm. Difficult terrains, porous boundaries, difficulty in understanding native peoples’ language, and cultural dissimilarity have all impeded the American fight against the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

It is an issue of recurring debate in Washington as to how to combine counterinsurgency operations effectively with nation-building efforts. It is because of America’s military thrust in its foreign policy, that counterinsurgency operations have gone more military, and thus impeded the nation-building process. According to Michael J. Mazarr “the tremendously insightful Hammes and policymakers such as the thoughtful and dedicated Gates have fully recognized the importance of nonmilitary instruments of power in dealing with these new threats and have called for improvements in those instruments. In practice, however, actual U.S. operations in these contingencies have retained an overwhelmingly military flavor” (Mazarr, 2008).

The shifting and secret alliance system

In the context of the post-Cold War era in which alliances and partnership are always shifting, an effective policy of coercion cannot be ap-

plied. With the growth of non-state actors like radical religious groups, states do not always form alliances on a formal basis and can operate in a surreptitious way if the allying other group is not a state. Pakistan provides a cogent example to illustrate this. On the one hand it fights the 'War on Terror' and other side it provides sanctuary and logistical help to different terrorist groups. While the US has strong reservations regarding Pakistan being a strong ally to fight terrorism as the secret defence documents disclosed by Wikileaks point out, it gives more and more aid to Pakistan to reduce anti-Americanism and the support-base for terrorists in Pakistan (The US Embassy cables, 2011). In the beginning of 2011, at a time when the US was contemplating the ways and means to withdraw from Afghanistan, the Washington Post reported that the Obama administration would give Pakistan more military, intelligence and economic support after assessing that the US could not afford to alienate Pakistan (Adhikari, 2011). The White House rejected proposals made by military commanders who, after losing patience with Pakistan's refusal to go after the Afghan Taliban, recommended that the US deploy ground forces to raid the insurgents' safe havens inside Pakistan (The US Embassy cables, 2011). After Osama bin Laden was found and killed in Pakistan and after the interrogation of American-born but Pakistani origin terrorist, David Headley, the US relationship with Pakistan reached a new low. Headley, an American official working for Drug Enforcement Administration had strong links with the Al Qaeda and Pakistani terrorist groups like Laskar-e-Taiba. After he was arrested, he revealed the connections between ISI, Laskar-e-Taiba and Al Qaeda. However, analysts argue that still the US and Pakistan have a tacit understanding, as Pakistan has not shot down a single US drone, despite its complaints about frequent American drone attacks. Iran, on the other hand shot down the single US drone that crossed into its territory. Iran and China being deeply suspicious of American motives in the Central Asian region are reported to have provided military support to the Afghan Taliban. For example, there have been reports of Iran providing military hardware to the extremist Sunni Afghan Taliban and Chinese-made military equipment has reportedly also been found on Taliban fighters (Mullen, 2009). Thus, the shifting of alliances, the increasing capability of states to pursue independent foreign policy objectives and secret and informal alli-

ances, jeopardize coercive diplomacy and render the use of force ineffective. International politics relating to Afghanistan can be situated in the grey area defined by no clear alliances and by asymmetric warfare.

The New Great Game after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan

Strategies adopted by different major powers in Afghanistan make solutions to the Afghan problem very difficult. The major powers seem to face a prisoner's dilemma where the opponent's intentions and actions are not clear. While many regional powers have joined the War on Terror led by the US, they have done so to facilitate their own role in the region. The people of Afghanistan perceive another civil war awaiting after US withdrawal, like the one that ensued after Soviet withdrawal. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan will affect the rough balance maintained among the Central Asian states and could result in the eruption of border disputes and ethnic conflicts entailing a negative impact on Afghanistan. Conflicts in Afghanistan could also spill over to volatile Central Asia (Mankoff, 2013). Russia which so far has limited its role to preventing passage of drugs and radical Islamism from Afghanistan into Central Asia could be compelled to play a major role in Afghanistan with the withdrawal of American forces. China, which so far had a free-ride on American and NATO military presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia and thus been able to concentrate on an economic diplomacy, could also be pushed to take up a military role to insure its energy interests in these areas (Weitz, 2013). Afghan President Hamid Karzai has asked India to take up a larger military role in Afghanistan by supplying weapons and training Afghan security forces. Pakistan has been preparing itself to secure strategic depth in Afghanistan with the eventual American withdrawal from Afghanistan. Iran, on its part, would never like the phenomenon of rising Sunni influence in Afghanistan and therefore would act to counter it. India's rising influence must be countered by Pakistan and vice versa. China's increasing military role would be a problem for Russia and India. Non-state actors like the Taliban may have their independent plans in Afghanistan or in collusion with state actors like Pakistan. American withdrawal from Afghanistan could create a power vacuum not only in Afghanistan, but could create a similar situation in Central Asia, enhancing the stakes of the regional powers like Russia, China, India, Pakistan and Iran.

If the present stalemate continues and the US withdraws, the new Great Game would continue in a more dangerous environment in the absence of a rough equilibrium maintained in the region by the US and NATO presence. The regional powers would intensify their roles and become more militaristic.

Framework for addressing the Afghan problem

The Afghan problem can be addressed within a regional framework respecting Afghan neutrality and evolving strategies of regional cooperation with the initiatives and lead taken by the UN. Afghanistan's stability is dependent on the behaviour of its neighbours and extra-regional players like the US. Historically, Afghanistan pursued a policy of neutrality rather than joining any power-blocs or endorsing any externally imposed ideology. Therefore, the solution to the Afghan problem lies in upholding its neutrality status. The geostrategic situation of Afghanistan has tempted major powers to intervene there. However, the lesson that is to be learnt is that no Empire or state has been able to occupy Afghanistan. The British and Czarist Empires, the Soviet Union and the United States have all failed to achieve their desired objectives in Afghanistan.

The major powers need to shed their military understanding of security purely based on their respective geopolitical interests, avoid quick military solutions to the problems and instead wait for a prolonged process of consultations and negotiations and take care of the socio-economic problems. Afghanistan needs economic assistance for its development and security. The Afghan army needs to be properly trained to ensure security after the US leaves Afghanistan. Afghanistan also requires international support in order to turn into a democratic country that will allow for the representing of its multi-ethnic groups in the governance structure and the conducting of free and fair elections. Cooperation and understanding between the major powers can reduce the strength of radical groups and, therefore, bring them to negotiating table.

The UN needs to play a significant role as it would lessen the fear that if a major power does not promote its influence in Afghanistan, their adversaries would take advantage of that and spread their own agenda. The UN can be an effective check against a particular major power increasing

its influence at the cost of others. However, the effectiveness of the UN depends on the lessons learnt in Afghanistan by the major powers that it has benefited none but affected all.

Conclusion

The new Great Game in Afghanistan involves many regional powers who began to assert their role more independently after the tight structure of the Cold War collapsed. The end of the Cold War also witnessed the growth of non-state actors like radical religious groups with asymmetric war tactics. Regional powers try to defend and promote their geopolitical interests by forming secret alliances with these groups which, in turn, undermine the interests of other players in the region. For example, Pakistan, Iran and China are reported to have provided arms and aid to the Taliban to thwart the American role in Afghanistan. The growing interdependence between nation-states in the era of globalisation and the availability of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction to many states have provided state actors with the required leverage to pursue their geopolitical interests independent of the US. However, though the regional powers try to contain American influence in the region, they undercut each other's interests there too. The alliances formed in the post-Cold War world are not clear. American leadership has expressed its apprehension over whether Pakistan is a trustworthy partner to fight terrorism. The US policy of containment towards Iran and Russia would certainly be difficult in this era of interdependence. The US has also eroded its soft power resources by flouting international norms, fighting with warlords, not trying to address the problem of drug-trafficking adequately and by unilaterally determining the Afghan war strategies and peace plan. The US has neither the requisite hard power resources to force a solution to the Afghan problem nor the required soft-power resources to reach a political settlement. With the drawdown of American forces from Afghanistan, the struggle for influence could intensify among the regional powers which might precipitate another civil war in Afghanistan. The possible solution to the Afghan problem lies in working out a regional framework of cooperation among regional powers under the leading role of the UN.

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