

Strategic Culture and Threat Perception of Afghanistan

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Indian Defence Review

Afghanistan has geographical interface with energy-rich West Asia and Central Asia as also with nuclear capable China and Pakistan. Its direct interface with India is precluded by Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. Nonetheless, Afghanistan remains an important factor in India's security calculus.

The export of terrorists to Jammu and Kashmir from Afghanistan has been the most pressing concern for India. The role played in the hijacking of an Indian aircraft by Islamic fundamentalists demonstrated the level of viciousness that the Taliban regime had acquired. A friendly and stable government in Afghanistan can mitigate much of India's security concerns.

Afghanistan shares a 76 km boundary with China, 936 km with Iran, 2,430 km with Pakistan, 1,206 km with Tajikistan, 724 km with Turkmenistan and 137 km with Uzbekistan. This 1,240 km long (east to west) and 565 km wide (north to south) mountainous (50 per cent country above 2,000 mtrs) country has seriously impacted on the security sensitivities of all its neighbours.

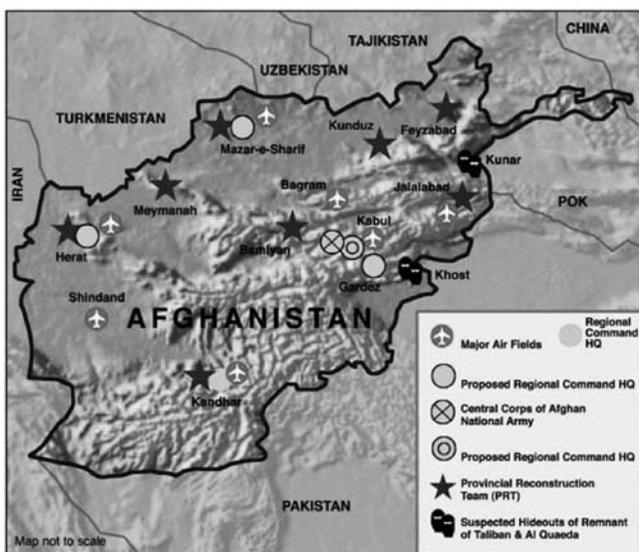
Afghanistan's destabilisation has engendered the movement of a large number of refugees (approximately 6 million) to Iran, Pakistan and Tajikistan. The presence of refugees in these countries and particularly Pakistan has created serious social and internal security problems, which include drug trafficking and impetus to the clandestine arms market. Even 'Stringer' surface-to-air missiles supplied by the US to Mujahideen groups during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan were reportedly on sale.

The fundamentalist and terrorist elements in Afghanistan are known to have developed regional and global links. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) cadres have been receiving active support from such elements in the past. In fact,

the IMU cadres fought alongside the Taliban against the Coalition Forces. All the Central Asian States have been severely afflicted by smuggling of drugs that are cultivated in Afghanistan. The country's destabilising potential is enormous.

Historically, Afghanistan's mountains are characterised by a number of passes of great strategic importance, including the Khyber Pass (1,027 mtrs) leading to the Indian subcontinent. Between Quetta (Pakistan) and Pakistan's border with China, there are more than 200 passes leading into Afghanistan, of which nearly 50 per cent are motorable. The existence of these passes had facilitated guerrilla operations by the Mujahideen against the Soviet forces. Even at present, they hold the key to the defence and security of Afghanistan, especially from the Taliban forces, which have melted away in the region.

Strategically, Afghanistan is of great importance to Pakistan. Pakistan has always considered its lack of strategic depth vis-à-vis India as its greatest geo-strategic disadvantage. A friendly and amenable Afghanistan, in Pakistani perception, can compensate for this disadvantage during hostilities with India. Moreover, the Durand Line, which demarcated the boundary between Afghanistan and British India in 1893, has always been repudiated by most of the Afghan regimes. The line divides the Pashtuns who have strong ethnic affinities into two. In the 1980s, there were some 10 million Pashtuns in Pakistan and 6 million in Afghanistan. The clamour for reunification by the Pashtuns in the two countries could exacerbate under a non Pak-friendly regime in Afghanistan. It was because of such imperatives that Pakistan propped up the Taliban regime.



The most important leverage Pakistan has is the access to the sea that it provides to landlocked Afghanistan. For Afghanistan, Karachi located at a distance of 1,700 km is the nearest and most accessible port.

So far this leverage has been ineffective due to economic regression in Afghanistan, but its potency is likely to increase as and when an economic turn around takes place. Afghanistan has some oil and gas of its own, but not enough to qualify as a major strategic concern. Its northern neighbours i.e. the Central Asian Republics by contrast contain reserves, which could be critical to future global supply. But Central Asia's energy reserves are worthless unless they are efficiently moved and marketed. The oil and gas supply of the Central Asian Republics continues to be predominantly predicated on the old Soviet Union pipeline network that terminates in Russia. This dependency gives Russia a huge leverage over the Central Asian States. The US has been rooting (albeit selectively) for alternate pipeline routes in order to extricate the Central Asian Republics from Russian dependence. Piping it through Iran does not appear to be a possibility given US-Iran relations. Piping it through China will be prohibitive in cost. Potentially, the most attractive energy markets are in South Asia i.e. India and Pakistan, where demand is booming and competitors are scarce.

In fact, it would be far more profitable than pumping it west and selling it in Europe. But the pipeline network that would carry oil and gas has to necessarily pass through Afghanistan. Certain quarters allege that it was the economic consideration, especially the interests of its oil industry that weighed on the US to acquiesce to Pakistan propping up of the Taliban Government. Subsequently, it was the issue of refuge provided by the Taliban regime to Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda cadres that dominated all other considerations. In the inter-play between security and economics, the latter began to override. The 9/11 incident forced the US to adopt a drastic military course. For the world, the strategic importance of Afghanistan from the geo-political point of view was yet again underscored.

Afghanistan has always been a robust buffer against competing influences. The Iranian revolution has had little impact on it. China was prevented from making any inroads. Pakistan's attempt to dominate Afghanistan has been rebuffed time and again. The erstwhile Soviet Union's southward expansion plans were put paid to in Afghanistan. The key to regional and global stability, therefore, lies in the positive encouragement to Afghanistan's buffer status by the international community. If Afghanistan could turn positively neutral, it would bring immense economic benefits to itself.

Threat Perception

Afghanistan's strategic importance and geo-political location has rendered it a constant victim of internal and external power struggles, conflicts and combat. It was an apple of discord between Russia and Britain in the 19th century and between USA, USSR during the Cold War. At the UN Millennium Summit in September 2001, the ousted (by Taliban) Afghan President Rabbani had lamented that "foreign interference had turned our land into a terrorist training camp, a centre for drug smugglers and a base for spilling instability." Most of the regimes in Afghanistan have been vulnerable to machinations by vested powers. Historically, there has been no external power that has exercised a benign influence on the country. Even during the USSR's decade-long physical occupation of Afghanistan in the '80s, the efforts at development, administration and governance were ideology dominated.

While the US may have achieved its strategic aims in arming the Mujahideen during the Soviet occupation, the Afghan society as a consequence degenerated. It gave a fillip to Islamic fundamentalism and gun culture, which arguably culminated in the rise of the Taliban and subsequently 9/11. It is no wonder, therefore, that socially and economically the country has remained stagnant. Afghanistan continues to be extremely vulnerable to religious, political and economic manipulation by regional and extra-regional powers.

Afghanistan is home to several ethnic linguistics and tribal groups. Rivalry and armed hostilities have been common between them. Historical and geographical factors have contributed to the preservation of its diversity. In the '80s Afghanistan experienced a most drastic decline in its population. Nearly one-third of the population fled the country. Even the '90s were characterised by civil war and unrest. The country continues to suffer from internecine warfare, acute poverty, a decaying infrastructure and its lands pock marked with landmines.

The estimated 28.7 million population of Afghanistan is composed of various ethnic groups i.e. Pashtuns – 44 per cent (predominant in southeastern parts), Tajik – 25 per cent (west, northwest interior and northeast), Uzbek – 8 per cent (northern borders) and Hazara – 10 per cent (central Afghanistan). The remaining 13 per cent constitute Turkmen, Baloch and others. The many diverse ethnic groups have not been able to psychologically integrate themselves into a nation. The policies of various Afghan governments have been such that one or the other ethnic group has invariably felt marginalised and alienated. For more than 200 years (1748-1973) all the kings who ruled Afghanistan were of

Pashtun extraction. Even the Taliban Government was overwhelmingly Pashtun dominated.

It is indeed the first time in Afghanistan's history that the (present) government, even though an interim one, has disproportionate representation of Tajiks and Uzbeks. Of the 38 Generals chosen by Defence Minister, Fahim in February 2003, to constitute the general staff of the army, 37 were Tajik. After the victory of the Northern Alliance over Taliban, such a reaction was expected, but in the long run an inequitable power structure can prove to be self-destructive. Nation building cannot be achieved by marginalisation and parochialism. The warlords who are in government positions have been showing a great deal of reluctance in amalgamating their militias into the national army. There is always the danger that in the event of a change in political and ethnic equations, the cycle of internal attrition may recommence, thus pushing the country into yet another period of regression. This problem is historical and traditional and poses the biggest threat to Afghanistan's peace and stability.

Poppy cultivation in Afghanistan is a major ever-growing concern for the entire world community. Drug cultivation and trafficking is not only causing instability in Afghanistan, but has also become the most important source of financial sustenance for terrorist outfits. It is estimated that more than 70 per cent of the world's narcotics originate from Afghanistan. The total area planted with poppies was 1,52,000 acres in 2003 compared to 76,900 acres in 2002 and 42,100 acres in 2001. In fact, in the year 2003, Afghanistan produced the highest amount of opium since 1999, estimated at 36,000 metric tonnes. As per a recent United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODOC) report, opium production increased by 64 per cent in 2004 compared to 2003. This is the highest drug production in Afghanistan's history and the largest in the world.

A quarter of Afghanistan farmers are believed to be engaged in poppy cultivation. While the farmers involved, at an average utilise 27 per cent of their land for poppy cultivation, it accounts for 60 per cent of their income. The increase in opium production is ascribed to persistent poverty, high opium prices and loans from traffickers. The lack of control by the Hamid Karzai Government in many areas of Afghanistan dominated by warlords has enabled poppy cultivation and drug trafficking to thrive. The Central Asian Republics are being used as transit routes as well as selling point for drugs produced in Afghanistan. This has spawned many drug cartels and syndicates in these countries. The security of these countries is being increasingly imperilled by this problem. Opium production also militates against the restoration of authority

by Afghanistan's central government because it creates large incentives for the warlords to retain their fiefdoms. Whatever the drawbacks and pitfalls of the Taliban regime, it had made some cogent moves to deal with the menace, and did make significant headways.

Source: <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/2010/08/strategic-culture-and-threat-perception-of-afghanistan.html>

Additional Reading

- America must give the south to the Taliban by Robert Blackwill
Source: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/7caa5128-94f3-11df-af3b-00144feab49a.html>
- End of the game by K. Subrahmanyam
Source: <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/end-of-the-game/645627/0>