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Afghanistan: Strategic Conundrum for India

INTRODUCTION

India has been able to generate enough goodwill in Afghanistan in recent past but the same has not translated into tangible results. Indian diplomacy has faced a series of major setbacks, where Indian concerns were summarily ignored till India agreed to attend the Moscow Dialogue-2019 and softened its stance on negotiations with the Taliban. Pakistan has attempted to render New Delhi irrelevant in the evolving security dynamic in Afghanistan. India's main focus has been to support the Afghan government and the political process in the country as mandated under the Bonn Agreement of 2001.¹

India's support for the Northern Alliance against the Pakistan-backed Taliban in the 1990s strengthened its position in Kabul after 2001. India has also done its best to restore the balance in its engagement with a range of different ethnic groups and political affiliations in Afghanistan. The balance was tilted towards the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance during the 1990s as a counter to Pakistan-controlled hard-line Pashtun factions, led by the Taliban. India had used its vocal support for Karzai, an ethnic Pashtun educated in India and the current President Ashraf Ghani, to demonstrate its keenness to revive its close ties with Pashtuns.² This concerted drive to recalibrate its ethnic affiliations is critical in terms of creating a larger footprint for India and also emerge from the trust deficit of supposedly being anti-Pashtun. However, with the impending democratic transition of power, threat of the United States (US) withdrawal of troops does not augur well for India.



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Key Points

1. India has pursued a "soft power" strategy towards Afghanistan, sticking to civilian rather than military matters.
2. India has been able to generate enough goodwill in Afghanistan in the recent past but the same has not translated into tangible results.
3. The core of the United States (US)-Taliban deal has been getting the Taliban to commit to preventing terrorist attacks outside of Afghan territory.
4. India is playing an important role by laying the foundations for sustainable economic development in its neighbour. Afghanistan.
5. Allies USA, Afghanistan, Russia and Iran are having difficulty in viewing India as a credible partner in the emerging strategic realities in Afghanistan.
6. India should vigorously aim to fill the vacuum created due to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) drawdown by providing military aid (short of boots on the ground).
7. India needs to significantly scale up its operations in Afghanistan, especially in the economic, industrial, communications, Information Technology (IT), human capital developments, construction, reconstruction, diplomatic, intelligence, and military fields.

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Afghanistan:...

AFGHAN PEACE PROCESS

The US government has long wanted to leave Afghanistan; the Obama administration had hoped to withdraw most of the US Military forces in 2013 and 2014, until that goal was dashed by the Islamic State's (ISs) sweep through Iraq to the doorstep of Baghdad and the fear in Washington that large parts of Afghanistan could similarly fall to the Taliban. President Trump's announcement in December 2018 to withdraw 7,000 US troops has indicated US desire to liquidate its Military efforts in Afghanistan. Peace talks on January 21, 2019 between Taliban and the US in Doha, Qatar has created a positive vibe with all concerned other than the Afghan National Unity Government (NUG) expressing this as the closest Taliban has ever got to a peace deal. Trump administration it seems is seeking an early exit from Afghanistan without obtaining further Taliban concessions, including direct negotiations with the Afghan government.

Brokering peace in Afghanistan has political, ethnic, and regional undercurrents mired in a history of violence that is central to Afghanistan. The present initiative of the US may have generated immense hope but needs to be tempered with caution as stakeholders with contrarian interests have much to lose or gain and achieve a mutually acceptable middle ground is a chimerical prospect. The core of the US-Taliban deal has been getting the Taliban to commit to preventing terrorist attacks outside of Afghan territory. The Taliban itself did not engage in such attacks and indeed, some members of the group consider al-Qaida "a plague on Afghanistan."³ But to publicly disavow support for its international jihadi brethren still comes with costs for Taliban; particularly compromising its ability to receive support, including funds, from global jihadi networks if it ends up mired in a prolonged civil war in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal. Taliban has been determinedly fighting IS since 2014, a group that includes jihadis expelled from the Taliban, as well as fighters of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan who had been fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan for years, albeit in the past alongside the Taliban. The other components of the proposed Peace Agreement are as follows:

1. Cease Fire
2. Counter Terrorism
3. Troop Withdrawal
4. Intra-Afghan negotiations

The begrudging acceptance by all stakeholders including India that Taliban will continue to play a key role in future of Afghanistan has led to all parties wooing Taliban. However, the recent success of Taliban forces against Afghan National Security Forces (ANSFs) and the ISAF coupled with Trump administration's exuberance to cut its losses and exit have

made them belligerent and they are bound to drive a hard deal as they negotiate from a position of strength. Taliban has further queered the pitch by refusing to talk to NUG which runs at divergence to the thought of an "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" peace process. The Doha office of Taliban has been the hub of all activity with Khalilzad and US envoys making repeated official and unofficial visits. Mullah Baradar who is a close aide of Mullah Omar has been nominated as the Chief Negotiator of Pakistan and thus provides credence to the view that Taliban may finally be serious about negotiations and are not using it as a smoke screen to consolidate their position.

Post-negotiation issue of power-sharing and the Afghan Constitution's viability are as prickly as well. Taliban will seek a right to contest Afghan elections and want substantial power in the national government. It may want to be "given" large parts of the country's south to run as its fief, where it currently has de facto power. This Taliban proposition will not be acceptable to Afghan powerbrokers and regional satraps. The Afghan government is not part of the negotiations and is miffed at being blindsided. The immediate problem for President Ghani is the peace negotiation's effect on Afghanistan's presidential elections in July 2019. Will the Taliban be allowed to run its own candidates although the registration deadline has passed? Such a change would profit the Taliban. Will the elections be postponed until an Afghan peace deal is struck, with an interim government created in the meantime, including strong Taliban representation? President Ghani, in most scenarios, would lose power and thus remains fiercely opposed to it. Any historical investigation would easily reveal that democratic power sharing has failed abysmally as the multi-layered Afghan society has vertical and horizontal silos which defeat the purpose of stability and conflict termination. Failure to accept concessions and make them would make an internationally brokered peace tenuous and fragile.

President Ghani's chances of winning over 50% in July's presidential elections are not high. His government has been isolated for over two years; its legitimacy and support have declined over the past four years; and it has suffered the defection of many political allies, key powerbrokers, and constituencies. Seventeen other candidates are running for president. Two rounds of elections are thus likely. Unless Afghanistan radically cleans up its electoral processes and a consensus candidate emerges, claims of fraud will be rampant and a months-long political crisis may lie ahead, as in the last two presidential elections. Such a political crisis can derail the Taliban-Afghan part of the negotiations or the Taliban may seek to form an interim government amidst the crisis. Such a

situation would further pose questions on the timelines of the US troop withdrawal. President Ghani meanwhile announced the appointment of Asadullah Khalid, a Pashtun as Defence Minister and Amrullah Saleh, a Tajik as the Minister for Interior on December 23, 18. These appointments are indicative of the combative spirit of President Ghani who while supporting the peace initiative is also entrenching himself to combat Taliban militarily. It can be safely assumed that President Ghani is not going to give up his office meekly.

Russia and Iran want the US to pull out its military from the region. Indeed, both have been cultivating ties with the Taliban through the provision of weapons, intelligence, and military assistance. Russia sees the Taliban as a lesser danger than the IS. Iran has reconciled itself to the Taliban being a major force for years to come and it has strengthened its leverage over the Taliban by hosting several hundred Taliban commanders and their families, many of whom have decamped from Pakistan. However, both Russia and Iran will play the Taliban against their other assets and long-cultivated proxies and militias, including in the North. Saudi Arabia, too, is likely to use Afghanistan as another proxy battleground against Iran. Pakistan, however, cannot rely on the Taliban to prosecute its interests in a post-deal Afghanistan, considering that the Taliban is as fed up with the yoke of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency as are other Afghans with Pakistan's interference. But Pakistan will not stop meddling in Afghanistan's affairs.

INDIA: SOFT POWER FOR HARD GAINS

India has pursued a "soft power" strategy towards Afghanistan, sticking to civilian rather than military matters. In consonance with the priorities laid down by Afghanistan's government, Indian assistance has focused on building human capital and physical infrastructure and helping the agricultural and other important sectors of the country's economy. India is building roads, proving medical facilities, and helping with educational programmes in an effort to develop and enhance long-term local Afghan capabilities. India has pledged around US\$ 2.3 billion on various projects, emerging as the sixth largest bilateral donor to Afghanistan. Important infrastructural projects undertaken by India include building of the 218-km Zaranj-Delaram highway enabling south-western Afghanistan access to the Iranian port of Chabahar, construction of electricity transmission lines, the Salma Dam power project in Herat province, construction of the Afghan Parliament building, helping in the expansion of the Afghan national television network, and several smaller projects in agriculture, rural development, education, and health.

As a consequence, India has come to enjoy considerable soft power in Afghanistan. Ordinary Afghans appear to have welcomed Indian involvement in development projects in their country. Indian films and television programmes are a rage among the local Afghan populace. India remains the favourite destination for Afghans with the Indian Embassy and four other missions issuing around 350 visas daily. India has a fundamental interest in ensuring that Afghanistan emerges as a stable and economically integrated State in the region. Afghanistan's economy remains highly dependent on foreign aid and trade with neighbouring countries. The only way in which the flailing government can retain and enhance its legitimacy is by bringing the Afghan economy back on track. For this it largely depends on other States and India is playing an important role by laying the foundations for sustainable economic development in its neighbour. India has encouraged community participation as an effective tool for reaching out to the tribal areas and providing the locals with options for generating livelihood. These attempts have also been in tune to the multi-ethnic engagement by India and align itself in the ethnic matrix of Afghanistan as a friend of one and all.⁴

Despite having a range of interests in Afghanistan, a consensus has emerged in India in recent years that India's "soft power" strategy of relying on political and economic engagement and cultural outreach, while making India one of the most popular foreign presences among ordinary Afghans, has not brought it any perceptible strategic gains. Rather, India stands sidelined by the West despite being the only country that has been relatively successful in winning the "hearts and minds" of the Afghans. India's role in the peace talks has been marginalised compared to USA Pakistan and China which have been the key stakeholders beside Russia in the peace process.

From the very beginning the prime objective of India's Afghanistan policy has been pre-empting the return of Pakistan's embedment in Afghanistan's strategic and political firmament. And ironically it is India's success in Afghanistan that had driven Pakistan's security establishment into a panic mode with a perception gaining ground that India was "taking over Afghanistan." The Trump administration's desire for a rapid withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan has given the necessary opening to Pakistan to regain its lost influence in Kabul through Taliban's return to mainstream.

Return of Taliban to Afghanistan would pose a major threat to India as the brunt of escalating terrorism will be borne by India, which already has been described as "the sponge that protects" the West. Indian strategists warn that a hurried US withdrawal with the Taliban still posing a threat to

Afghanistan will have serious implications for India, not the least of which would be to see Pakistan, its eternal rival, step in more aggressively. As Henry Kissinger has warned, “In many respects India will be the most affected country if jihadist Islamism gains impetus in Afghanistan.”⁵ Though India continues to insist that it won’t retreat from Afghanistan and the *business as usual* response to the rapidly evolving situation in Afghanistan and its failure to recalibrate its actions is indicative of policy paralysis. India’s opposition to the concept of national reconciliation in Afghanistan which was basically centred on the Taliban involvement in process of governance had put India on the back foot.⁶ The recent efforts to course correct and offer the olive branch to Taliban is a realisation of the paradigm shift in the political calculus of Afghanistan. Taliban has also voiced placatory requiems with respect to India and assured safety of Indian investments in Afghanistan.

Despite its critical interests in Afghanistan, New Delhi has not had a very evolutionary and dynamic policy towards Afghanistan over the last decade. Part of it is a function of the rapidly evolving ground realities in Afghanistan to which India has to respond. There is incoherence in Indian response as New Delhi seems to making several arguments depending on the audience at hand. On the one hand, India is signalling to the US that it views long-term American presence in Afghanistan as integral to regional security. On the other, it is reaching out to the Iranians who want to see a full and complete US withdrawal from the region. Even as India has signed a strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan promising to enhance its role in Afghan security sector, it is recalcitrant on the scope of security cooperation with Afghanistan. As a result, New Delhi has not only complicated its own future options but has allies who are having difficulty in viewing India as a credible partner in the emerging strategic realities in Afghanistan.

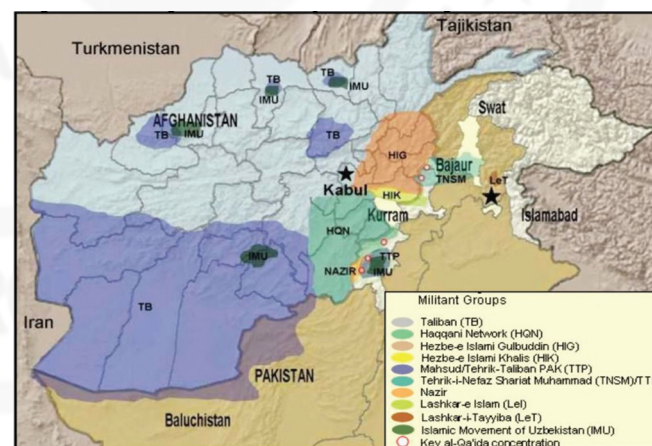
COST OF FAILURE

India is in a constant dilemma with respect to its options in Afghanistan and the strategic space that India had is fast shrinking. The diplomatic faux pas in failure to identify the relevance of Taliban or a moderate version of it has made it miss the proverbial bus. India’s refusal to use hard power and reluctance in asserting its profile more forcefully has made her irrelevant as the ground realities metamorphosed and a deviation emerged between the strategic interests of India and Washington. The Trump administration is intent on moving out of Afghanistan and has managed to gesture to Indian adversaries that they can shape the post-ISAF architecture to

serve their own ends. India was unwilling to stand up for its own interests and thus a very few saw the benefit of aligning with India. To preserve its interests in an evolving strategic paradigm, India is now coordinating with Russia and Iran with whom India has convergent interests’ in Afghanistan. India has reached out to Russia and Iran with political interactions at the highest levels reiterating nations’ shared position on Afghanistan and institutionalizing cooperation on Afghanistan.

Once ISAF and the US exit Afghanistan and India flounders in dealing with the emerging paradigm, the ramifications would be immense both in respect of India’s security calculus and status as a regional or emerging global player. While structural faults have clearly pushed India into a confused policy, vis-à-vis, Afghanistan, there is a wider spectrum of other political and institutional factors that have shaped India’s response. India’s delayed attempt to execute a mid-course correction to its policy in Afghanistan would have a price tag that may be too heavy for India to pay. The following can be the implications:

1. **Pakistan’s Expanded Role.** Pakistan is undergoing its worst economic crisis and faces incredible security challenges from terrorist groups which it created and supported. Pakistan is losing credibility and stature in the world. It would not miss an opportunity to fill the void left behind by ISAF in Afghanistan. It would seek to expand its influence in the region by coercion and proxy tactics. Geographical proximity to Afghanistan, vis-à-vis, India gives it the advantage of immediate reaction and detailed execution of plans. As of now, it is contained to some extent, by the presence of allied forces in the

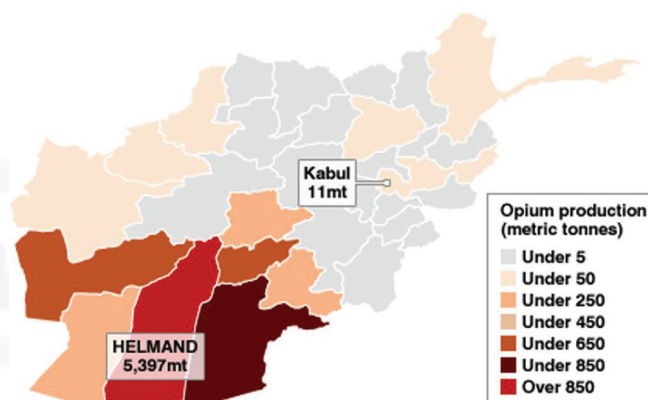


Map 1: Operational Area of Militant Groups in Afghanistan

Source: Center for Lessons Learned United States Army

vicinity. Once they leave, Pakistan would expand its role to engulf Afghanistan. Thus, Pakistan's ability to play mischief and its vulnerability to forces of destruction could add to India's and Afghanistan problem.

2. **Revival of Trans-National Terrorist Activities.** Possible domination, if not outright victory, of Taliban and the US retreat will galvanise terrorist groups to renew their attacks against India and its interests despite the peace accord imposing certain restrictions on Taliban. With the western forces leaving Afghanistan, there is bound to be a diminishing scrutiny of terrorist activities in Pakistan. The West, in fact, is going to be more concerned about the re-emergence of IS in the Middle East and will refocus its attention to this region. This will allow the Pakistan Army relative freedom to launch major terrorist operations in Kashmir and other parts of India. In all likelihood, there will be a revival of the Kashmiri separatist movement.
3. **Restrictions on Energy Security.** India's energy security needs are inexorably tied to Iran and Central Asia. This is amply reflected in India's substantial investments in the region, be it the Chabahar Port in Iran or the oil fields in Central Asia. Kazakhstan is set to become one of the world's top ten oil producers by 2025. The Indian Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) Limited in the last few years has bought stakes of over US\$ 7 billion in some of the top oil companies in the region. Afghanistan is apart of energy transportation for India. India constructed Zaranj-Delaram road connecting Afghanistan to Iranian Port of Chabahar in 2008.⁷ A volatile Afghanistan would shred all the plans of India towards an alternate route for its energy security.
4. **Loss of Trade.** India has an emerging economy. It seeks to maximize on its potential and exports. Afghanistan has rich sources of minerals and apparently undiscovered hydrocarbons. Presently, Afghanistan relies on world aid for sustenance but if it comes out of the present crisis, it could prove to be a lucrative market for Indian heavy machineries, automobiles, infrastructure, and IT industries. India can get access to ores, minerals, and the yet to be exploited hydrocarbons at reasonable rates. If an anti-India government ascends to power in Afghanistan then it is unlikely that India can fulfil the trade potential between the two countries.
5. **Drug Trafficking.** Afghanistan has been the greatest illicit opium producer in the entire world, ahead of Myanmar, the "Golden Triangle", and Latin America since 1992, excluding the year 2001. Afghanistan is the main producer of opium in the "Golden Crescent". Opium production in Afghanistan has been on the rise since the US occupation started in 2001 (Map 2). In addition to opiates, Afghanistan is also the largest



Map 2: Poppy Cultivation Map of Afghanistan

Source: Available at https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markeaston/2008/10/map_of_the_week_the_mystery_of.html, accessed on 04 May 19

producer of cannabis (mostly as hashish) in the world. There is an important nexus between drugs and Hawala (informal money transfer system) in Afghanistan. It will be noteworthy to see how the departure of the US forces will impact drug trafficking. Most likely, as the situation will continue to deteriorate, the drug trafficking problem will fester. Despite the presence of ISAF in the country for more than a decade, poppy cultivation has grown in Afghanistan (Map 2). The menace of drug trafficking is not only related to issues of law and order but its impact on society in terms of health is equally horrendous. Money generated through drug trade has been used to fund various insurgent and terrorist movements. It has been estimated that money generated from the illegal sale of narcotics accounted for 15% of the finances of militant groups in Jammu and Kashmir.⁸ Similarly, Sikh militant groups in Punjab and North-east insurgent groups like the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah) [NSCN (IM)] are known to channelize drugs into India to finance their operations.

POSSIBLE COURSES OF ACTION FOR INDIA

India has primarily relied on its "Soft Power" in wooing Kabul; it is one of the largest donors and has contributed immensely to nation building by a plethora of humanitarian and infrastructure development projects. India would be deeply distressed in case of damage to political and economic capital it has invested in Afghanistan. The snub by the US of not including India in the calculus while enunciating its exit strategy has been seen by many as an opportunity besides the perception that India is on its own as far as securing its

national interests is concerned.⁹ The standing of India in the Tajik and Hazara ethnoscape is secure and may be further strengthened by the independent line of thought and action enunciated by New Delhi, the criticality, however, remains in the Pashtun dominated areas where it has not been able to make much headway.

The India-Pakistan divide on Afghanistan with divergent strategic goals and failure to articulate their stated positions for arriving at a consensus on what would be an acceptable state of affairs for both the nations as far as Afghanistan is concerned has put India in a position of disadvantage by soft-peddling its capabilities.

India has emerged as a major economic actor in Afghanistan trying to bolster the Afghan state's capacity in various measures. But by refusing to use hard power and asserting its profile more forcefully India soon made itself irrelevant as the ground realities changed. India needs to revitalize its efforts and lead the surge to establish stable governance in Afghanistan, a blitzkrieg on all fronts by the Indian dispensation would bring about the much required paradigm shift in the alignment of regional and global players in Afghanistan. Steps which need to be taken by India to launch a major initiative offensive to regain its strategic space and expand its footprint in Afghanistan are as under:

1. **Indian Military Footprint.** Budget for ANSF is approximately US\$ 4.6-5 billion¹⁰ per year and the total aid requirement for Afghanistan is US\$ 10 billion per year for the next decade. The US has sought assistance from other nations to enhance contributions for the ANSF.¹¹ The presumption is that this aid is likely to decrease annually as the Afghanistan government stabilizes and its financial condition shows consistent improvement. India can expand its role by contributing in military domain as under:
 - (a) Training, funding, and advising Afghan National Security apparatus, the presence of Indian security forces in such a role would redefine the Indian image as a security provider to the local population.
 - (b) Direct sale or gifting of weapons, ammunition, and communication equipment should be pursued. In 2014, India had signed a pact with Russia; Russia would be paid by India to supply arms and ammunition to Afghanistan.¹² Russia would supply artillery, helicopters, and armoured personnel carriers. Afghanistan's request for T-72 tanks, artillery guns, AN-32 planes, and MI-17 helicopters along with bridge laying

equipment and trucks should be expedited and the requisite training imparted at the earliest.

- (c) India should provide more seats for Afghans in Indian military training institutions or alternatively consider sending trainers and advisers to Afghanistan.
 - (d) India should vigorously aim to fill the vacuum created due to the ISAF drawdown by providing military aid (short of boots on the ground).
 - (e) In order to provide security to infra created, India should consider deployment of the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) resources. The quantum of Forces would be dictated by threat and complexities of infrastructure created in concert with the Indian Embassy in Kabul.
 - (f) Establishment of Indian Training Team in Afghanistan under the aegis of Afghanistan government post 2019 elections would increase the outreach of the Indian Armed Forces.
 - (g) OFB and the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) must develop a consortium with Afghan government to energize the defence industry.
2. **Exploitation of Cultural Capital.** India needs to capitalize on the cultural capital it has and put out a contrary narrative aimed at de-radicalization of youth and prompting them towards education, progress, and development.
 3. **Development of Chabahar Port.** Speedy development of Chabahar Port will serve to open up alternative trading links to Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics (CARs). Economically and politically, it also serves to provide Afghanistan an alternative port to conduct its commerce at much lower tariffs compared to the Port of Karachi which consequently loses its position of pre-eminence. Engagement with Taliban to ensure security of the project for economic gains must be the important agenda.

Indian International Agenda

The international agenda of the Indian government in Afghanistan must be to follow Lines of Operations (LOO) as enunciated next:

1. **The Strategic Depth.** Proponents of "Strategic Depth" concept are convinced that a weak and pliable regime in Afghanistan would provide Pakistan with the requisite depth in the event of a comprehensive conventional war with India.¹³ Irrespective of the merits and demerits

of the concept, Pakistan has done nothing major to follow up on this theory and to prove Pakistan's genuine desire to bring to fruition this concept. For instance, Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), where Al Qaeda and other terrorist organisations have firmed in, is epitomic of poor governance, abject poverty, zero development, scarce infrastructure, and a capricious security environment.¹⁴ Pakistan's claim of obtaining strategic depth in Afghanistan is not matched by a commensurate, visible, and viable inclination to develop infrastructure, social stability, and security along the borders in FATA. The condition across the border in Afghanistan (within the sphere of Pakistan's political and military influence) is equally dismal. Pakistan has not facilitated the creation of the requisite infrastructure in the border areas of Afghanistan nor in FATA that would facilitate the actualisation of strategic depth concept. In the modern era of nuclear deterrence and the global reach of strategic assets, this concept is becoming increasingly irrelevant and needs to be capitalised by India while arguing its standpoint with reference to Pakistan involvement in Afghanistan.

2. **The Durand Line.** The Durand Line which demarcates the boundary between Pakistan and Afghanistan has never been recognised by any government in Afghanistan, including the pro-Pakistan Taliban regime.¹⁵ It is time the international community analytically re-examines the contours of the Durand Line Agreement and resolve the demarcation issue in the interests of maintaining enduring peace and stability in the region. India needs to charioteer the permanent resolution to the Durand Line problem by internationalising it with following ulterior motive:

- (a) India can consider giving recognition to the claims for Pashtunistan to internationalise the issue or if it is perceived to be against our immediate interests (Northern Alliance), we can bring it to the notice of certain other countries which share similar concerns about Pakistan.
- (b) It will rile the Pashtun majority in case Pakistan rejects the proposal or seeks to disclaim it. For Pakistan, it would be a "lose-lose" situation, irrespective of whether it agrees or disagrees.
- (c) It shall force Pakistan into investing economically and militarily in border areas of FATA for quelling instability and show visible signs of exerting its writ in these areas if it claims them to be intrinsic to the nation.
- (d) India's support for the Pashtunistan cause would endear it to the Pashtun majority and also be

an added bonus which would facilitate the safe pursuit of its economic agenda.

3. **Elimination of Anti-India Terrorism.** Pakistan besides having launched anti-India, non-attributable terror attacks on Indian soil, has also done so on Indian interests in Afghanistan in collusion with local groups in Afghanistan. Terror/Mujahedeen organisations like the Haqqani network, Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Quetta Shura Taliban (QST) and **HIZBUL MUJAHIDEEN**, have matured into commercial mafias with self-sustaining financial enterprises, including drug trafficking, kidnappings for ransom and smuggling, to name a few. The activities of these groups can be effectively neutralised only if Pakistan, their principal benefactor, is made accountable to the international community. Hence, rooting out terrorism and weakening its sponsors would be one of the primary aims of Indian involvement in Afghanistan.
4. **Islamic State: The Damocles' Sword.** The establishment of caliphate by IS in Iraq and Syria makes it the most popular and potent terrorist organisation in the world.¹⁶ The release of pressure on IS in Syria by impending withdrawal of the US troops may be minimal as Russia would support the government to quell IS. The rivalry between Taliban and IS can manifest into a blood bath both in and around Afghanistan and the target would be Western and Indian assets in Afghanistan. It must also be realised that Taliban would not allow ISIS manoeuvre space within Afghanistan and thus force ISIS to gravitate to Pakistan or CAR. This apocalyptic scenario should be the rallying point for all nations and India would do well to further aggravate the concerns.

CONCLUSION

The scenario after US/North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) withdrawal from Afghanistan will be unique; such a pre-planned withdrawal of troops from a region in the War on Terror hasn't taken place yet. In the post-withdrawal scenario, existing players will either find methods to continue their violent agenda or they will attempt to re-energise the elected government. In the former case the strategy of these groups must be calculated properly so that extremism and radicalisation in the region can be controlled and eliminated.

The thinking is that a withdrawal of US forces and a power-sharing deal that empowers the Afghan Taliban would eliminate much of the basis for the militancy in Pakistan. The entry of the Afghan Taliban into the political mainstream

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would then create fissures within the Pakistani Taliban landscape, making the group much more militarily and politically manageable.¹⁷

India needs to significantly scale up its operations in Afghanistan, especially in the economic, industrial, communications, IT, human capital developments, construction, reconstruction, diplomatic, intelligence, and military fields. The vacuum created by the ISAF drawdown should not be permitted to be exploited by other regional players, notably China. Considering the inevitability of militant attacks by Pakistan's proxy groups and their negative implications on India, all-out efforts need to be undertaken to have a robust, well-integrated policy in place to restore balance with minimal cost to human life and property, and in the shortest time frame.

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