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KARTIKEYA PAPER

THE IMPACT OF GEO-POLITICS OF SOUTHWEST ASIA ON AFGHANISTAN: A MEDIUM TERM PERSPECTIVE

Rahul K Bhonsle

Kartikeya — in Indian mythology,
Lord Kartikeya is known as the God of War.

The Impact of Geo-Politics of Southwest Asia on Afghanistan: A Medium Term Perspective

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The Impact of Geo-Politics of Southwest Asia on Afghanistan: A Medium Term Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Geographically, Southwest Asia is not as well defined as other regions of Asia. However, it can be roughly denoted by the arc extending from Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Towards the north, it would be flanked by the Caspian Sea, Central Asia and the Great Himalayan massifs which separate the Indian subcontinent from Tibet. In the south, this region flanks the most important oil routes extending from the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. Geo-politically, this region is increasingly assuming significance as it is seen as the base for global Islamic fundamentalism emanating from the ungoverned areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The US Army War College's Larry Goodson states, "Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran are a troubled triangle and the US strategy is to involve the US government in the region to reduce the troubled nature."¹

Iran is a paradox of the Middle East, a Shia non-Arab Muslim theocracy amidst predominantly Arab Sunni Muslim states, yet in many ways, it is more democratic and modernistic than some of the Arab monarchies. These contrasting religious and cultural roots of Iran lead to a differing world view of and by Tehran internally, within the Middle East as well as geo-politically. In the latter context, Iran continues to be a weak state and, hence, would be exposed to manipulation by global powers. Hydrocarbon oil and gas reserves make it one of the powerful players in the global energy matrix. India is

emerging as a major economic player with growing national interests driven by its large population base, burgeoning economic size and appetite for energy. These geo-economic, and strategic factors, along with instability bred by fundamentalism in Pakistan and Afghanistan, make this region of critical significance for global peace and security in the years ahead. Engagement by extra-territorial powers, be it the USA, European Union, Russia and China, either directly or indirectly, in this region, is, thus, inevitable.

Afghanistan is the fulcrum of Southwest Asia. Its large ungoverned spaces are ideal sanctuaries for global non-state players who had established a stronghold in the area based on the Taliban till 9/11. The Taliban and Al Qaeda were evicted by a US led operation thereafter, but the country continues to be unstable with extension of instability into the western areas of Pakistan's tribal belt. This zone will remain the fountainhead for global Islamic terrorism in the years ahead, acting as its ideological as well as command and control matrix. This instability will be sustained as much by internal as by external factors and would, thus, need a deeper examination for an evaluation of the impact of the geo-politics of the region on stability in Afghanistan.

AIM AND SCOPE

The aim of this paper is to review the impact of the geo-politics of Southwest Asia on Afghanistan in the medium term. It examines national aspirations, internal and external factors in each of the states — Iran, Pakistan, India and Afghanistan — and finally evolves three possible scenarios till 2012.

IRAN

National Aspirations

Iran's national aspirations arise from ancient Persian civilisation roots. Thus,

Iranians feel that they should seek their rightful place in the global political order. Given the turbulence of past history and recent experience of Western power politics, be it in terms of support to the Saddam Hussein regime, particularly in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq War, or intervention in 2003 over alleged intelligence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, there is a deep antipathy, particularly amongst the conservative Islamic clerics, against the United States. The European Union(EU), Russia and China are seen as more benign but the skewed global power balance indicates to the Iranians that America will never allow Tehran to assume its rightful place in the Middle East and is effectively using Israel to achieve this aim. Attainment of nuclear capability is seen as the key to this position of power in the regional balance in the years ahead.

Another significant aspiration of the Iranian leadership, not so much of the populace, is to proselytise the Shia influence globally. Iran's engagement in Lebanon, Iraq and in defeating the Taliban in Afghanistan needs to be seen in this context. Acquisition of nuclear capability has been touted many times as a "Shia" bomb, but it also contains within it roots of a Persian resurgence. There is widespread support in Iran for developing a nuclear capability which is seen as a legitimate right of the people.² This expression is also evident in the proliferation of missiles and aircraft for which Iran has built a substantial indigenous capability in the past few years. These national aspirations will be hard to suppress in the years ahead and their manifestation into seeking a greater role for Tehran should be evident.

Internal Political Structuring

Iran is predominantly Shia Muslim, with 89 per cent following the Shia faith, which is also the official state religion; 9 per cent are Sunnis; and other non-Muslim minorities include Zoroastrians, Jews, Baha'is, and Christians.³ Iran is a pluralistic society, with Turkic and Arab influence, apart from Persian

predominance. Its political system is of the *Velayat-e-Faqih* or absolute clerical rule based on a narrow interpretation of Shia thought.⁴ The structure has two tiers, the clerical, and a popular, elected Parliament or Majlis. The Assembly of Experts, which consists of 86 popularly-elected clerics for an eight-year term, chooses the Supreme Leader. Citizens will not vote for representatives to the Assembly again until 2014.⁵ The 12-member Council of Guardians, comprising primarily clerical leaders, has the role of vetting candidates for the Majlis as well as overruling any decision of the Parliament. Thus, in the 2004 elections, the reformists were summarily rejected and the conservatives were elected, occupying 160 of the 290 seats in the Majlis. The next Majlis elections are slated to take place on March 14, 2008.

The president is the executive head of the government and is elected for a four-year term. Here again, the contest is primarily between conservatives and liberals. In 2004, Tehran Mayor Mahmud Ahmadinejad defeated former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a liberal, in the second round, with almost 62 per cent of the vote. The next presidential elections are scheduled for 2009. While Ahmadinejad has represented the public face of Iran to the West, domestically he is neither very popular nor very influential. The authority lies with the Ayatollah and his indulgence of Ahmadinejad provides him the power that the West sees in Iran.

A key deduction would indicate that Iran's predominantly conservative order will continue till at least 2009. Any substantial change in policy towards liberalism, if at all, can come about only after there is change in the power balance through a less conservative president, or a more balanced Majlis.

Relations Within the Region

The key foreign policy objectives of Iran have been maintaining its territorial integrity and security, safeguarding the atypical political

system which is unique in the world, ensuring welfare of the people, and strengthening cultural identity.⁶ These goals are seen to be mutually exclusive in some respects to the prevailing regional order be it in Pakistan, Afghanistan or the Middle East from time to time. Iran has had a turbulent relationship within the region, particularly due to a Persian, non-Arab, Shia society amidst a vortex of predominantly Arab or Sunni states. Thus, there is cultural divergence with the neighbourhood at two levels: Arab/Persian and Shia/Sunni. Recent Iranian history is most concerned with the evolution of a powerful Iranian state within this flux. This central precept defines Iran's relations within the region as well as with other powers that have a significant presence there, such as the United States or Israel. Where states have been tolerant of Iran's aspirations for a greater regional role, Tehran has maintained amicable relations. Thus, the EU, Russia and China have been the principal interlocutors in Iranian relations globally. On the other hand, where Iran perceives a sense of intolerance, it has powerfully contested the powers, be it Israel and Saudi Arabia regionally or Washington globally. The present conservative regime in Iran in particular is not tolerant of any country siding with Israel or the US against its own interests. India had a taste of this rancour when it voted for a motion against Iran's nuclear proliferation in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Iran's relations in the Southwest Asian region have been amicable apart from the brief period of the reign of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. This was a period when Iranian relations with Pakistan were also poor. However, with the Karzai regime, the relations have been more balanced.⁷ The principal bilateral concerns with Afghanistan relate to the refugees, drug bubble, support to Sunni fundamentalist organisations in Iran such as the Jundullah, and an old standing dispute over water rights of the Helmand river. Some analysts even indicate that continued US

engagement in Afghanistan and a possible Vietnam type withdrawal for the US may also be one of the larger goals of Iran; however, there is not enough evidence to support this premise. While the Tehran government does have larger interests in supporting dissidence in Iraq, a similar motivation is absent in the case of Afghanistan. There are accusations that the Iranian government is not closely supervising groups in Iran supporting the Taliban.

Iran also sees a larger regional role for itself not just in the Middle East but also amongst the Caspian states. Successful conclusion of the Second Caspian Sea Littoral States Summit in mid-October in Tehran denotes the aspiration for access to a number of regional orbits, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, (SCO) being another, where Iran is an observer, and participated in the summit in Bishkek in August. The priority of Iranian concerns could evolve as: the Middle East, with the focus on Iraq and Israel, Afghanistan and then the Caspian states. However, the balance may shift to the Caspian in the case of a stabilised Afghanistan or one which is seen as not having any deleterious impact on Tehran's influence in the region. Tehran's interest in Central Asia and particularly in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan is well known. Its access to the former is primarily through Afghanistan and, hence, this area assumes significance for Iran in the years ahead.

One primary factor that is evident in the discourse above is that Iran will not accept antagonistic external influence be it against the Iranian state or the Shias in its regional periphery. This is more than underlined by the system of *Velayat-e-Faqih* wherein the clerical veto would ensure that religious interests will be as significant as national ones. Economic constraints, however, should be able to temper this policy towards greater restraint.⁸

At the moment, the view from Tehran is quite sanguine. To the west, the

US remains bogged down in Iraq, where a friendly Shiite government is governing. To the east, a solidifying network of alliances promises greater security for Tehran. For the time being, Iran appears to be well on top of the waves sweeping over the region and may continue to remain so unless the catastrophe of a US strike on its nuclear facilities completely upsets the calculus in the Middle East as well as Southwest Asia. Iran may not react as mutedly as Iraq in the initial stages as the people are in unison with the clergy and the government.

PAKISTAN

National Aspirations

Pakistan's national aspirations arise from the roots of its emergence as an independent nation-state from British India. Founded on the two-nation theory that the Muslims need a separate state to meet their aspirations, Pakistan has followed this legacy over the years. Moreover, Pakistan also sees itself as carrying the mantle of the Mughal rule in India, thereby dominance of Southwest Asia and even Central Asia, the matrix of the Mughal rulers, as much as South Asia is considered Islamabad's rightful claim. This policy has seen Pakistan seeking a king-maker's role in Afghanistan — something it was able to perform for the first time through the installation of the Taliban regime.

Within the Muslim community, Pakistan seeks the role of a moderate moderniser. Kemal Ataturk is the favourite role model of Pakistani administrators, including the present one, President Musharraf. The need for balance with India and attaining a predominant role in the affairs of Islamic states has also led Pakistan to develop a powerful military and nuclear capability. While Pakistan's heartland of Punjab is modernising, the aspirations of the tribals in the western belt, be it the feudal clans of

Balochistan such as the Bugtis and the Mengals or the Mehsuds and Wazirs of Waziristan, are rooted in tribalism due to underdevelopment. Justice is still administered through interpretation of the *Sharia* and there is no urge for modernisation apart from the lure of the gun and the jeep. The people in these ungoverned areas still follow tribal codes and customs and are not exposed to modern education or laws.⁹

Internal Political Structuring

Pakistan has been faced with continuous political crisis over the years. Thus, it has had intermittent periods of rule by a democratically elected civil government and the military. The legacy of Field Marshal Ayub Khan, the second military ruler of Pakistan, was carried forward by the likes of Yahya Khan, Zia-ul-Haq and now Pervez Musharraf. The many bouts of civilian leadership have ended in an unpleasant experience of elected governance for the country because of ineptness of the civilian class, their indulgence in feudal politics and personal greed and corruption, and who have many times used the Pakistani state as an instrument for self-aggrandisement. This, in turn, has provided the military the *raison d'être* to take over power. However, many observers believe that the present military led regime is likely to disprove this dictum, given that it was forced to impose Emergency on November 3, 2007.

The Pakistani military has developed well entrenched interests in governance and today controls the structure of the state, dominating it in all spheres. Pakistani military officers, serving and retired, are found in virtually all positions of government, from president, governors, ministers or ambassadors. With such a controlling interest and stranglehold on power, the army 'rules' in Pakistan without the need of a martial law. There were discrete signs of change initiated by the recent activism by the judiciary, attempting to make up for the lack of a political culture in the country

which could bring the people closer together on issues of national significance. Imposition of Emergency has nipped this hope in the bud.

The strategic mindset of the military is typified by paranoia. Pakistan's relations with its neighbours have also assumed dimensions of confrontation. Thus, with India, it is instability, to prevent it from emerging into a regional hegemon, while in Afghanistan, it is to attain strategic depth by aligning the interests of the ruling clique in the country with those of Islamabad. When Pakistan has not seen congruence with this concept, there have been attempts at seeking a change in regime by internal and external politicking. Currently, however, large scale presence of US and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation(NATO) forces and the process of development in the country has prevented Islamabad from upsetting the regime in Kabul, though it did try till it was strongly rebuked by Washington. Till lately, relations between the presidents of both the countries were poor, though the US and Turkey have been active in encouraging reconciliation and a détente prevails.

Pakistan's structural imbalance arises from the sharp divide between the essentially moderate population of the eastern provinces of Punjab and Sindh and the predominantly fundamentalist belt of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Federally Administered Tribal Areas(FATA) of Waziristan and the Agencies. The growth of the *madrassas* has contributed to increase in fundamentalism in this area. While the *madrassas* in the eastern provinces have been relatively more moderate despite the influence of extremist organisations focussed on *jihad* in Kashmir, such as the Jamaat-ud-Dawa or Lashkar-e-Taiyyeba, the western group, which was heavily represented at the Lal Masjid mosque in the heart of Islamabad, is predominantly churning out extremists. The penetration of these *madrassas* by the Al Qaeda is also evident. While these fighters were low cost, quickly trained Mujahideen during the Soviet era, the repercussion of their

proliferation is being felt in Afghanistan during the Taliban and post-Taliban periods and now in Pakistan.

Pakistan's contemporary structure of governance is imbalanced, with the president enjoying far more powers than is normal in any institution in a democracy. A uniformed president implies a cantonment mindset in politics which could be the reason for the inability of a military ruled or backed regime in Pakistan to be able to govern in a modern society. Thus, it has sought solace in regressive forces representing fundamentalism. However, Pakistan's alignment with the US' war on terror upset this political calculus and, thus, it faces war on two ideological fronts. On one side are the democratic forces seeking freedom from the khaki, and on the other are fundamentalists fighting the regime for its alignment with the US. The state will have to make a compromise with either element of society; the clear option is democratic forces and unless this happens, there is unlikely to be political stability in Pakistan in the near term

Yet, with the army providing a unifying framework, prospects of a failed state in Pakistan may be limited, though there would continue to be large tracts such as Waziristan and Swat which are ungovernable, or disorder for certain periods of time. It is these gaps of both time and space which are of concern.

Relations Within the Region

Pakistan has always strived to protect and promote its national interests in the region. Protection of national identity is also very consequential and its expression is seen in the threat from India with a larger Muslim population, possibly subverting the entire system in South Asia in its favour. These fears have been fanned by India's role in the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971. Thus, nuclear weapons, having an asymmetric proxy war capability, and seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan are considered legitimate objectives. Islamic identity and special relations with other Muslim states advocating a

feeling of *Ummah*, is also a strong aim of Pakistan's national policy.¹⁰ However, where there is a clash of interests, the national goal is seen to supersede the supra national goals of the *Ummah*.

Past policies in Pakistan which sought to create dissension in neighbouring states are now being abandoned, if Jehangir Karamat, a previous Pakistani chief of the army staff, is to be believed. He alludes to these thus, "Policies that encourage trans-border conflict or create centrifugal tendencies are not in Pakistan's interest now or in the future — whatever may have been the perception in the past." Karamat also sees internal instability as highly dangerous for Pakistan but more so when the government is unwilling or unable to face the problem squarely.¹¹ While Pakistan is attempting to overcome past apprehensions and restructure the relationship with India, Islamabad also seeks a larger role of bringing peace and harmony within the Islamic world. It is in this goal that it is likely to come into a clash with Iran, for there is no congruence between the two on the larger religious identity. In the overall paradigm of Southwest Asia, Pakistan is continually haunted by memories of the Russia-India and Northern Alliance relationship as also the India-Iran and an Iran-Russia relationship.¹²

One of the critical issues in relation to Pakistan and Iran are that of the sectarian Shia-Sunni divide which, apart from frequent internecine violence within Pakistan, has also seen deployment of armed forces on the Iran-Pakistan border. This difference came to a boil when, in August 1998, Iran accused Pakistan of failing to protect its diplomats in Mazar-e-Sharif who were captured and killed by the Taliban.¹³ Yet the paradox could be more than perplexing with the infamous Pakistani nuclear proliferator, A Q Khan alleged to have been involved in selling the P-1 centrifuge designs to Tehran. Pakistani authorities always maintain that this was in his individual capacity, a lie which is easy to nail but difficult to act against. Pakistan's

Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed has said, "He helped Iran in his personal capacity, and the Pakistan government had nothing to do with it."¹⁴ For what reason other than economic or energy benefits would A Q Khan assist a Shia neighbour to emerge as a competing nuclear power is hard to fathom. This could also be the larger game plan of Pakistan of ensuring US presence in the region, given the threat of Iran's emergence as a nuclear power. Perhaps this is one way Islamabad feels that Washington will continue to depend on it in the future. When correlated with Tehran's accusation of Islamabad for the American presence in the region, the argument is reinforced. Gwadar could be another bone of contention in the future as it would seriously impact the development of Chabahar as a port of choice in the Gulf when the oil lanes to Central Asia are developed.¹⁵

Pakistan sees both India and Iran as having malignant interests in Afghanistan. The downward trend in the Pak-Iran ties was set in motion primarily by their varying perceived interests in Afghanistan, and conflicting attitudes towards the Taliban.¹⁶ As Ayesha Siddiqi, a noted Pakistani author has remarked, "Strategically, it will be positive for Pakistan to support a hostile policy towards Iran."¹⁷ This will also lead to Pakistan's acceptance of a permanent US presence in Afghanistan as well as in the Middle East as it would balance regional interests which it sees are inimical due to the skewed balance of power against it. This is a school of thought led by the "irrelevance of Pakistan in US strategic play" school, which, with past experience, feels that in case the US finds no need for Islamabad, it may dump it in favour of, say, India, or possibly even Iran, given its relevance to the energy needs of Washington.¹⁸ While the latter scenario is too far-fetched, the former, of closer US-India relations, is already being played out.

Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan have a common interest in the control of the Baloch rebellion which has been prominent in the region since the 1970s. While presently it is largely under check and is primarily directed at

attaining greater economic and democratic rights within Pakistan, any conflagration may see a commonality of interests of these states, getting them closer together in the future.

Pakistan's relations with India are also tempered by resolution of the Kashmir issue for which the validity of the current Line of Control is a major issue. As it is seen to divide the state of Jammu and Kashmir, with contested political sovereignty of both India and Pakistan, resolution of Kashmir and linked to it, the Indian claim of proxy war, are central to relations with New Delhi. Similarly, on the western side, the Durand Line is critical for it similarly divides the Pashtuns who live on both sides of the border. Recognition of the Durand Line would remove the fear in Islamabad of the Pashtuns in both countries coming together to declare a "Pashtunistan".¹⁹

Pakistan's interests in stability in Afghanistan are also related to the substantial opportunities for trade with the Central Asian Republics.²⁰ This could be a mutually advantageous relationship for Islamabad trading oil for goods, for it is the closest state in the south which is relatively developed industrially. This issue also acts as a competing factor with both India and Iran. The most significant energy gains for Pakistan are linked to both Iran and Afghanistan, on one side, and India, on the other. The Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) gas pipeline project and its offshoot to India with the extended acronym of TAPI provide Islamabad with considerable direct benefits of access to cheaper energy as well as gains through transit rights to India.²¹ Energy politics and economics, thus, have the potential of getting the states of Southwest Asia together.

INDIA

National Aspirations

India as a secular democratic republic has always seen itself as a leader of the

Third World. There is growing resentment in India over great power dominance borne out of the oppression of partition and long colonial rule. Indians aspire to be a developed state, with or without military preeminence. As India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said recently, "India stands for peace and for the peaceful resolution of all problems between nation-states. Our national goal is to foster an external and internal environment of peace and stability, which will allow us adequate space to concentrate on the multiple economic and social challenges facing our people." However, after the initial years of idealism in India's foreign and security policy, realism has set in, particularly after the 1962 War with China. This is expressed again in the words of the prime minister thus, "But the reality is that we live in a world of unequal power relations. We live in an uncertain international security environment. We are, therefore, obliged to create adequate defence preparedness to manage any potential challenge to our security and vital national interests."

Indians are concerned about personal and national growth and seek a decisive role in the periphery as well as the global political arena. This expression is most amply highlighted through India's aspirations for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Indians also see South Asia in particular as their sphere of influence and seek a larger political and economic role which has also been one of the principal causes of acrimony in the region, where New Delhi is frequently seen as a hegemon. Indians are also proud of their secular culture and there is a tendency to go out of the way to make minorities, particularly the Muslims, a part of the larger national fraternity. By this, they would expect to beat the two-nation theory harped upon by Islamabad. The Indian belief in being a great civilisation is also expressed in the deference to others with a civilisation history. Iran forms an important facet of this expression. Thus, India's external affairs minister has harped on respect for Iran's sensitivities, but this concept does not fit in neatly in the modern inter-

state relations paradigm and, therefore, does not receive too much attention in the West.

Internal Political Structuring

India has a well developed electoral polity, with the civil government nominally having complete control over all arms of the state. This entails that India's approach to security problems is more holistic and all aspects of national power are applied to achieve system-wide gains. Strategic decision-making is in the hands of a democratically elected political order, with the prime minister acting as the chief executive on behalf of the president who is the head of the state. The Council of Ministers is the principal decision-making body of the government, thereby, maintaining a sufficiently broad-based decision-making process. On the other hand, the process is slow and deliberate, and implementation, through a number of intermediate levels of central and state government authorities is tardy. Foreign policy is entirely the jurisdiction of the chief executive and the Council of Ministers, which implies that there is limited parliamentary oversight, a concept which is being increasingly questioned in the wake of differences between the ruling coalition, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and the left parties on the Indo-US nuclear agreement recently. Apart from this major dissonance in policies between the left parties and other centrist parties such as the Congress or right wing nationalists like the Bhartiya Janata Party(BJP), there is sufficient congruence in the thinking of major parties on foreign policy issues in India.

Some of the critical issues of concern in relation to India's foreign policy need to be underlined. India will not get into an alliance with any other state; India will not deploy its forces in areas which are religiously sensitive such as Afghanistan and Iraq as it would have to contend with the large Muslim population within, unless it is under the UN's aegis; and India

prefers bilateral over multilateral agreements in most spheres. New Delhi is also sensitive to outside presence, particularly of the Chinese, in South Asia, while it seeks to portray an independent foreign policy.

General elections are due in India in 2009. Some political pundits even predict a mid-term election in 2008. Whatever be the course of polity, the attendant fallout of controversy over the Indo-US nuclear deal has been to prevent major policy decisions.

Relations Within the Region

Indian interests in Southwest Asia are multifarious. While the adversarial relationship with Pakistan has prevented New Delhi from greater direct involvement, India has consistently attempted to outflank Islamabad's physical obstruction by creating alternative options, be it in collaborating in the security of the Persian Gulf sea lanes, development of the Chabahar port or the Delaram-Zaranj highway which will connect Iran to the Afghanistan ring road and, thus, to Central Asia. India is keen for greater engagement in Afghanistan. This could be in the form of economic and management assistance, while limited military assistance primarily in training could also be envisaged. However, this will only come about once there is greater stability in the government.

India's relations with Iran had been low after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Secular India was not regarded as a model for greater amity by the largely radical Shia clerical leadership of Tehran.²² However, lately, there has been considerable improvement to the extent that it has become a sticky point for the United States. The Hyde Act specifically seeks India's support for US efforts to undermine Tehran's nuclear weapons programme. Ironically, this has also become one of the main stumbling blocks in the Indo-US civil nuclear deal. The IPI is also seen as a sore point by Washington. However, both the countries are firmly committed towards

maintaining smooth relations with each other and would avoid mutual recrimination. Iranian Interior Minister Mostafa Pour Mohammadi, who visited India in November, carried an invitation for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to visit Tehran. The visiting minister also emphasised, "Ties between our countries are deep-rooted and very old...we enjoy good relations in cultural, economic and political areas."²³

India's relationship with Afghanistan is driven by the substantial aid and assistance provided to the Karzai regime, to the tune of \$ 900 million. Indian presence in rebuilding Afghanistan is obvious, with over 3,000 Indians, mainly middle level managers and technicians, assisting Kabul in various spheres. India also has full-fledged consulates in Kandahar, Jalalabad and Mazar-e-Sharif, primarily to support its aid and assistance programme. Pakistan is uncomfortable with the Indian presence in Afghanistan as it mitigates its security, creating a second front, as well as reduces its strategic depth. Nevertheless, Indian presence in Afghanistan is a reality and Pakistan may have to accept its necessity given that there are no real alternatives, with limited countries willing to operate within the country. On the other hand, after some initial resistance from the Taliban, leading to three incidents of kidnapping of Indians, the reaction at the grassroots within Afghanistan has not been hostile. However, greater Indian involvement in Afghanistan is bound to be not only dependent on Indo-Pakistan relations but also on a considerable decrease in antagonism between the two states. Relations may improve but hostility and suspicion will remain which will temper Islamabad's resistance for a larger role for New Delhi in Afghanistan in the future.

AFGHANISTAN

National Aspirations

Afghanistan is a predominantly Sunni Islamic state and has a population of

80 per cent Sunnis, Shias 19 per cent mostly along the western and northern areas, and others are 1 per cent. The Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group at over 40 per cent followed by the Tajiks (25 per cent), Hazaras (10 per cent), Uzbeks (6-8 per cent), Aimaq Turkmen, Baluch, and other small groups. Dari (Afghan Farsi) and Pashto are the official languages.²⁴

There are primarily two divergent strains in Afghan aspirations: the modernist and traditionalist. The modernist one, represented by Karzai and his ilk, seeks a democratic, educated, liberal Afghanistan which is benefited by integration with its neighbours as well as globally. The modernists are holding the seat of power in Kabul, having overthrown the traditionalists, the Taliban, in 2001. However, the hinterland in many parts is still dominated by the traditionalists, who see in Afghanistan a reflection of an Islamic state of feudal tribes, weaved together by the *Sharia*. These are rabidly anti-West and draw upon the Afghan legacy of opposing and defeating outside forces throughout history, be it the British or Russians. The clash between modernists and traditionalists is likely to continue in Afghanistan in the years ahead, and in the medium term, there is no hope of drastic restructuring of the aspirational order which is presently seen to be divided in a ratio of 40:60 between the modernists and traditionalists. Over a five-year period, the most optimistic estimate indicates that this ratio would be reversed, yet the resistance to modernisation is likely to continue, particularly in the eastern and southern areas.

Over the years, Afghans have remained divided, first on lines of tribe and ethnicity, then as Communists and conservatives, and now as modernists and traditionalists. This eternal conflict within has prevented the growth of a powerful national identity of oneness which could bring together people of all ethnic origins, Pashtuns, Tajiks Uzbeks and Hazaras. This is one of the key hindrances to development of national institutions today such as the Afghan National Army or Police (ANA/ANP). Thus, as the Afghan Minister of

Defence Abdul Rahim Wardak said to ANA soldiers on September 25, 2005, “You might be from different provinces speaking different languages, but you’re one nation and you represent one Afghanistan. You all have one goal and objective, which is strengthening of the national unity.”

Internal Political Structuring

Afghanistan has a nascent political structure, with a bicarmel legislature and the president as the head of state as well as government. Major decisions are taken by the president and ratified by the Parliament. Provinces are administered by governors nominated by the president. This provides the president reasonable control over the provinces. There are differences of opinion over the viability of a presidential versus a parliamentary system, but, at present, these have been reasonably controlled. There is a limited democratic structure at the grassroots, and administration is still based on the feudal tribal arrangements of elders and *jirga*. This increases difficulties for the central government to reach the bottom of the mainly agrarian society. However, for the Taliban, it provides an effective working relationship with the tribal networks and, therefore, they have never been short of local support, at least in the south and west.

Regional resistance fighters, also known as “warlords”, a term which most Afghans detest, have considerable influence based on sub-tribal affinity and represent a sub-tribal union under a common leader. The purpose of this group is primarily self-interest and, thus, it is likely to align itself to any party which will benefit the warlord individually and not so much as a group collectively. The central rationale is thus not common but personal objectives and ambitions of the group leader. This has led to political flux in Afghanistan and continued feudal dissension. Warlords are also susceptible to being bought over. Presently, the Afghanistan government is engaged in winning the loyalty of warlords through a

policy of general appeasement. Thus, the powerful Uzbek warlord Rashid Dostum has been given the ceremonial post of chief of staff to the commander-in-chief of the Afghan National Army. The fickleness of warlords in Afghanistan is one of its greatest banes. At the tribe or village level, elders perform a defining role and most decisions are taken by the *jirga* of elders. Taliban leaders also draw their power from their ability to adjudicate and impart justice. Lacking any modern institution of jurisprudence, an Afghan depends on *Sharia*-based decisions by his local leaders which may even mete out harsh punishments but which are at least quick in the settlement of disputes.

Lack of unity amongst the Afghans has provided extrinsic powers influence in the region, which in turn has also led to antagonism and the perception that the Afghans will not be led from outside. Yet the reality is that the state has been continually under the influence of its powerful neighbours, be it British India, Russia and the Soviet Union or Pakistan. Today, the United States has a major defining role in Afghanistan which was more than evident during the recent South Korean crisis. American resolve prevented Karzai from exchanging prisoners for hostages, though a large quantum of money was said to have been provided as ransom for the release.

Afghanistan will require extensive support at all levels of governance for it to sustain itself in the years ahead. This is possible only through the commitment of the international community. The same has already been pledged to the Afghans by the United Nations for another one year, only recently. Responsibility for the security of all of Afghanistan was transferred to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in October 2006. As of date, 50,000 Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers have been trained along with some 60,000 police, including border and highway police.²⁵ However, continuous security cover of the armies of NATO and the United States is

essential as the ANA and the ANP are yet to emerge as cohesive modern forces capable of undertaking independent operations and policing on their own.

Relations Within the Region

Afghanistan's geo-economic significance was, so far, based on negative factors such as being the largest global source for terrorism and opium in the world. This would, however, change substantially once hydrocarbon resources in Central Asia can be extracted to full potential. While the Caspian Sea route is one option, pipelines through Afghanistan, like the TAPI, will be others which would invariably either flow towards Iran or Pakistan. Access to Central Asia is, thus, an important attribute of Afghanistan and for which it is being regarded as a prize by all three of its Southwest Asian neighbours, thereby, creating competition amongst them.

Afghanistan has been traditionally aligned away from the West. The antagonism of the Taliban against the West was further heightened with its coalition with the Al Qaeda, and firmed up the resolve of the group against America in particular. However, this is not a purely Pashtun orientation but a general sentiment in the Afghan psyche which is more comfortable in a non-Western environment. While Russia had considerable goodwill in Afghanistan, it was squandered through its attempt to dominate the internal polity which culminated in the Soviet invasion in 1979. That this event coincided with the Iranian Islamic revolution also led to a redefinition of the geo-politics of the region.

There are many contentious issues between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Durand Line established in 1893 is seen by Afghanistan as a line dividing the Pashtun homelands and has never been accepted as an inter-state boundary with Pakistan. Pakistan's fence building activities have, thus, been severely resisted, including at times by exchange of artillery and mortar fire.

Pakistan's strategic obsession of depth in the west due to its antagonist relations with India has also led to its policies of domination of the Afghan neighbourhood. The manifestations of the obsession led to Pakistan's stiff opposition to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979, which was also due to the perception in Pakistan of being sandwiched between two powerful neighbours, the Soviet Union in the west, and India in the east. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, which had been drafted in 1971 and which provided New Delhi Moscow's support in assisting the rise of Bangla aspiration and led to the break-up of Pakistan, also rankles Pakistan. However, of late, Pakistan-Russia relations have shown considerable improvement, though Pakistan will prefer a Western presence in Afghanistan much more than a Russian one.

Pakistan is now attempting to increase its trade with Afghanistan which in 2004-05 stood at US \$ 1 billion.²⁶ It enjoys considerable advantage of providing the only sea link to the landlocked state. It has been contributing to reconstruction efforts in the country; however, the projects undertaken are primarily in terms of development of infrastructure and communications in eastern Afghanistan where Pakistan sees the Pashtun population having closer affiliation with its own people. Afghan refugees are another issue of concern for Pakistan.

The Karzai government has demonstrated extraordinary keenness to maintain an even-handed relationship with neighbours, including Pakistan, though it has not been particularly successful in this. With Iran and India, it has had good relations which were somewhat affected by the refugee crisis with Iran during the summer of 2007. However, recently, Karzai spoke up for Iran in a joint conference with the US president in the United States, which, given the strong resentment of the Bush Administration towards Tehran, was an extraordinary gesture, denoting the significance of Iran to Kabul. This balance in relations is expected to

continue. Cooperation between Iran and Pakistan is also important for bringing about peace and stability, and expediting the reconstruction efforts in war-ravaged Afghanistan.²⁷

On the other hand, the Taliban has, and maintains, close relations with the Pakistan intelligence agency. Its survival is dependent on the support being provided by Pakistan. Cutting off this tap may be physically as well as ideologically difficult for Islamabad in the near future. The “new Taliban” is, however, a conglomerate about which not much is known except that it is far more sophisticated and brutal than in the past. Its fighters comprise many nationalities, including Afghans, Pakistanis, Chechens, Uzbeks and even Arabs.²⁸ Establishment of a government with the firm resolve to eradicate fundamentalism alone will ensure that Pakistani support to the Taliban is stopped.

SCENARIOS

While there would be a number of factors which will impinge on the emerging scenarios in Afghanistan, for the purpose of the study, the focus will be on a single issue, that is, regional relations within Southwest Asia. The possible scenarios that could be seen in Afghanistan by 2012 have been outlined below, along with the desired course of regional relations and the likelihood of this. These scenarios are broad-based outline ones from which various sub-scenarios can be developed subsequently. The three scenarios could be as follows:

1. Scenario 1 – Growing stability.
2. Scenario 2 – Status quo.
3. Scenario 3 – Growing instability leading to anarchy.

Scenario 1 – Growing Stability

Absolute stability in Afghanistan can come about only in the long term

over a spectrum of ten years and beyond. However, growing stability within the mid-term perspective is feasible. This would imply consolidation of the government and administrative structure in Kabul, its increased reach beyond the capital, partial shift of focus from security to development, establishment of normal law and order in over 70 per cent of the country, reduction of militancy from the present levels to isolated terrorist incidents, and so on. One of the primary factors which are incumbent in Scenario 1 is the maintenance of the present level of deployment of NATO/ISAF in Afghanistan, and concomitantly an increase in force levels would contribute to greater stability in an earlier time-frame. The desired course of regional relations would necessitate the following:

Pakistan. Pakistan is the pivotal regional player. Stability in Afghanistan is predominantly dependent on Islamabad's positive contribution translated in the form of improved Pakistan-Afghanistan and Pakistan-India relationships. There are primarily two facets to actions by Islamabad. One relates to suppression of militancy in its own areas and the other is its role as a facilitator for aid and trade in Afghanistan. By going beyond regional politics and allowing the maximum number of external players to operate in the country, Pakistan could play a pivotal role in stability. The following actions by Pakistan will contribute to Scenario 1:

- Realignment in strategic thinking wherein stability in Afghanistan is seen in Islamabad's national interest.
- National resolve of the government and the people to root out extremism from the western areas of NWFP and FATA. Since this is one of the factors on which Emergency is declared, ostensibly there should be an increase in measures taken to control militancy.
- Denial of sanctuary to the Al Qaeda and Afghan Taliban, including

elements of splinter groups such as the Hizb-e-Islami (HEI). Combined with point one above, these two measures would comprise the main contributing factors to Scenario 1.

- Socio-political and military actions to bring stability to areas astride the Durand Line, particularly in FATA and Northern Balochistan.
- Progressive dialogue towards settlement of differences over the Durand Line with Afghanistan.
- Opening the land route for aid, assistance and trade to India.
- Speedy conclusion of IPI and development of proposals for TAPI.
- Blocking of drug routes from, and arms routes to, Afghanistan.
- Effective sustenance of refugees with a policy of gradual rehabilitation, in conjunction with UN policy and agency.

Iran. Iran is a dominant player in bringing about stability in Western Afghanistan and providing legitimacy to the Karzai regime

- Improvement in Iran-US relations. This possibility is considered limited, given the present levels of antagonism in Washington, more than in Iran, and possible political foreplay in the Middle East. However, a more liberal president and Majlis, in that order, which is possible in 2009 and 2008 respectively, may see a distinct shift in relations.
- Delinking Iran's relations with Afghanistan from its larger geo-political conflict with the US. Iran has shown some overt indications of the same in the recent past.
- Preventive measures by the Iranian government to control flow of arms into Afghanistan from non-government sources.
- Planned retrenchment of refugees in Iran avoiding the knee-jerk reaction adopted in April-May 2007 where large numbers were forcibly repatriated on grounds of non-registration.
- Greater aid and assistance to Afghanistan.

- Development of trade and commerce with Afghanistan as well as the Central Asian Republics through Afghanistan. This will also be facilitated by opening of the Zaranj-Delaram highway under construction by the Indian Border Roads Organisation.
- Provision of port access to Afghanistan at Chabahar.

India. Indian influence in bringing about stability lies in improvement in Indo-Pakistan relations, trade and aid.

- Confidence-building measures with Pakistan focussed on greater transparency to overcome apprehensions about India's relations with Afghanistan and Central Asian states, thereby, defusing fears of a second front with bases in Tajikistan and larger interests in other Central Asian countries.
- Confidence-building measures with Pakistan with reference to lack of involvement in Balochistan and FATA militancy.
- Speedy conclusion of negotiations on IPI and commencement of talks on laying out TAPI.
- Active assistance in training of the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police. This need not necessarily be undertaken within Afghanistan, but could even be undertaken in India, utilising the large capacities of the Indian military and police training centres, some of which are underutilised at present.
- Opening of the Delaram-Zaranj highway.
- Enhancement of aid in terms of both quantity and sectors of interest to the Afghan people.
- Enhancement of bilateral trade, particularly in facilitating trade in agricultural produce, as India is the largest market close to Kabul which can easily absorb alternative fresh produce from Afghanistan, which could possibly replace poppy cultivation.

Afghanistan/ISAF/UN. The Afghanistan government lacks the capability to take effective measures for consolidation singly, hence, measures required by the ISAF or the UN as stake holders in Afghan resolution have also been included. These will include the following:

- Reduction of present levels of Taliban influence in the south and the eastern provinces by over 50 per cent.
- Disruption of the Al Qaeda and Taliban command and control network in Afghanistan. Targeting leaders may be a good strategy to be followed for this purpose.
- Proactive action to deny routes of ingress from FATA in Pakistan to Afghanistan. Establishment of a counter-surveillance grid is essential. Continuous disruption of lines of communication is also important.
- Enhancing the capacity of the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police in terms of both numbers and quality.
- Sustained military operations for interdiction of the Taliban and extending the influence of the government to newer areas.
- Intelligence operations to proactively neutralise the roots for growth of the Taliban.
- Information operations and perception management through Afghan forces to expand the writ of the government.
- Developing alternatives to poppy cultivation, particularly, in the Helmand province.
- Focus on large size projects such as operation of the Kajaki electricity network to bring about visible progress to the people.
- Programme for acceptance of refugees from Pakistan and Iran.
- Greater transit facilities to all regional countries for access to Central Asia.
- Reduction of crime and criminal gangs operating sometimes in tandem with the Taliban.
- Continued focus on enhancing soft capabilities of the youth through

focus on primary and secondary education.

- Even spread of aid and development across all the provinces.

Scenario 2 – Status Quo

Status quo would imply that the government continues to control areas presently under its influence with limited ingress of the Taliban in the north and west, and a balance of influence in the southern and eastern provinces. The present level is approximately 50:50, with the government controlling half the districts and the Taliban the other half, in the south and east. This would also imply survival of the present Afghanistan governing regime. Possible actions which would result in a status quo are indicated as follows:

Pakistan. Pakistan's inability to support the Afghanistan government by administrative and military measures to neutralise Waziristan as a base for the Taliban and Al Qaeda would be the primary contributor to the status quo. While international pressure may not enable Pakistan to abandon the course of focussing on militancy in FATA, if the actions taken are not result oriented but merely to manage external perception, militancy will remain unchecked, and combined with local support, may continue to be a festering sore for its neighbour, Afghanistan. In aid and trade too, if Islamabad continues to be a bystander rather than a catalyst, this will not develop beyond the present contours of slow and patchy development in the country. Some of the other issues are as follows:

- Lack of political and military will to counter militancy and extremism from the western areas of NWFP and FATA.
- Continued proliferation of fundamentalist and extremist *madrassa* culture in the area.
- Focus on short-term regional gains of seeking arms and military

assistance from the USA, while remaining committed only by episodic counter-militancy actions. Pakistan receives an annual contribution of \$ 2 billion, 90 per cent of which is military related aid from the USA.

- Continued misapprehensions with Afghanistan over the Durand Line.
- Keeping the Taliban and Al Qaeda as a strategic card for international as well as regional engagement.
- Pursuit of a policy of blocking India's easy access to Afghanistan.

Iran

- Continued strain in Iran-US relations. Conservative control of the Iranian Majlis and a republican president in January 2009 could possibly contribute to the same. This would lead to Iran-Afghan relations being used as a power tool to embarrass the USA.
- The Iran government's ambivalence on flow of arms to Afghanistan, with public denials, yet no measures taken to stop the flow.
- Ambivalence towards the refugees, continuing to use them as leverage against the fledgling Afghan government.
- Reduction of aid and assistance to Afghanistan.
- Lack of interest in development of trade and commerce with Afghanistan as well as the Central Asian Republics.

India

- Continued focus on national interests through opaque ingress in the Central Asian states, particularly Tajikistan and possibly Uzbekistan.
- Deterioration in Pakistan-India relations or, at best, a status quo.
- Lack of progress on IPI, no development of TAPI.
- Continuation of the present policy of active non-engagement in military affairs and assistance to Afghanistan.

- Delay in opening of the Delaram-Zaranj highway.
- No fresh tranche of aid and development.

Afghanistan/ISAF/UN. Continued restriction on the writ of the Afghanistan government in and around Kabul will be one of the key determinants of the status quo. Other issues include the following:

- Containment of Taliban influence in the south and eastern provinces at present levels but no reduction.
- Sustenance of Al Qaeda and Taliban influence amongst the tribal network in the area providing financial, recruitment and other support as hitherto.
- Continued access to the Taliban and Al Qaeda from FATA.
- Slow capacity building of the ANA and the ANP in terms of both numbers and quality.
- Failure to counter poppy cultivation, though the level of produce may remain within the 6,000–7,000 tons paradigm.
- Continued problems of management of refugees from Iran and Pakistan. Slow rate of visible development and education in the country.

Scenario 3 – Growing Instability Leading to Anarchy

Instability may not necessarily represent a doomsday scenario in Afghanistan, given the stakes of the international community and particularly NATO and the United States, that consider a security hole in Kabul as a global threat. However, instability would imply a rump government in Kabul, the dominant influence of the Taliban in the south and east with a ratio of 70:30 or more in relation to government forces, networked terrorism in the north and west and continued support from sanctuaries in Pakistan. Greater influence of the Taliban in the north and west could lead to anarchy. Breakdown of aid and development, including

severe food insecurity and continued growth of the area under poppy cultivation would be its other facets. Withdrawal of parts of the over 40,000 NATO/ISAF troops, particularly those deployed in the critical provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Ghazni and Uruzgan, and weakening of the counter-militancy grid will also be a major factor. The possible actions which would contribute to instability are indicated as follows:

Pakistan. Breakdown in Pakistan's governance structure or its takeover by anti-West and fundamentalist elements or covert influence exercised by these elements on the Pakistani government to prevent it from controlling the growth of the Al Qaeda and Taliban in FATA and NWFP would have a snowballing impact in Afghanistan. Alternatively, the inability of the Pakistan Army to control militancy, with declining authority of the leadership, loss of morale and resistance within troops would also contribute to their ineffectiveness in counter-militancy operations. This would also weaken Islamabad's resolve to support coalition forces and development in Afghanistan. Some of the other relevant issues are as follows:

- Continued growth of the Al Qaeda and Taliban in NWFP and FATA.
- Fostering fundamentalist and extremist *madrassa* culture in the country even in selected western areas would have a sizeable impact.
- Deterioration of Indo-Pakistan relations, leading to the requirement of a force build up on Pakistan's eastern borders or the Line of Control would be detrimental to the control of militancy in FATA.
- Continued fostering, even if it is covert, of the Taliban and Al Qaeda as an alternative force on the western front to ensure strategic depth.
- Build up of confrontation over the Durand Line.
- Complete denial of access to India to Afghanistan.

Iran

- American strike on Iran leading to Iran's possible declaration of war on the United States. Iran would seek to foster militancy in Iraq as well as Afghanistan to ensure that America fails to attain its larger goals in the area, thereby, attempting to defeat the United States by a strategy of indirect approach.
- Severe deterioration in US-Iran relations may also lead to a similar situation with greater strangulation of Iran by America and consequent *quid pro quo* reaction by Tehran. Such a scenario is feasible in case Iran reaches criticality in its nuclear weapons programme or Washington even suspects that it has done so.
- Iran would develop a proxy war option in Afghanistan to undermine US influence which could be a multi-pronged one to include use of terrorism and refugees to advantage.
- Iran may not be averse to supporting the Taliban merely to undermine US influence in Afghanistan which would be a double whammy for the fundamentalist group, now receiving support from both Iran and Pakistan.

India

- Strained Indo-Pakistan relations arising from tension over Kashmir and continued support to terrorism in the Valley extended to the Indian hinterland, with Pakistan-based groups accused of aiding, abetting and conducting terrorist acts in India.
- Major terrorist strike in India, the roots of which are invariably traced back to Pakistan, would lead to a similar situation.
- Development of a standoff on the Indo-Pakistan border, leading to deployment of troops by both sides as was seen during 2002. This will provide Pakistan legitimate reasons to withdraw forces from Waziristan, thereby, giving leeway to the Taliban.

- Pursuit of Indian interests in Central Asia as well as Afghanistan without taking into consideration Pakistan's sensitivities to the same.
- Reduction or status quo in aid and development.
- Kidnapping or eviction of Indians deployed in Afghanistan due to the Taliban threat.

Afghanistan/ISAF/UN. Collapse of the Afghanistan government would result in instability. This may not be merely eviction of Karzai from the seat of power in Kabul, but also growth of alternative power centres, including regional governors, return to warlordism and partial control of territory in the south by the Taliban. These major trends will include some or all of the following:

- Disengagement by US/ISAF forces from Afghanistan due to domestic pressures.
- Deterioration or collapse of Afghanistan-Pakistan and Afghanistan-Iran relations.
- Loss of control over areas astride the Durand Line in both countries.
- Rise of the “new” Taliban which can mobilise anti-West sentiment in the populace to advantage while simultaneously undermining the support of people and government in the west to troop intervention. South Korea is a victim of this trend, with withdrawal of forces by December 14, 2007, after the crisis over the kidnapping of 23 South Korean citizens in August.
- Series of suicide attacks, with heavy casualties.
- Large scale refugee influx.
- Uncontrolled poppy cultivation.
- Collapse of the ANP and partial collapse of the ANA with possible defections to the Taliban.
- Effective interjection of Iran and Pakistan in politics and militancy in

areas adjacent to the states and extending further inwards.

- Return to “warlordism” and boost to groups such as the HEI which stand marginalised today.
- Elimination of Karzai and other moderate Pashtun leaders.

Greater political polarisation with the growing Pashtun-Tajik-Uzbek rift.

CONCLUSION

The situation in Afghanistan is partially dictated by regional relations that Kabul has with its neighbours, particularly Iran and Pakistan. This has implied linkages with Indo-Pakistan relations and Iran's power status in the Middle East. Afghanistan has seen instability for the past three decades, with tectonic ideological convulsions, from Communism to Islamic fundamentalism, which has resulted in regression in the growth of nationalism in the country during this period. Today, the country is slowly and steadily returning to normalcy but the process will take a long time as over four decades of instability cannot be overcome by half or even a decade of stabilisation operations. Thus, a two to three decade scenario of prosperity, given continuity of current levels of development, is an optimistic estimation. Over the medium term, however, Scenario 2 or status quo plus appears the way ahead, provided the international community continues with its commitment to Kabul, regional relations are reasonably stable and a conflagration between the US and Iran or India and Pakistan is avoided.

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