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# geopolitics

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**FLYING HIGH...**

But are they trained enough?



**BRACING FOR THE FUTURE:** The India-Afghanistan agreement has the potential to provide some direction to the uncertain post-2014 situation in Afghanistan PIB

## LOOKING BEYOND 2014

It will be too much to expect that things would be stable in Afghanistan when the American troops leave the country. Therefore, India has to be pro-active in defending its own security and economic interests in that country, writes **GULSHAN SACHDEVA**

**A** PART FROM broad discussions on the 2014 drawdown by international forces, developments of the last few months, including the assassination of Ustad Burhanuddin Rabbani in September 2010, speculations on negotiations with the Taliban, ongoing regional anxieties and continuing global economic crisis have pointed towards increasing unpredictability about Afghanistan's future. Besides, the tensions between the US and Pakistan and instability within Pakistan have further complicated future scenarios for Afghanistan.

Of course, at the Bonn and Istanbul conferences, both the international community and the regional players reaffirmed their long-term commitment to the future of Afghanistan, which goes much beyond 2014. The Bonn Conference of December 2011 was attended by 85 countries and 15 international organisations. At the conference, all participants dedicated themselves to "deepening and broadening their historic partnership from Transition to the Transformation

Decade of 2015 to 2024". The final declaration talked about mutual commitments in the areas of governance, security, the peace process, economic and social development, and regional cooperation.

Earlier, in November 2011, at the Istanbul Conference, which was attended by the so-called "Heart of Asia" countries consisting of Afghanistan, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, UAE and all the Central Asian republics, participants reaffirmed their strong commitment to a "secure, stable and prosperous Afghanistan in a secure and stable region". Apart from other things, in the context of Afghanistan, the regional countries also agreed to respect for the territorial integrity of states, non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states, dismantling terrorist sanctuaries and safe havens, disrupting all financial and tactical support for terrorism and support for the stability and peace in Afghanistan, as well as respect for Afghanistan's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity. On the face of it, these developments looked very promising.

Moreover, the American officials also talked about working for a New Silk Road Strategy for Afghanistan. Despite all these developments, however, the future of Afghanistan looks more uncertain today than that any time in the last one decade.

One important reason for this uncertainty is that almost every one involved in the Afghanistan project believes that by 2014 a significant number of coalition forces would have left the country, even if some American forces continue to stay for longer periods mainly in non-combat missions. In June 2011, President Obama announced that the US policies had already accomplished most major goals and that drawdown of 33,000 US troops would take place by September 2012. Despite doubts about the durability, the transition to Afghan leadership began, as planned, in July 2011, and is continuing. The security responsibility for many provinces and cities has already been handed over to Afghan authorities.

Although this transition has already begun, it is quite clear to all that due to weak Afghan government and insurgent

safe havens in Pakistan, the country will still need direct security assistance even after 2014. As a result, Afghan officials are negotiating "strategic partnerships" with the US and other partners. It is hoped that the US troops that will remain in Afghanistan will come under the auspices of a strategic partnership agreement under negotiation with the US. It is reported that the agreement is likely to be modelled along that of a "Security Agreement" agreed with Iraq in 2008. This agreement, however, may not have an end date for US military involvement in Afghanistan. To reduce uncertainty, Afghanistan withdrawal will also leave significant forces behind. Negotiations for this agreement, which began in February 2011, are still not complete. Some reports indicate that negotiations have bogged down over Afghan insistence on firm deadlines for Afghan institutions to assume control over detention centres and decisions on night-time raids on insurgents.

In the meanwhile, Afghanistan has already signed its first-ever "strategic partnership" with India. The India-Afghanistan agreement has the potential to provide at least some direction to the uncertain post-2014 situation in Afghanistan. Apart from increasing capacity-building as well as socio-cultural and educational linkages, the agreement points towards two major things. First, India has agreed to assist in the training, equipping and capacity-building programmes for Afghan national security forces. Secondly, it recognises that regional economic cooperation is vital for long-term economic prosperity of Afghanistan and the region. In addition, the agreement creates bilateral institutional mechanism consisting of annual summit meeting, regular political consultations led by foreign ministries of both countries and establishment of strategic dialogue on national security led by national security advisors of both countries.

Overall, post-2014 Afghanistan is going to face two major challenges: security and development. Although there have been some gains in recent months, the security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated significantly since 2007 and will remain difficult in the foreseeable future. With the drawdown of foreign forces, the situation will become more challenging for the Afghan administration. Although overall number of security-related incidents in the last few months of 2011 declined somewhat, suicide attacks continue to



**GROWING PARTNERSHIP:** Border Roads Organisation is involved in crucial infrastructure projects in Afghanistan and India's involvement will increase after the US withdrawal

pose a serious challenge. Between September and November 2011, there were 36 suicide attacks, of which nine were complex attacks.

Recently, the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB), which is responsible for overall strategic coordination between the Afghan government and the international community, has reached an agreement to increase the Afghan National Police Force from 134,000 to 157,000 and the Afghan National Army from 171,000 to 195,000. Although these numbers have already increased significantly, the security forces will need much more mentoring than that provided so far. Owing to higher rates of desertion, many more also need to be trained on regular basis. So far, Americans have provided a major share of resources for training. In fact, about 50 per cent of their committed and disbursed resources for reconstruction and development in Afghanistan have gone only to train security forces. The Europeans have also contributed for police training. Apart from lack of socio-cultural understanding of new Afghan soldiers, the western training has also been very expensive. If India is able to share some of their burden, a significant amount of resources can be freed for other development programmes. This will also provide a major role for India in any future security scenario. Although details are not known at the moment, it is

likely that a major portion of training agreed in the strategic partnership agreement will be conducted in India itself.

In the last ten years, the US has depended heavily on Pakistan to resolve Afghan problems. The apparent deterioration in the US-Pakistan relations, however, may force the US to look for other allies. To reduce its dependence on Pakistan, the US since 2009, has increasingly relied on a series of commercial air and ground routes, called the Northern Distribution Network (NDN). Under this network, non-lethal supplies to coalition troops in Afghanistan are sent through Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The NDN comprises three principal land routes. The first one is from the Georgian Black Sea port of Poti, through Baku, Azerbaijan, across the Caspian Sea and into Central Asia. The second route is from the Latvian port of Riga through Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The third route originates in Latvia and travels through Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and passes into Afghanistan via Tajikistan. Already close to 75 per cent of ground sustainment cargo is now shipped via the NDN. According to the US Transportation Command, around 40 per cent of all cargo transits the NDN, 31 per cent is shipped by air, and the remaining 29 per cent goes through Pakistan. The dependence on Pakistan was about 90 per cent in 2009.

At the moment, the NDN only allows



one-way transit of goods to Afghanistan. And that too, it only allows the transit of non-lethal supplies, such as cement, lumber, blast barriers, septic tanks, and matting. As a result, sensitive and high-technology equipment is transported by air. According to a recent report by the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, it also costs roughly an additional \$10,000 per twenty-foot container to ship via the NDN instead of Pakistan. Still, it seems that this option will be increasingly used by the coalition forces in future. Since NDN and the Manas Transit Center in Kyrgyzstan are going to play increasingly important roles in supporting coalition operations, the coming years may see a greater Central Asian role in US stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan. As a result, the US may also try to balance its security and political priorities in the region.

With declining western interest, the amount of resources available for development projects in the next decade is likely to be significantly lower than that in the past one decade. Experience suggests that withdrawal of international troops in other parts of the world has reduced civilian aid, with implications for economic growth and fiscal sustainability. Therefore, potential financing gaps in the budget could threaten security and recent progress made on the developmental front. According to the World Bank, actual aid to Afghanistan in 2010-11 was about \$16 billion, about the size of the nominal GDP. Any rapid decline in aid will severely affect growth performance and employ-



## DIPLOMACY

ment scenario in the country. There is another view, however, that the actual impact of declining aid may be less drastic as most of the international aid in any way was leaving Afghanistan as imports, expatriated profits and salaries.

Unlike Iraq, Afghanistan has very limited resources. For long-term sustainability, it ultimately has to play its traditional role of facilitating trade and commerce through its territories. American officials have now repeatedly talked about the New Silk Road Strategy. Since 2005, the idea has been discussed at many academic and policy forums. This strategy is a long-term vision of an international trade, transit and energy network that links Central and South Asian economies through Afghanistan. This was a good blueprint for Afghanistan but unfortunately has been mixed with regional geopolitics and exit strategies from Afghanistan. Still, Afghanistan has no other option but to continuously work for this strategy. On the

KABUL WILL HAVE TO PLAY ITS ROLE OF FACILITATING TRADE AND COMMERCE THROUGH ITS TERRITORIES

sidelines of the UN General Assembly, the New Silk Road strategy was unveiled in September last year at New York. This meeting was hosted by Germany and co-chaired by US Secretary of State as well as by German and Afghan foreign ministers. The meeting was attended by 27 countries and international organisations, including Indian and Pakistani foreign ministers.

However, many analysts have pointed out difficulties in implementing this strategy, particularly in the context of difficult India-Pakistan as well as Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. But, some positive developments have taken place. In 2010, Afghanistan and Pakistan signed an agreement called Afghanistan-Pakistan Trade and Transit Agreement (APTTA). At the moment, it is a partial agreement designed to exclude India. Under the agreement, Afghan trucks are allowed to carry Afghan transit export cargo to Pakistani ports and also to the Indian border.

If implemented properly, this has the potential to boost Afghanistan's development and regional trade. Over time, it may also create insurmountable pressures within Pakistan and Afghanistan to open up trade across the border with India. In September 2011, the Commerce Minister of Pakistan visited India and expressed optimism at the dawn of a new era of trade and investment relations with India as "both countries are now poised to open bank branches, and land routes". The Indian Commerce Minister Anand Sharma also described his visit as a "defining" moment in bilateral trade relations.

The former US ambassador to Afghanistan and Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, outlined recently that what happened in 2014 and beyond would depend on the success and failure of the US strategy with regards to eliminating terrorist sanctuaries in the region, catalysing a strategic shift in Pakistan policy from supporting those who are fighting NATO and Afghan forces — the Taliban, the Haqqani network and others — to facilitating a political settlement in Afghanistan, persuading the Afghan government to deal with issues concerning governance and corruption, and perusing a positive outlook for the region based on economic integration and establishment of a New Silk Road.

However, whatever the US may do, none of its policies is likely to deliver conclusive results by 2014. One US strategy between now and 2014 is likely to be some kind of reconciliation with the Taliban. The recent reports of Taliban planning to open a political office in Qatar may be a step in that direction. But the trouble with this strategy, as the former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger noted recently, is: "If you negotiate while your forces are withdrawing, you're not in a great negotiating position." In these circumstances, India has to be pro-active in defending its own security and economic interests in Afghanistan and the region. In the changed scenario, India can be in a better position to the influence outcome by building on its "strategic partnership" with Afghanistan and developing economic integration strategies with the Central Asian States.

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