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INDIA-PAKISTAN CONFRONTATION: WHAT HAS CHANGED ABOUT INDIAN- HELD KASHMIR SINCE 1947?

ASMA YAQOOB*

Prologue

The ideological imprudence and political short-sightedness of Indian leadership has never allowed it to win the hearts and minds of Kashmiris. Treating the Kashmiris with an iron fist would never complement Indian grand strategy in the region and beyond. The human sufferings in Indian-held Kashmir (IHK) would also continue to jeopardize India's self-proclaimed world shining image. The Kashmir conflict has long begun to cease as a 'mere territorial dispute' between India and Pakistan given the strategic pattern of regional and international politics in the last few decades, large-scale western influence in the region, proxy wars, dynamics of alliances and coalitions within and beyond the region, and most importantly, the rise and spread of dissident elements in IHK with strong linkages elsewhere. Becoming well aware of these socio-political dynamics, New Delhi has lately realized the futility of any solution of Kashmir issue without taking into account the diverse political aspirations of Kashmiris living in the region. What is still missing in New Delhi's policy vision, however, is her stiffness over not allowing a trilateral dialogue to break the impasse of political negotiations and finding a win-win solution on all three fronts, i.e., India, Pakistan, and Kashmir. The nature of India-Pakistan peace parleys and the strategic issues involved in them often fail to complement whatever New Delhi and Kashmiri leadership arrives at and vice versa. The peace process on Kashmir is a broad subject to be dealt with in a single study. This paper,

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therefore, limits itself to socio-political and military dynamics through which IHK has been passing during the past six decades, making it vulnerable to communal wrangling just like the rest of India.

Introduction

It has been more than six decades that the Kashmir issue has kept the Indo-Pakistan hostility burning. In spite of respective Indian and Pakistani claims about Jammu and Kashmir as ‘an integral part of Indian union’ and ‘unfinished business of 1947’, the essence of dispute has changed a lot in recent decades. In the words of Teresita C. Schaffer, “The Kashmir problem began as a dispute over territory; what has made it toxic has been incompatible national identities.”¹ The Indian drive to play against the wills of majority Kashmiris has put Indian nationalism into rivalry with Kashmiri nationalism. India and Pakistan have entered an arms race over Kashmir and are engaging in fruitless bilateral diplomacy both with and without international persuasion. On the other hand, the Kashmiri youth and politicians have long rejected the status quo over Kashmir; more so, as the world community has shifted its attention from the settlement of Kashmir dispute to a mere call for crisis-management. One of the most perceptible changes regarding IHK is recognition on the part of both India and the international community to view Kashmiris as important stakeholders in achieving a sustained resolution of the conflict. The Kashmiri youth has become tech-savvy enough to post online pictures and videos of Indian security forces’ brutalities, besides engaging in online discussion forums to share their vision and ideas of peace, thus waging a social media war against the armed hands of Indian government.

The IHK has long been administered by India as a special territory under Article 370 of the Indian constitution. Amendments to this article have been central to a gradual integration of Kashmir with the rest of the country. Kashmiri diasporas around the world are expressing dissatisfaction with the Indian administration and pace of development in Kashmir, and want Kashmiris to run their own socio-economic and political affairs. Despite a lack of leadership among Kashmiri political groups, many from the academic and business circles are speaking up through modern modes of communication, involving social media sites, to show their concerns and views about the conflict. Their views exhibit concern about Kashmir’s under-development, showing local alienation from the Indian setup of centralized control of Kashmir affairs. The Kashmiri youth also want their voice being recognized as the most important in any dispute settlement process between India and Pakistan as well as through the international community.

This study seeks to analyze various changes that have altered the geopolitical landscape of IHK on global radar. In doing so, the study is set to answer the following questions: What has changed in IHK geographically, militarily, and politically? What has been the Indian central government’s policy vis-à-vis IHK since 1947? To what extent, local representatives have any say in the running of IHK? How strong is the communal divide or integration (if there is any) with respect to the demands of regional autonomy? Does the emergence

of social media constitute an important change in reviving Kashmiri struggle at the international forums? What are the most pressing challenges for Kashmiris in the present day? Based on the preliminary assertion that regional and international geo-politics in the recent past have brought numerous changes in IHK, the study aims to highlight the need for a remodelling of Indian strategy about the issue itself.

Geopolitical divisions of IHK

The disputed area of Kashmir, located in the north-western region of Indo-Pak Subcontinent borders China and Afghanistan. The territory is divided into five regions. Two regions, administered by Pakistan, are commonly referred to as Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad (free) Jammu and Kashmir, while three are in the control of India, collectively incorporated by India into the state of Jammu & Kashmir, also known as IHK. A line of control marking the ceasefire line between the Pakistani and Indian administered parts, both on ground and map, actually divides the disputed territory to which both India and Pakistan lay their respective claims. The geographical divisions of Kashmir do not make it a mere territorial dispute between the two historically rival states but also involve political underpinnings, cultural reflections, and economic discrepancies within and outside these divisions. The IHK is itself divided into three regions which represent ethnic, religious, economic, and political diversities intensified during the recent years.

According to the Indian government's 2011 census, the population of IHK is about 12.5 million (see Table 1).² The first important part of IHK is called the Vale or Valley of Kashmir with a population of more than 5 million.³ The Valley has a predominant Muslim majority. Jammu is the second most-inhabited area, having a population of 4.4 million with a 60 per cent Hindu and 30 per cent Muslim population.⁴ Muslims are a majority in three of Jammu's six districts. The mountainous Ladakh is the third region of IHK mainly inhabited by Muslims and Buddhists (see Table 2). Each of the communal group is about half in the district of Leh, but in Kargil district Muslims are in majority.⁵ The Ladakh region also includes a large Shiite Muslim population showing religious diversity from Sunni majority in the Valley.

The IHK is divided not only geographically but also politically. Of these three IHK regions, supporters of the freedom movement are primarily based in the Valley of Kashmir opposing the rule and heavy control of New Delhi. This is the region that has suffered most because of armed clashes between Indian security forces and local Kashmiris. Jammu and Ladakh are on the side of the Indian government.

Table 1**Area and population of the three regions**

Region	Area (Sq. Miles)	Population (2011 Census)
Kashmir Valley	8,639	5,350,811
Jammu Region	12,378	6,907,623
Ladakh Region	33,554	290,492
Total	54,571	12,548,926

Source: Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs.

Table 2**Religious Demography in J&K - Census 2011**

DIVISION	POPULATION			
	Muslim	Hindu	Sikh	Buddhist
Kashmir	97.16%	1.84%	0.88%	0.11%
Jammu	30.69%	65.23%	3.57%	0.51%
Ladakh	47.40%	6.22%	-	45.87%
Jammu and Kashmir	66.97%	29.63%	2.03%	1.36%

Source: Election Commission of India, 2014

The Kashmiris themselves are not happy about these regional divisions. Dissatisfied with Indian acts of control, the population of IHK is politically divided into three groups—those who are on the side of Pakistan, political groups favouring centre's rule, and finally those who are struggling for independence.

The three regions of IHK have been following a different approach towards centre's rule of the territory since the contested accession of Kashmir to India in 1947. The accession is a controversial affair because the ruler of Kashmir, a Hindu Maharaja, chose to accede to India disregarding the popular will of his majority Muslim populace. The events that followed later and involved a war between India and Pakistan in late 1947 gave the Indian government an excuse to use every means to tighten its control over the territory and people of Kashmir. The brutal state repression accompanied by instruments of constitutional integration of IHK by the Indian government has produced dissident elements within the territory over the years. The Kashmiri uprising of 1989-90 has a whole background of misrule, political manipulation, economic exploitation, and military high-handedness towards local activists often labelled as pro-Pakistani and militants revolting against the state. This uprising started from the Valley and spread to other parts of IHK. Over the course of time, ethno-geographical, religious, socio-economic, and political divisions have become a dominant feature in IHK though. The following section will look into details of each of these divisions.

Regionalism in IHK

Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh achieved administrative unity only during the British rule. Before that the three regions of IHK remained distinct in their identity and political governance.⁶ Putting three divergent regions into one without regard for their religious and cultural differences pitted them against one

another soon after the British withdrawal from India. Political differences between these regions also have a communal angle as the Valley is different from Jammu and Ladakh in terms of its demographic composition and allegiance towards Delhi government. There has also been a feeling of political neglect in Jammu and Ladakh because of resource allocation and administrative decisions for the region being taken in New Delhi. A perception of political and electoral dominance of the Valley widely prevails amongst inhabitants of Jammu and Ladakh. Sensitivities also exist in Jammu about the Valley being a pivotal point of politics for New Delhi and, therefore, enjoying national and international policy attention. This regional disparity led to the beginning of agitation-based politics in Jammu as early as 1953. To address regional discontents, the Indian government appointed several commissions in the past, two of which were Sikri Commission and Gajendragadkar Commission, to make inquiries into regional imbalances which later proved true in economic and political fields.⁷ Uniformity of politics and development in IHK, however, is neither the goal of successive IHK governments nor of New Delhi.

Regional political aspirations took a communal form when the two major political parties in IHK, National Conference and Congress, competed for votes in 1983 Assembly elections by campaigning for faith-based voting. The Congress succeeded in winning the support of Jammu Hindus by playing up their fears of domination by the Valley-centred politics of the region whereas the National Conference targeted Muslim dominated constituencies throughout IHK.⁸ This trend of communal-based electoral politics in IHK continues to this date.

Sub-regional political divisions grew wide enough with the demand of Jammu and Ladakh for treating the whole region under exclusive jurisdiction of Indian constitution instead of granting it a special status under Article 370.⁹ The Hindus of Jammu and Buddhists of Ladakh have long been supporting a complete integration of IHK in the Indian Union in contrast to the demand for greater autonomy by the Muslims of the Valley.¹⁰ Demanding separation of Ladakh from the rest of IHK, Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) formed the People's Movement in 1989 for Union Territory status.¹¹ In other words, the demand called for representational allegiance to the centre and making Ladakh politically distinctive from Jammu and Valley. LBA also started demanding a trifurcation of IHK along communal lines:¹² Ladakh for Buddhists, Jammu for Hindus, and Valley for Muslims which was welcomed by both hardliner Hindu forces in India including Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS),¹³ as well as the so-called liberal political parties like Congress.¹⁴ The trifurcation demand is still being repeated by these political groups in India occasionally as the lasting solution to Kashmir problem.

Sub-regional politics in Ladakh

Within Ladakh,¹⁵ political differences are wide enough between its two districts—Leh and Kargil—largely due to a clash of identity crossing religious and regional lines. Co-inhabited by Buddhist and Islamic cultural spheres, the large number of Shiite Muslims in Kargil puts it apart from Leh which is a

Buddhist dominant area. The two areas were made separate districts in 1979 by the then chief minister of the state Sheikh Abdullah¹⁶ on administrative grounds, but the decision sounded more like a religious one and could be likened to the historical partition of Bengal into East and West Bengal by the British government in 1905. Following widespread Hindu agitation, the partition of Bengal was reversed by the British Viceroy Lord Hardinge in 1911. The division of Leh and Kargil is, however, still intact resulting in the politics of region, religion, and identity.

In fact, religious divisions in Ladakh became more prominent after new political developments in the region which were characterized by electoral politics and young Buddhists' demands of separate Union Territory status for Ladakh. Both in Leh and Kargil, relations between Muslims and Buddhists are in constant tension primarily due to the incidents of conversions on account of inter-religion marriages in the past. This is widely opposed now after becoming a major issue in 1989.¹⁷ The demand for Union Territory status was heavily opposed by Muslim inhabitants of Ladakh region which resulted in communal riots in 1989 leading to a social boycott of Muslims from 1989 to 1992 by the LBA.¹⁸ This four-year agitation-based politics led to the birth of another political organization, the Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUTF), with the merger of all Leh-based political parties into it.¹⁹

For centuries, Ladakh remained home to socio-cultural, religious, and commercial exchanges between its Muslim and Buddhist population. This communal harmony transformed into religious clashes between different political groups belonging not only to Buddhists but also to Shia and Sunni sects of Islam. Religious fundamentalists from Buddhist and Shia Muslim groups were reportedly engaged in violence to settle political scores.²⁰ This inter-faith discord was principally exploited by LBA through highlighting Buddhist identity as distinct from Islam, and associating the former with the history and territory of Ladakh.²¹ Thus the period of 1970s and 1980s witnessed growing fundamentalism within Buddhist community, calling for unity against non-Buddhists.²² Recognizing the distinct geographical and religious identity of Buddhists, the government of India agreed to give Ladakh the status of Autonomous Council. The Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) was created Under the LAHDC Act of 1995 as a regional autonomous model. Using the same model, an Autonomous Hill Council was also established in the neighbouring Kargil District, known as Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Kargil or KAHDC.²³ The two Councils have long been engaged in the politics of religious fundamentalism and have used their respective religious identities to win alliances. During the *Panchayat* (local government) elections in 2011, faith-based campaigning particularly became the test case.²⁴

This inter-religious political rivalry is especially dominant in Zanskar, a majority Buddhist town in the Muslim majority Kargil district of Ladakh. Since the start of 21st century, the two communities are engaged in bitter rivalry over the issue of conversions out of fear of losing their respective demographic majorities. National newspapers' comparative assessments of two census reports

(2001 and 2011), suggesting an overall decline in Buddhist population in the district due to religious conversions, are only adding to the politically motivated communal divide in the region.²⁵

Rise of militant/radical forces

Even if the Kashmiris conceded to Maharaja Hari Singh's hurried accession to India without any consideration for majority's will, it was the gradual suppression and feeling of alienation that made the inhabitants of IHK dead set against New Delhi's rule. Giving feedback after interviewing political and economic representatives from the Valley, the Kashmir Study Group report narrates, "These people who in the early years had not necessarily been happy with the Indian connection but had been content to live with it, had now become embittered antagonists of India."²⁶

The story of the rise of militant elements in IHK begins with post-partition politics between Kashmiri leadership and Indian government. Reluctant to accept Pakistan's statehood and having suspicions on final accession of Kashmir to India, soon after partition India embarked upon a programme to win the support of Kashmiris. National Conference (NC), the biggest political party founded by Sheikh Abdullah in Kashmir during pre-partition years, also found patronage in Nehru's Congress to solidify the former's rule in IHK.²⁷ The NC and Congress leaders were able to conclude an agreement in 1949 which provided for an independent political status for Kashmir in the future Indian constitution. The first constitution of India in 1950 not only endorsed the 1949 Agreement by incorporating Article 370 to delineate relationship between central government and IHK, but also included IHK in Article 1 and Schedule 1 to validate the latter's accession to the Indian Union. Under Article 370, IHK was allowed to have its own constitution, flag, and political title. The Article restricted Indian government's powers vis-à-vis IHK to external affairs, defence, and communication only. In the years to come, Abdullah's absolute authority in governing IHK as different from the rest of India came under heavy criticism. Looking at the internal political history of IHK from 1950s to 1970s, one gets a sense that a battle of pursuing competing objectives soon drifted NC and central government apart.²⁸ Sheikh Abdullah was arrested in August 1953 in 'Kashmir Conspiracy Case'. This provided an opportunity to secessionist elements to come out in the open. The arrest of Sheikh Abdullah and a change in government²⁹ strengthened the belief that the central government was only interested in promoting its control in the territory at the cost of undermining the process of democracy.

The Plebiscite Front (PF) was founded in 1955 by the supporters of jailed Sheikh Abdullah and began demanding the right to self-determination for IHK. Describing the Indian Army as the army of occupation, the PF termed Kashmir's accession to India temporary.³⁰ Opposing the politics of NC, PF emerged as an active political party in the region with seeds of separatism and remained so until early 1970s when a political compromise was reached between Sheikh Abdullah and Indira Gandhi leading to restoration of the former to his position in IHK.³¹ It was during this period of political confrontation

between Indian government and IHK that militant groups rose up in protest for their rights. Hilal Bhatt, a Kashmiri writer, recalls how his peer group at school used to long for joining indigenous guerrilla organizations to fight Indian rule, and parents fearing their children to become militants began sending them to boarding schools outside the Valley.³²

The PF was dissolved by Sheikh Abdullah in exchange for his reinstated status in the government. This dissolution, however, proved short-lived as the young secessionist elements of PF soon established another separatist group known as the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF). Successive efforts of New Delhi to control IHK politics by installing hand-picked regimes, entering into alliances with NC, and planned rigging in State Assembly elections proved disastrous for Kashmiri youth. Opposing political settlement between NC and centre-led Congress, JKLF raised slogans for liberation of Kashmir. Massive street agitation of JKLF began in the wake of post-1987 election results. This engaged a large number of young Kashmiris enthusiastic for ending Indian control of IHK. Instead of addressing their grievances, the Indian government dealt high-handedly with secessionist elements by appointing tough administrators like Jagmohan Malhotra and supporting security forces against common citizens in IHK.

Victoria Schofield points out:

“The grievances amongst the Kashmiris, which had been allowed to fester, the steady erosion of the ‘special status’ promised to the state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1947, the neglect of the people by their leaders, were clearly India’s responsibility. Tavleen Singh believes that Kashmir would not have become an issue ‘if the valley had not exploded on its own thanks to Delhi’s misguided policies’.”³³

The integrationist politics of Indian government through undemocratic and inhuman ways of control were always resisted by some sections in IHK. During 1987 and 1989, however, there were episodes of massive violence, shutdowns, and protests against Indian administration and policies in IHK. The following events particularly triggered the armed battle for self-determination in IHK:

1. Unconstitutional removal of elected governments, frequent change of chief ministers, and whittle down of Article 370 by the Indian government imbibed a feeling of betrayal and alienation amongst the Kashmiris from 1950s onwards. The Holy Relic Movement of 1963³⁴ gave a new angle to secessionist elements in the region. Headed by Mirwaiz Molvi Mohammad Farooq, the Holy Relic Committee was jointly formed by Muslim clerics and separatist parties for restoration of the Holy Relic. Becoming a ‘coalition of opposition parties’ in the Valley, the Holy Relic Committee was soon transformed into Action Committee³⁵ rallying common masses through religious sentiments around the right to self-determination.
2. The history of Assembly elections in IHK is linked with rigged and fraudulent electoral politics. The manipulation of electoral votes in

1987 elections, however, proved disastrous for Indian government. The results of the 1987 elections brought a massive change in youth politics of Kashmiri groups who raised anti-India slogans throughout the Valley. Navnita Chadha Behera has articulated the feelings of Kashmiri youth who used to say, “the bullets will deliver where the ballot had failed, slaves have no right to vote in the democratic set-up of India and we were left with no option but to pick up the guns.”³⁶ The Indian government first responded by appointing hard-line rulers and later by introducing direct rule in IHK in January 1990, igniting a new wave of resistance in the region.

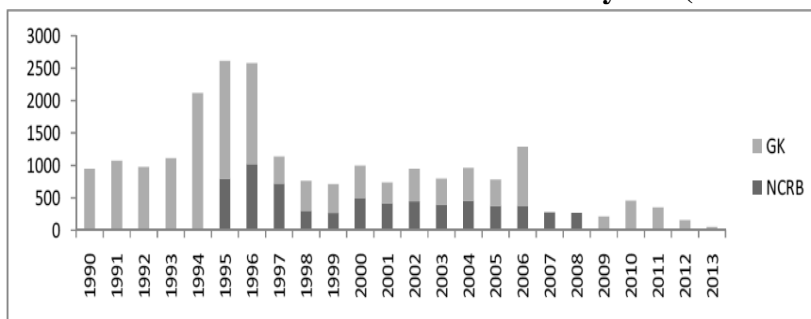
3. Although the *Jama'at-e-Islami* (JeI) in Kashmir had come into being in 1945, much before the partition, it only actively started participating in the politics of IHK during 1970s.³⁷ The JeI has long been projecting itself as the champion of Muslims in Kashmir which led many militant outfits of IHK freedom movement to get linked with it. These include *Hizbul Mujahideen*, *Hizbul Islami*, *Islami Jamiat-e-Talba*, *Al-Jehad*, etc. The JeI itself came into alliance with other pro-freedom Islamist organizations under the banner of Muslim United Front (MUF) in September 1986. Along with JeI, other fundamentalist parties grouped under MUF were the *Ummat-i-Islami* and *Anjuman-i-Itehed-ul-Muslimeen*. Other political units of MUF included Islamic Study Circle, Muslim Education Trust, Muslim Welfare Society, *Islami Jamiat-i-Talba*, and *Idara-i-Tahqiqat*. The main objective of MUF was to protect the religious and political rights of Muslims in IHK by contesting polls in 1987. But electoral rigging and manipulation of ballot boxes resulted in massive victory of NC-Congress alliance. The MUF defeat in 1987 elections proved counterproductive for New Delhi, as the former received mass support in the following years. Street protests against electoral rigging resulted in imprisonment of large number of Kashmiri political leaders later to become heads and chiefs of various militant groups in IHK. Some of their names include Mohammad Yousuf Shah (Syed Salahuddin) heading Kashmir's largest surviving militant outfit *Hizb-ul-Mujahideen* (HM), and Mohammad Yasin Malik, Chief of JKLF. Both of them contested the 1987 elections from the platform of MUF.³⁸ To continue the freedom struggle by championing the cause of Islam, an 11-party alliance was formed in March 1990 with the name of *Tehrik-e-Hurriyat-e-Kashmir*. The alliance comprised of some old militant outfits in addition to new political leadership striving for the freedom of Islam. Some of the prominent member organizations of this alliance were JeI, Muslim Conference, People's League, *Mahaz-e-Azadi*, and Islamic Students League.³⁹ The religious cause, as propounded by these Islamist organizations in IHK, helped engage masses in freedom struggle on a large scale. Most of these religion-based political organizations resorted to armed struggle only after facing brutal treatment of their leaders by the Indian army and paramilitary troops in IHK.

4. The impact of changing international climate on IHK was huge. Events like revolutionary movements of Hungary and Cuba and the success of Afghan *Mujahideen* against Soviet Union instigated the birth of groups like Al-Fatah and People's League in IHK who initiated guerrilla warfare against Indian tyranny and as an expression of disappointment with the political leadership of Kashmir. A number of militant outfits were established by political leaders as well as by other prominent Kashmiris at this time. By 1994, there were some 11 major militant organizations operating in IHK besides dozens of smaller ones.⁴⁰ Many of them were banned by the Indian government, while many re-emerged with new alliances and different names. Researching into news archives of the 1990s, one gets the impression that the revolutionary ideas of freedom and concepts like nation-state were becoming more popular internationally during those times. The surge for freedom in IHK was partly created by the disintegration of USSR⁴¹ and independence of many Central Asian states in the waning years of the Cold War.
5. Communal politics played its own role in strengthening separatist tendencies in IHK. The centuries old group identity of Kashmiris was divided into Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist aspirations for rights within the region. The Hindu nationalist parties including Praja Parishad, Jana Sangh, and the RSS—backed by Congress and other Hindus—launched agitation as early as 1952 against the autonomous status of IHK.⁴² The communal agitation of Praja Parishad led Sheikh Abdullah to shift his idea from 'complete internal sovereignty of Kashmir' to an 'independent Kashmir'. Events like the Amarnath Land controversy of 2008 and beef-ban controversy of 2015 have also multiplied radical elements amongst the youth of Kashmir who view them as Hindu India's religious domination of Kashmir.⁴³
6. The ruthless use of force by Indian Army and acts of torture against Kashmiri youth fuelled gross resentment and reinforced militant elements in IHK during the past decades. According to Human Rights Watch, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) provides safe exit to Indian Army from being trialled in extrajudicial killings in Kashmir.⁴⁴ The cycle of repression and abuse of human rights under the umbrella of AFSPA (1990) reinvigorated the growth of radical forces in Kashmir. The AFSPA gives extraordinary powers to Indian Army to counter militancy in IHK. These extraordinary powers also provide the army impunity in cases where innocent civilians including children are killed by 'mistake'.⁴⁵ The Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act (PSA) is another cruel law used by both central and state governments to detain a person without trial for a period of two years. Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have declared the PSA as an unconstitutional law misused by the Indian authorities to hold anyone in custody without judicial enquiry.⁴⁶ The number of detainees held

under the PSA has greatly reduced in recent years though (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Total number of detainees under Public Safety Act (1990-2013)



GK: It represents Greater Kashmir newspaper data

NCRB: It represents National Crime Records Bureau

Source: Kumar Mohd Haneef, *International Research Journal of Social Sciences*, July 2015.

There are three types of security forces positioned by the Indian government in Kashmir for several decades: Indian Army, the Border Security Force (BSF), and the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). The latter two forces directly operate under the Home Ministry unlike the Indian Army controlled by the Ministry of Defence. Of these three forces, BSF has particularly earned bad reputation for its brutal operations and extrajudicial killings of innocent Kashmiris.⁴⁷ There is a whole count of horror stories of individual tortures and inhuman treatment meted out by the Indian security forces to the Kashmiris at the infamous torture centre Papa-II.⁴⁸ The unchecked repression and despotism of Indian government in the name of security has only worsened the situation, giving rise to radicalism and extremism in the region. This point is well-endorsed by the Director of Global Operations at Amnesty International, “Till now, not a single member of the security forces deployed in the state has been tried for human rights violations in a civilian court. This lack of accountability has in turn facilitated other serious abuses.”⁴⁹

There is a dearth of collated data on the number of killings, disappearances, rapes, tortures, and encounters of Kashmiris during the last 25 years. The only thing that one gets after doing extensive web research is reiteration of figures between 40,000 to 100,000 killings in IHK from official and unofficial sources. The IHK government places the total figure of killings in IHK at 43,460 from 1990-2011. This figure, includes 21,323 freedom fighters, 13,226 civilians killed by freedom fighters, 3,642 civilians killed by security forces, and 5,369 policemen killed by freedom fighters.⁵⁰ These figures, like other data available on media group sites and civil society associations, lack coherence in collation of the information on killings, suicides due to tortures and rapes, physical disabilities, internal displacements, reported and unreported disappearances, and unmarked graves in Valley and other regions. Further

research is required to elucidate the criminality of the Indian security forces—by virtue of the authority vested in them through draconian laws in the name of security in IHK—but which has ruined the whole Kashmiri society making it only reactionary and venomous. Blaming the collective coercive arm of Indian government for the growth of militant elements in IHK, Behera writes in *Demystifying Kashmir*, “The central government appointed Governor Shri Jagmohan’s policy pushed the populace to becoming anti-Indian and turned the most apolitical Kashmiris into active supporters of militancy.”⁵¹

Showing concern for increasing radicalization of the Kashmiri youth, Waheed Parra, a youth leader from the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) argued, “Firstly, they [young Kashmiris] have a conflict with their identity. Secondly, they are anti-establishment. We are trying to figure out how to integrate them into the mainstream.”⁵² The ruling party should also recognize this boldly that every action has a reaction. Indian brutal suppression of freedom elements in IHK and redefining of Kashmir issue by linking it with terrorism and insurgency radicalized the Kashmiris’ struggle for self-determination.

Indian diplomacy of control

In the past decade, the politics of violence has receded in IHK to a great extent but lack of political stability as well as new modes of protest and the freedom movement still pose multiple challenges to Indian rule in the region. India has been following a trifold policy in its international diplomacy on Kashmir issue. At international forums, India has long rejected external intervention in an attempt to maintain a policy of bilateralism in dispute settlement with Pakistan. In discussions with Pakistan, India upholds Kashmir as its integral part, conditioning the continuation of the peace process with the settlement of other prickly issues between the two countries. But internally India treats Kashmir as a colony, depriving its inhabitants of majoritarian pluralism and democratic rights. To strengthen the centre’s control and weaken local administrative authority, the Indian government issued 28 constitutional orders and extended the application of some 262 Indian laws to IHK between 1954 and 1970s.⁵³ Almost 600,000 troops were deployed in the Valley to police a population of just 8 million. ⁵⁴ During the past 68 years of military conflict, Indian diplomacy vis-à-vis Kashmir has changed from persuasive integration to coercive, and from electoral influence to aid and development diplomacy.

Repression and violence

The politics of confrontation and cooperation between central government and Sheikh Abdullah sowed seeds of discontent and radicalism in IHK, challenging Indian control of the state. The inception of militancy in 1989-1990 was faced off by successive Indian governments with an iron hand. Broad literature is available within and outside the region depicting in detail the horror stories of Indian atrocities, mass murders, rapes, tortures, disappearances, and civilian sufferings. Since 1989, an estimated 70,000 people have been killed and around 8,000 have disappeared.⁵⁵ There are a number of voices from inside IHK narrating their childhood memories of human rights violations by the

Indian security forces. In his personal memoir, Basharat Peer, a Kashmiri journalist, tells how the crackdowns and systematic torture by Indian security forces “changed Kashmir forever with militant groups sprung up in every village.”⁵⁶ India responded to this militancy by passing various notorious acts such as AFSPA and by setting up of two medieval torture chambers, Papa I and Papa II, into which large numbers of local people, as well as the occasional captured foreign jihadi, would ‘disappear’.⁵⁷

For the inhabitants of IHK, their territory is occupied by a ‘foreign army’.⁵⁸ Search operations, curfews, irregular bans on internet, interrogations, and massive killings of local people by the Indian army and security forces in the name of maintaining security have long become a norm in IHK. According to the Amnesty International 1992 report:

“Widespread human rights violations in the state since January 1990 have been attributed to the Indian army, and the paramilitary Border Security Force (BSF) and Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF)... Cordon-and-search operations are frequently conducted in areas of armed opposition activity...Torture is reported to be routinely used during these combing operations as well as in army camps, interrogation centers, police stations and prisons. Indiscriminate beatings are common and rape in particular appears to be routine...In Jammu and Kashmir, rape is practiced as part of a systematic attempt to humiliate and intimidate the local population during counter-insurgency operations.”⁵⁹

Installing the Delhi-controlled governments in IHK has long helped Indian state apparatus to maintain a tight grip over the region. For example, the government of Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad—installed in 1953 upon the arrest of Sheikh Abdullah—adopted a policy of coercive suppression of all military and political voices of resistance. Similarly the appointment of Jagmohan Malhotra as governor in 1990 began a new era of “state repression marked by routine beatings, intimidation, verbal abuse and humiliation, widespread torture, rape, arbitrary detention of scores of youth suspected of being militants, and shootings by the security forces at public processions and in crowded market areas.”⁶⁰ The iron hand of respective Indian governments has case-hardened dissension and violence in IHK.

Erosion of autonomy

Article 370 of the Indian constitution has been at the core of historical and contemporary changes in IHK. In spite of acceding to the Indian Union in 1947, the so-called state of Jammu and Kashmir (IHK) maintained its autonomy by signing the Instrument of Accession that limited central government’s role to external affairs, defence, and communication. Article 370 of the Indian constitution recognized the distinctiveness of IHK by stipulating in clause D that no such order which related to the matters specified in the Instrument of Accession will be issued except in consultation with the IHK government. The article also acknowledges the supremacy of the Constituent Assembly of the

state in recommending any changes to the said article by any presidential notification.⁶¹ In simple words, Article 370 excludes the region from many general laws of the Indian constitution as applied in other states of India. For instance, the article prohibits Indian citizens from other states to purchase land or property in IHK. Similarly, as per the provisions of the article, the central government cannot enforce financial emergency in IHK under Article 360 of the Indian constitution without the concurrence of the IHK government. Many international agreements concluded by the Indian government do not automatically extend to the IHK, so on and so forth. The Article in its original standing calls for maximum autonomy of IHK and provides ample scope for self-rule within the Indian federation as envisioned by its chief drafter Sheikh Abdullah.

Ever since the incorporation of Article 370 into the Indian constitution, the subject of autonomy and self-rule in IHK has been widely opposed in India. Successive New Delhi-based governments have passed various amendments and constitutional orders with the help of installed governments in IHK to evade Kashmir's autonomy clause from the Indian constitution in an attempt to integrate the region with the Indian Union. The process started with the Constitutional (Application to Jammu and Kashmir) Order 1954, issued by the president of India, extending the centre's jurisdiction to all subjects under the Union List and the residuary powers. In 1958, through a constitutional amendment, IHK was brought under the purview of central administrative agencies. In November 1964, Article 356 (imposition of President's Rule) was applied despite provision in the state's constitution for governor's rule. Through the 1965 presidential order and 6th Amendment, the head of state (Sadr-i-Riyasat) elected by the state legislature was replaced by a governor nominated by the centre and prime minister by chief minister.⁶² In 1986, insertion of Article 249 into the Indian constitution empowered the parliament to enact legislation on any state subject with a two-thirds majority of Rajya Sabha (upper house of Indian parliament).⁶³ In the words of Ashutosh Kumar, "42 Constitution Orders issued over the last five decades have resulted in substantially curtailing the powers of the State Legislature whereas the powers of the Parliament have been extended. Out of 395 Articles of the Indian Constitution, 260 laws have been made applicable."⁶⁴ Such orders and amendments passed by the centre amount to a deliberate erosion of autonomy of IHK in an attempt to integrate the region with Indian Union irrespective of the will of majority of Kashmiris. Further, the history of rigged electoral politics in IHK exposes undemocratic intentions of India in beheading political consciousness and civil liberties of Kashmiris.

Loss of international interest

The United States and other western countries accept that Kashmir is a dispute but consider this long drawn out conflict as a typical case of contested border between India and Pakistan rather than an international issue involving severe human rights violations on which UN has passed many resolutions. The matter is still being considered 'a bilateral conflict' by the outside world with a

slight change of view on the dispute to be settled in accordance with the wishes of the Kashmiris.

The very first internationalization of the Kashmir dispute could be traced back to the UN intervention to impose a ceasefire to end the first war between India and Pakistan in January 1949. To monitor the ceasefire line between the two countries, the UN Military Observer Groups in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) were deployed in Kashmir. These groups continued the monitoring exercises until the outbreak of second war between India and Pakistan in 1965. The 1965 Indo-Pakistan war engaged outside world⁶⁵ to play a role in crisis management in South Asia. The 1971 war between India and Pakistan that led to the dismemberment of Pakistan through Indian covert military assistance witnessed an ever-increasing superpower engagement—Soviet Union, the United States, and China—all focusing on crisis diffusion over Kashmir with their larger global and regional interests. This period was followed by a reduced international diplomacy in Kashmir conflict. Instead, the post-1971 bilateral diplomacy of India and Pakistan leading to Simla Agreement in 1972 itself led to an identification of a new ‘ceasefire line’ as the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir. It was the popular uprising of Kashmiris in 1989 that evoked international interest in the conflict again but from a new angle. This time, international human rights groups stood up to criticize violations of human rights in IHK by the Indian security forces. The armed resistance of Kashmiris in 1990s coincided with nuclearization of India and Pakistan in 1998 which reinvigorated international involvement in South Asia out of fear for militarization of Indo-Pak conflicts.⁶⁶ The rejection of Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and nuclearization of the conflict alerted the US towards pressurizing the two countries to begin a series of talks to settle the root causes of conflicts between them.⁶⁷ This resulted in a high-level summit between India and Pakistan in February 1999 which was concluded with a bilateral agreement—the Lahore Declaration—to resolve all differences amicably. The Kashmir issue got huge international media attention due to the Lahore Declaration which reaffirmed India and Pakistan’s commitment to find a peaceful resolution to it. International pressure for dispute settlement that was built up after the 1998 nuclearization of India and Pakistan reached new heights with the outbreak of a ‘limited war’ between the two countries in Kargil district of Kashmir in May 1999. Although the crisis came to an end with the intervention of United States in July 1999, international pressure⁶⁸ continued to mount on both the countries to enter into dialogue and negotiations. India also showed interest in accepting the US technology and intelligence to monitor the LoC which later allowed international diplomats to visit IHK during September and October 2002 elections.⁶⁹ International crisis management diplomacy was again set in motion in December 2001 when, in the wake of terrorist attacks on Indian parliament and Indian allegations on Pakistan for supporting cross-border terrorism, the two countries deployed armed forces along the LoC as well as at the international border. Stern warnings were issued from the high offices in the US to avert a nuclear war in South Asia.

The international community was not initially willing to see Kashmir conflict in the light of self-determination. For many years, fighting in Kashmir remained a conflict only between India and Pakistan. It was in the post-1990 period of armed struggle in IHK that the voices of the Kashmiri freedom fighters captured the attention of human rights bodies internationally. These were the years when any peace process or idea of back channel diplomacy began to focus on Kashmiris as the ‘third party’ to the conflict.

Besides the United Nations, the issue has been raised on a number of international platforms including Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference (CPC) without any significant outcome for its resolution. There have been moments when international community got involved in the conflict (1947, 1965, 1971, and Kargil) but their interventions primarily remained limited to diffusing the conflict especially after the nuclearization of both India and Pakistan. During all episodes of violent clashes along the LoC, the United States and many other European countries pushed Pakistan to stop supporting Kashmiris’ movement for freedom instead of pressurizing India to accommodate the grievances of Kashmiris. For instance, Victoria Schofield writes about the Kargil War, “the Pakistani government called on the international community to assist in a resolution of the Kashmir dispute. Unconvinced by Pakistan’s denials of involvement, the western response was far more supportive of India’s demands for a withdrawal than Pakistan’s requests for discussions to solve the core issue of Kashmir.”⁷⁰

The US and international involvement in Kashmir conflict has witnessed renewed engagement only during escalated conflict situations. Thus international interest in Kashmir could only be categorized as mere crisis-management. Analyzing the Kashmir policy of the Obama administration, former US foreign service officer Howard Schaffer writes, “Should another serious Kashmir related India-Pakistan crisis develop, Obama will no doubt resume the crisis-management efforts which have been so central to America’s role in Kashmir in the quarter-century dating back to the George H.W. Bush administration.”⁷¹ The recent concern of the US and the world community with terrorist networks has facilitated a renewed interest in South Asia but with a different strategy: pathologically focusing on Afghanistan while dealing with Pakistan and India as de-hyphenated⁷² on Kashmir and other bilateral issues.

Party politics: lack of leadership in Kashmir

The three regions of Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh have long been maintaining politics of regionalism where leadership is divided along ethno-religious and regional identities. The Valley-centred politics of regional leadership has generated intra-regional struggle for political influence dominated by external affiliations. During the post-1950s period, a number of political parties sprang up in Jammu and Ladakh regions in response to the control exercised by the Valley-based National Conference over economy and politics of IHK. The failure of Sheikh Abdullah’s National Conference (NC) to integrate the divergent political aspirations across the three regions of IHK soon resulted in regional frustrations and dissenting political groups throughout the region.

From 1967 to 1990, a number of outfits emerged in Jammu region. These included Panthers Party, Jammu Mahasabha, Jammu People Front, and Jammu Mukti Morcha. Organizations like Jammu Mukti Morcha protesting against the permanent dominance of the Valley-based leaders were created with the objective of forming a separate Jammu state.⁷³

The politics of ruling parties in IHK from 1947 to-date is a history of alliances and coalitions with central government in New Delhi. This tradition of coalitions began when NC—established as early as 1932 in Kashmir—merged with the Congress and became the Jammu and Kashmir branch of the latter in 1965. The NC was reconstituted by Sheikh Abdullah in 1975 and won two immediate State Assembly elections with a majority in 1977 and 1983. The death of Sheikh Abdullah and decline of popular support in 1987 elections forced JNKC to seek power in IHK with the support of a coalition government of the Congress Party. This warranted a never-ending control of the centre on IHK governments in the years to come. Like NC, the second most important political party in IHK, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), also followed the practice of cobbling alliances and coalitions together with the central ruling political parties including Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).⁷⁴ Although the politics of coalitions with the central government secured the regimes of NC and PDP in IHK, it resulted in a heavy cost in terms of trust loss by state subjects. Over the years, the declining economy, skimpy public infrastructure, and high rate of unemployment have fuelled the discontent of Kashmiri masses with their political leadership. The inconclusive elections of December 2014 with no party securing majority seats resulted in a new political bargain when the PDP entered into an alliance with BJP to form a coalition government in IHK.

It is for the first time in Indian history that a Hindu nationalist party is sharing power in the only Muslim majority region of the country. The road to this alliance seems to be quite turbulent as witnessed by a developing communal crisis in the past few months which has put IHK into prolonged unrest just like the rest of India where religious symbols have taken precedence over real governance, and regional practices are challenged by outworn ancient laws. The September 2015 ruling of the Jammu and Kashmir High Court (J&K HC) to ban the sale of beef in the region reiterated the 150-year-old Ranbir Penal Code enacted by the Dogra Maharaja of Kashmir in 1862 under which intentionally killing or slaughtering a cow was a non-bailable crime.⁷⁵ The J&K HC's ruling generated a vociferous debate besides demonstrations by sword-bearing Hindu radicals in Jammu and stories of violent attacks on Muslims. Only a month after the beef ban was imposed, violence broke out in the Valley followed by the death of a Kashmiri trucker allegedly involved in beef smuggling.⁷⁶

Over the years, the Kashmir conflict has witnessed the emergence and decline of over 50 rebel groups⁷⁷ often competing or cooperating with each other to prove themselves as representatives of people living in IHK. In the last few years, representative leadership in Kashmir has been reduced to divided political factions. The attempts of successive Indian governments to influence ideology and political leanings in Kashmir have resulted in infinite divisions

between and within regional leaderships of parties like the NC. Another major reason for party fissures has been ideological disagreements over the resolution of Kashmir dispute. One such example is JKLF—a militant-turned-political organization—which by the mid-1990s was split into two ideological groups: one supporting Kashmir's accession to Pakistan and the other advocating for an independent and united Kashmir through peaceful means.⁷⁸ During 1980s, the JKLF remained a strong platform for masses in Kashmir to voice their support for independence. Backed by huge public support, the JKLF was able to organize mass processions, rallies, and protest marches including armed attacks against the Indian government.⁷⁹ By 1990s, the pro-independence and secular nationalist ideology of JKLF was heavily countered by newly formed radical groups in the Valley such as Hizbul Mujahideen (HM). Backed by Jamaat-e-Islami and seeking the support of Muslim majority of the Valley, the HM gave a call for jihad against the Indian government and stood for accession to Pakistan. The decade of 1990s witnessed huge armed clashes between HM and JKLF opposing each other's goals vis-à-vis Kashmir conflict. News reports confirm that it was HM which targeted the JKLF and killed hundreds of its cadres. It also leaked information about JKLF hideouts to the Indian forces.⁸⁰ The HM was initially able to receive some popular support which soon faded out due to its excessive Islamic orientation and internal feuds. The fractionalization of Kashmiri leadership into multiple armed and contrasting ideological groups dealt a severe blow to the Kashmir cause. In 1993, the All-Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) emerged as an amalgamation of 26 religious, political, and social groups with an aim to combine disparate ideologies for a shared desire about the final resolution of Kashmir issue.⁸¹ Despite functioning as a cooperative alliance for over 20 years, popular support for the leadership of APHC has reduced over the years due to internal rifts between pro-independence and pro-accession groups. Disagreements also crawled up in 2003 over the role of militancy and dialogue in the movement⁸² resulting in its split into APHC (Mirwaiz group), Tehreek-e-Hurriyat Jammu and Kashmir (Geelani group), and Yasin Malik following his own course for independence. The APHC suffered a further split in 2014 when four constituent parties of Mirwaiz group left it.⁸³ The APHC's persistent stance on not taking part in State Assembly elections as a denunciation of Indian rule in the region has also left the organization without any popular political mandate. The self-representative character of APHC has failed to take into consideration the aspirations of the people in Kashmir. Then, there is Peoples Democratic Party, the current ruling political party in IHK, advocating self-rule. For many Kashmiris, the crisis of leadership in IHK is becoming the main stumbling block in the resolution of Kashmir issue.⁸⁴

The current leadership in IHK is fractionalized and lacks vision to guide the dissenting sections of youth who are not only fed up with militancy but are also baffled about their future in the disputed state. The Kashmir Study Group (KSG), after surveying different civil society groups in IHK, reported in 1997 that although the top leadership of political parties in IHK was enthusiastic to run government, people seriously doubted their ability to do so. The KSG

interviewees simply dubbed the leadership of APHC as ‘confused’ who not only failed to attract non-Muslim subjects of the state but also remained unable to devise a political consensus within the organization since its formation.⁸⁵ As the saying goes, united we stand, divided we fall. In recent decades, the dearth of unity amongst Kashmiris rendered the Kashmir cause leaderless. The Kashmiri leadership was never able to recognize the individual aspirations of different communities living in IHK. They failed to interpret the meaning of self-determination for each group of people divided along regional lines in Jammu, Ladakh, and Valley.⁸⁶ While self-determination means freedom for Muslim majority in the Valley, it represents integration within Indian Union for Hindus and Buddhists in Jammu and Ladakh. Even within Muslim majority populace of the Valley, a strong disagreement exists between pro-Pakistan and pro-independence groups over the concept of self-determination.

Vibrant youth and media in Kashmir

Traumatized by incessant warfare, high unemployment, political alienation, and social insecurities, the youth in IHK is hanging on to information technologies to show the inhuman face of India to the larger world. Media and web-based discussion groups often initiated by Kashmiris living in UK and elsewhere are providing alternate spaces to youth in Kashmir for catharsis. But this new battle is also counterattacked by the Indian government with frequent bans on text messages⁸⁷ as well as cyber surveillance. Kashmiri diasporas are everywhere in the world now. Those who have fled Indian atrocities in the Valley are now well-established, many of them exerting political influence in the US and British parliaments. Many migrants from the Mirpur district (in Azad Kashmir) belong to prominent British-Pakistani community in London. They are quite active in using social networking sites to raise awareness among the international community about civic and political rights of people living in IHK. Many from this diaspora have established online NGOs to promote Kashmir cause and freedom mission.

The use of social media as an alternate means of protest has also become popular amongst separatist groups whose sole reliance on strike calls and protest calendars was gradually rejected by the local people questioning the efficacy of shutting down the daily businesses. The Hurriyat leaders are themselves using Facebook and Twitter accounts to bridge the gap between people and leadership.⁸⁸

Termed as ‘cyber intifada’, the passionate youth of Kashmir are using their cell phone cameras to wage an alternate form of war against Indian atrocities. It has now become a battle of bullet versus stone and photo. In the words of Peter Goodspeed, “the youths record and photograph the clashes, posting images of the dead, sobbing mothers and funerals on Facebook and other websites....An uprising generated by Internet social sites is an angry amorphous force with no defined leadership.”⁸⁹ Many Kashmiris now prefer street and online remonstrations over armed struggle. Those preferring e-protests are children of the conflict,⁹⁰ born during or after the rebellion movement, who have witnessed their families suffer from street violence in the sixty years of

conflict. Street protests are now promoted and scheduled through Facebook and Twitter pages. The 'million march' was organized on 7 November 2015 to counter Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rally in Srinagar through social networking groups. Over 120 such pages were identified by the cyber cell of Jammu and Kashmir Police Force in an attempt to block most of them.⁹¹ Facebook and Twitter based chat groups revolve around anti-India discussions and often involve pro-freedom chants and slogans.

Many of the multimedia messages on YouTube and Facebook reporting innocent killings by the Indian Security Forces in Kashmir receive viral response (see Figure 2) and often end up in street rallies and mass protests. This has led the Indian government to enforce cyber surveillance and making arrests of many Kashmiris with charges of terrorism and hate speech. Scrapped only nine months ago in March 2015 by the Indian Supreme Court, Section 66(A) that "prohibited the sending of information of a 'grossly offensive' or 'menacing' nature through computers and communication devices,"⁹² was utterly misused by the IHK police force since its enforcement in 2008. The police lodged several cases against politicians, journalists, students, and others in Kashmir for spreading rumours and sharing information that could 'create disturbances and destroy peace in Kashmir'. At least 16 people were booked in 2012 for their alleged role in organizing protests on social networking websites.⁹³ For security reasons, many from the youth have long been using fake names and anonymous accounts to post pro-freedom messages.

Technology has opened up Kashmir both physically and intellectually. Advances in road and transportation infrastructure have made inroads into distant parts of IHK as far and high as the Siachen Glacier. It was the availability of modern mountaineering technology and skills that allowed India to expand ground-centred Kashmir war to the heights of more than 15,000 feet, converting the desolate terrain of Siachen into a new battlefield.⁹⁴ The emergence of social media and web technology is the most significant change that has given long subjugated people in IHK independent and diverse channels of opening up to the outside world about their sufferings and loss of faith in the Indian society in spite of several restrictions on freedom of speech.

Figure 2



Source: Open Democracy, 2010.

Emergence of Kashmiris as a third party at conflict stage

The initial parties to talk on Kashmir dispute were India, Pakistan, and the United Nations. After the Indian insistence and outright rejection of third-party involvement in the resolution of dispute, the peace process vis-à-vis IHK was conducted on a bilateral basis. The Nehru-Liaquat Pact, the Tashkent Pact, the Swaran Singh-Bhutto talks, the Simla Accord of 1972, the Lahore Declaration of 1999, the Agra Summit in 2001, cricket diplomacy, and several rounds of composite dialogue process between India and Pakistan during the last 68 years are all examples of bilateral diplomacy to resolve the Kashmir dispute.

Several confidence building measures (CBMs) were also launched to institutionalize the peace process on Kashmir, such as the beginning of the fortnightly Muzaffarabad-Srinagar bus service in April 2005 which became bi-weekly in August 2008. Another Poonch-Rawalakot bus service was started in June 2006 with increased opportunities for trade and travel across the Line of Control (LoC). The bus service helped in reuniting over 16,000 Kashmiris divided by the LoC. And trade of commodities between IHK and Azad Kashmir boosted goodwill and interaction between the populace on the two sides, besides engaging former militants in trading opportunities.⁹⁵ The cross-LoC trade,

travel, and sporadic interactions between the Kashmiri leadership has marked a new beginning for a symbolic focus of India and Pakistan on Kashmiri people as the most important stakeholder in the conflict.⁹⁶ Many of these were the initiatives launched by the Vajpayee government in power from 1998 to 2004. The Track II diplomacy of Vajpayee government with Pakistan also brought in focus the initiation of dialogue policy with Kashmiri separatists.

In May 2000, the government of India made a public declaration to have dialogue with APHC. Similarly, it was in August 2000 that India began peace talks with Hizbul Mujahideen after the Srinagar-based pro-Pakistan group declared a unilateral ceasefire in July 2000 for three months in IHK.⁹⁷ It was again in October 2003 that India offered to enter into dialogue with separatist leaders after the offer of talks was rejected by militant groups and hard-line separatists. Moderate separatist leaders like Abdul Ghani Bhat accepted the talk offer recognizing that “talking is better than acrimony.”⁹⁸ From 2004 to 2007, a section of Kashmir’s separatist leadership was engaged by New Delhi and Islamabad on a regular basis. Several Kashmiri leaders met former Indian prime ministers Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh. Some of them also travelled to Pakistan and met with the then president Pervez Musharraf. Pro-India Kashmiri leaders including present Chief Minister Omar Abdullah and Peoples Democratic Party leader Mehbooba Mufti also met Musharraf. Likewise, former prime minister of AJK Sardar Abdul Qayyum Khan went to New Delhi to attend a conference where he met Manmohan Singh in April 2007.⁹⁹ The failure of Indian government and Kashmiri leadership to sustain the political dialogue can mainly be attributed to the hard-line approach of New Delhi and disunity within the Kashmiri separatist groups.

Under growing international pressure regarding human rights violations in IHK and mounting militancy, Indian diplomacy has gradually turned to a two-pronged strategy: one continuing with a coercive hand, and the other promoting political dialogue in Kashmir. Going back in the past, the central government’s efforts to initiate dialogue with the Kashmiri leadership¹⁰⁰ have remained a zero-sum game for reasons cited above. Following are some of these failed attempts:¹⁰¹

1. The BJP government’s appointment of former Union Minister KC Pant as its interlocutor for peace talks with Kashmiris in April 2001 was met with failure after Hurriyat refused to talk without the involvement of Pakistan in negotiations, a demand stringently opposed by India.
2. In 2002, the so called Kashmir Committee was formed but failed to conclude an agreement with the Hurriyat.
3. In 2003, the BJP government appointed two interlocutors successively to engage in dialogue with separatist leadership in IHK. The talks failed due to the absence of a roadmap for talks and inability of the Indian government to offer any concessions to the separatists.
4. The two roundtables organized in February and May 2006 failed to achieve a consensual settlement due to the boycott of

- many separatist leaders, who called for the inclusion of Pakistan in the broader peace process.
5. In an effort to explore the contours of a political solution in IHK, the Indian government appointed a three-member team of interlocutors for Kashmir in October 2010. In the words of former Indian home minister P. Chidambaram the objective of this team was to “begin a process of sustained uninterrupted dialogue with all sections of people of Jammu and Kashmir, especially with youths and students and all shades of political opinion.” This time, the process seemed to work differently¹⁰² as the interlocutors were supposed to reflect the varied opinions of different interest groups within their report encompassing socio-economic needs and political viewpoints across wide-ranging communal divisions and dissent elements in IHK.

Thus over the years, the Indian government and politicians have been able to recognize Kashmiris as imperative enough stakeholders to achieve the stability of society. The practice of entering into dialogue with the people of IHK has, however, been limited to expanding the electoral process in the region. Therefore, the process of dialogue between central government and Kashmiris failed to consult differing political and militant groups in IHK and narrowly relied on political negotiations with some of the divided separatist factions to achieve desired electoral clout. This has marginalized the peace process and intra-Kashmir dialogue. The inclusion of Kashmiris from all sections and communities in the dialogue process is central to a final and sustained resolution of the conflict because of the different regional and political narratives ranging from Azadi and autonomy to integration with India or Pakistan. The participation of the people of Kashmir is also critical for the success of the India-Pakistan dialogue on Kashmir. They are direct stakeholders and their involvement would help both in evolving and implementing a solution acceptable to all the three parties to the dispute—India, Pakistan, and the people of Kashmir. Kashmiris have been very supportive of the Composite Dialogue and the Kashmir-specific CBMs but have been demanding their inclusion in the process to make them trilateral rather than bilateral.¹⁰³ The international community has also increasingly recognized the importance of engaging Kashmiris as one of the primary stakeholders in the peace process.

Conclusion

The IHK has undergone massive structural changes in the past six decades. Originally aiming to achieve self-governing powers with a strong sense of Kashmiri nationalism, the early political leadership of IHK resisted every effort of the centre to integrate the ethnically diverse region in the federal structure of India. The overplay of politics of integration by New Delhi, ranging from rigged elections in IHK to a gradual attrition of autonomy clause in the constitution, transformed indigenous political leadership into armed opponents. To make matters worse, militant struggle of Kashmiri youth was dealt with an

iron fist by successive Indian governments which resulted in gross human rights violations and internationalization of the issue. The successive Indian governments' insensitivity to Kashmiri aspirations and regional grievances intensified struggling elements both within and outside IHK. The Kashmiri diasporas around the world have long started using modern media technologies to promote the cause of Kashmiris' self-determination. Many within IHK have become increasingly involved with social media to wage a cyber-war against Indian atrocities in the region. The Indian drive to make IHK 'an integral part of the Indian Union' has strengthened Kashmiri nationalism on the one hand, and disturbed the communal harmony in the ethnically diverse region on the other. The most important perceptible change in IHK is not only the emergence of Kashmiris as primary stakeholders in the dispute but the recognition of both Indian and international populace to engage Kashmiris in the peace process in order to achieve a sustainable resolution of the issue. Any win-win situation in the dialogue process, however, faces a number of important challenges ranging from weak and divided political leadership in IHK and stringent Indian stand on holding bilateral instead of trilateral negotiations to an inadequate international pressure.

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NEW TRENDS IN CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY AND THE EVOLVING SINO-AFGHAN TIES

HUMERA IQBAL*

“Now we’re all talking about Syria. [By the] second half of next year, the most important topic will be Afghanistan.”¹

Wang Yi, Chinese Foreign Minister, 2013.

Fifth of August 2015 marked the 60th Anniversary of diplomatic and friendly relations between China and Afghanistan. The event was jointly celebrated by the Dunya University and Afghanistan-China Friendship Association to further elevate decades-old friendship by strengthening traditional and mutually beneficial cooperation through joint efforts.² With the drawdown of US combat troops, Afghanistan looms large in the minds of Chinese policymakers. The struggle faced by the Afghan security forces in fighting the radical extremist groups for the past few years has raised fears in Beijing. As the Western forces pack their bags from Afghanistan, questions are being asked about the future security of China due to its neighbouring contiguity. Afghanistan has been a constant worrisome neighbour for China as it remains a grim source of instability since the 1980s. To add further to the pressures on Beijing, both the US and Afghan governments expect it to play a significant role in shaping the future of Afghanistan after 2014. A thorough yet conscious strategic study persuaded Beijing to embrace a proactive diplomatic tone for engaging with Afghanistan for the future peace and security of China. Moreover, a realization about the regional scenario pushed China to shape a policy of engaging Afghanistan progressively within the region as well.

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This paper looks into the changing foreign policy archetypes of China as it has achieved regional status and acquired additional responsibilities under the leadership of President Xi Jinping. A 60-year chronology of China-Afghanistan relations until the present day with an overview of Afghanistan in China's foreign policy is also discussed. The paper also highlights Afghanistan in China's future discourse. The study aims to analyze the driving factors and strategy of Beijing in Afghanistan along with the risk levels Afghanistan holds for China. Before looking into the evolving Sino-Afghan relations, the paper first discusses the foreign policy of China for a clear understanding.

Marching West to the Chinese Dream: Neighbourhood diplomacy under Xi Jinping

For decades, China has based its foreign policy decisions on the 'five principles of peaceful co-existence'. The five principles as laid out in the Panchsheel Treaty, signed on 29 April 1954 are: 'mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity', 'mutual non-aggression', 'non-interference in each other's internal affairs', 'equality and mutual benefit', and 'peaceful co-existence'.³ These five principles are still valuable. Xi Jinping envisions these principles as, 'peaceful development', 'building a harmonious world', 'multi-polarity', 'acting as a spokesman for developing countries', and a 'policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries'.⁴

At the World Peace Forum in June 2013, Foreign Minister Wang Yi spelled out the principles of China's foreign policy under the new leadership. The new foreign policy revolves around building a new model of major country relationships and major country diplomacy. The novel role China aspires in the world is directly linked to President Xi Jinping's vision of the 'Chinese Dream' which aims at achieving equal footing with the world powers like the US in the international arena. The vision aims to modify China's growth and development model. Essentially, under the Chinese Dream, China's objective is to present itself as a more proactive and responsible state internationally, i.e., to be an international stakeholder, and a state observing international norms and standards. China, under the new foreign policy dream, intends to offer Chinese solution to deal with the burning international and regional issues. Foreign Minister Wang characterized China's 'major country diplomacy' by 'no conflict', 'no confrontation', 'mutual respect', and 'win-win cooperation'.⁵

Beijing is offering a substitute to the American notion of new world order under the new strategy which stresses equality and unchallengeable sovereignty for all kinds of states with different choices of internal political systems notwithstanding whether they comply with the Western ideals and interests or not. The Chinese term for such system is 'multi-polarity'. Beijing emphasizes that it 'never seeks hegemony'. China conveys to its smaller neighbours that its economic development and growing military power is not for regional oppression, in contrast to the Americans who enforce their will on other countries in the name of trade and human rights.⁶

In this regard, under the regional policy order, China's decade-long significant geo-political strategy aims to turn westward with the 'March West'

policy. The Third Plenum of the Communist Party of China (CPC) largely emphasized on market reforms and intensified national security mechanism, mainly aiming at ‘opening to those that border China inland’. Wang Jisi, a notable Chinese political analyst and former director of the leading China Academy of Social Sciences, urged Chinese leaders to ‘march westwards’ in an October 2012 policy paper. Wang pushed the Chinese policymakers to focus on China’s economic and diplomatic ties with its Central Asian allies to deepen its influence in the Asian continent and shrug off American influence there.⁷ Hence, Beijing intends to stabilize its regional neighbourhood as a ‘priority in its diplomacy’. China endeavours to establish dialogue among national groups to create a cohesive and stable environment as a policy option for resolving disputes within the conflict-affected neighbours.⁸

President Xi proposed the ‘One Belt, One Road’ concept—consisting of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR)—as a vital foreign policy approach. While respecting regional diversity, President Xi stressed on avoiding any kind of dominance in regional affairs, rejecting ‘one-size-fits-all’ development model, and endorsing management of disputes via ‘equal-based dialogue and friendly consultation’. China notably rejects the notion of becoming a development model for other states. The initiative is to create ‘a new pattern of regional economic integration’ and ‘innovation-driven open growth model’ of development marked by ‘mutually beneficial reciprocity’.⁹ With this, Beijing aims to engage actively for creating a conducive neighbourhood environment for development to serve the cause of national rejuvenation for which it seeks to have neighbours sociable in politics and closely tied in economy. China also aspires to deepen security cooperation and people-to-people bonds with its neighbours.

In contrast to Deng Xiaoping’s cautious approach in taking up a global leadership role, President Xi seems ready to take calculated political policy shots. China, under Xi Jinping, has emerged more confident and self-assured as it prepares to take risks in pursuance of its interests abroad and within the region. At the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) summit, Xi Jinping outlined his vision for a future Asian security order with an emphasis on the five principles of peaceful co-existence as founding rules for governing state-to-state relations. Therefore, President Xi Jinping painted his Asian security vision as made by Asians for Asians by declaring, “China’s peaceful development begins here in Asia, finds its support in Asia, and delivers tangible benefits to Asia.” With this, Xi offered a compelling model of regional leadership with an Asian flavour for the resolution of burning issues in its neighbourhood.¹⁰

Xi Jinping gave a fresh signal of assertive diplomacy with the new foreign and regional policy approach. Analytically speaking, however, the new approach does not mark a substantial change in the regional position China had in the past. The only new element introduced by President Xi is the vision and strategy to have ‘connectivity’ with neighbours and a linkage of Chinese Dream with its foreign affairs to have win-win relationships, but with a firm persistence on not compromising Chinese core interests and assertive continuation of its

principles of sovereignty. Hence, the question is where does Afghanistan fit in the regional policy of neighbourhood diplomacy and Chinese Dream of establishing a more viably peaceful, One Belt One Road connectivity? As an overly cautious new player, China still lacks a coherent foreign and regional policy with respect to Afghanistan. Moreover, the political options and the direction of China's future discourse are still being debated. Perhaps an understanding of China-Afghanistan relations since the beginning would help in evaluating future course of bilateral relations and options for China as a regional player with a progressive new vision.

Afghanistan in China's foreign policy

Afghanistan has never been an important player in diplomacy of the People's Republic of China (PRC). During the earlier decades, Afghanistan largely remained peripheral to China's interests. At times China did adopt a utilitarian approach towards it though. China's diplomacy with regard to Afghanistan follows a constant pattern of engagement comprised of cautiousness and watchfulness. Officially Beijing has managed to maintain proper relations with all the political forces in Afghanistan while opting for a low profile strategy. The US usually deals with both Pakistan and Afghanistan under one strategy, but Chinese policymakers looks at both countries separately, and make clear priority distinctions between them.

China has adopted a four-point approach towards Afghanistan:

1. Safeguarding security and stability;
2. Developing the economy;
3. Improving governance while respecting the rights of Afghans to choose the model of government suited for Afghanistan (lately China has replaced 'improving governance' with 'political reconciliation'); and
4. Enhancing international cooperation.¹¹

Therefore, China centres its approach on the principle of 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned' for upholding Afghanistan's independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the progressive path as decided by the Afghan people themselves. Although Beijing has implemented stern policies for countering terrorism in its own Xinjiang province, it argues for a non-military solution for Afghanistan.

Two core interests determine China's foreign policy in Afghanistan: security and economy. Hence, the arrival of the ominous date of 2014, and the ensuing unforeseen state of affairs, pushed China to take some responsibility, as indicated by the new foreign policy shift.

Sino-Afghan relations through historical lens

A detailed account of the Sino-Afghan relations would give a better picture of the 60 years of evolving relations.

An unnatural border

China's shortest border (76 km) among all its fourteen neighbours is with Afghanistan.¹² On the Chinese side, the two share a tiny sliver of a border known as Wakhjir Pass that has been closed since the founding of the PRC. On the Afghan side, the border area is called Wakhan Corridor, a sparsely populated narrow mountainous panhandle belt of territory in the north-eastern Afghanistan that forms a part of Badakhshan province.¹³

China and Afghanistan have never been natural neighbours. Wakhan exists only because in 1873 the two regional empires of the 19th century—Great Britain in India and Russia in Central Asia—carved out a political buffer to keep their empires geographically separated. Another agreement between Britain and Afghanistan in 1893 effectively split the historic area of Wakhan by making the Panj and Pamir Rivers the border between Afghanistan and the Russian Empire.¹⁴ The Anglo-Russian Boundary Commission awarded the area to Afghanistan in 1895-96 to create this buffer which was once part of the epic Silk Road.¹⁵

The pact involved neither China nor the Afghans and their boundary was left undefined. Today, this thin strip of land has become a bequest of the historic Great Game as it separates Tajikistan from Pakistan.¹⁶ This extremely rugged terrain has historically been a crucial ancient trading route of the Silk Road between Badakhshan in north-eastern Afghanistan and Yarkant in China's Xinjiang. The Wakhjir Pass at the eastern end of the Wakhan Corridor links it with the Tashkurgan Tajik Autonomous County in Xinjiang, China, which—as mentioned above—was closed down by the Afghan and Chinese authorities in the past.¹⁷

The relationship between Afghanistan and China can be divided into four phases according to the shifting interests and state of affairs between them, i.e., 1950s-1970s, 1980s-2000, 2000-2013, and 2014 to present.

1950s to 1970s

China and Afghanistan maintained friendly cooperative relations since the founding of the PRC in 1949. Kabul had readily recognized PRC on 12 January 1950, but Beijing only reciprocated once the formal diplomatic ties were established in 1955. China established its bilateral relations on the basis of the five principles of peaceful co-existence and embraced the credentials of Afghanistan as a neutral state. The Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Non-Aggression was signed between the two countries in August 1960.¹⁸ Under the boundary delimitation and rectification programme with its neighbouring states, Beijing and Kabul formally signed a boundary agreement on 22 November 1963.¹⁹

Initially both the neighbouring countries remained distant. Beijing had a weaker footing in Afghanistan due to the stronger Soviet presence there. In

December 1974 Daud Khan sent his brother Mohammad Naim to China as a special envoy of Kabul government in an effort to decrease reliance on Moscow. Beijing, as a goodwill gesture, offered long-term interest-free loan of about \$55 million to Afghanistan. Unfortunately, Afghanistan's neutrality was entirely abandoned after a 1978 pro-Soviet coup. The regime of Noor Muhammad Taraki signed a twenty-year friendship treaty with Moscow that contained collective détente provisions, followed by anti-China policies.²⁰

1980s to 2000

Irrespective of the friction between the two, China formally condemned the Soviet military invasion of Afghanistan with a demand for withdrawal of Soviet forces. Beijing took it as a violation of Afghanistan's sovereignty, and a security threat to China, Asia, and the whole world. Beijing did not recognize the Babrak Karmal regime held up by the Soviet Union, and supported the Afghan resistance by providing military training and arms to the Afghan Mujahideen.²¹ China viewed the geo-strategic location of Afghanistan as the cause of Soviet Union's action, and its own encirclement. Moreover, US airbase in Badakhshan province left China more anxious about becoming a target in the Cold War.²²

Beijing welcomed the supply of weapons to the Mujahideen. One of the most vital clandestine operations in Chinese history was that Beijing became the arms supplier in the guerrilla war against the Soviets. According to Barnett R. Rubin, an American expert on Afghanistan at New York University and former special adviser to the United States government and the United Nations, four intelligence services—the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the Saudi General Intelligence Directorate, and the Ministry of State Security of China—met every week in Islamabad.²³ During that time Beijing independently made connections with the ethnic Tajik military personnel in Afghanistan which later formed the Northern Alliance. After Soviet withdrawal, China, like the US, rapidly wound up its involvement in Afghanistan, but remained diplomatically engaged with the Najibullah government. When the civil war erupted, however, China officially closed down its embassy in Afghanistan in February 1993.²⁴

Under Taliban rule in the 1990s, Chinese remained absent from the big Afghan picture. Beijing never fancied the rise of Taliban and, therefore, never recognized their government in Afghanistan, but it closely monitored the country's putrefying state of affairs as a concerned neighbour. China supported the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) decision of imposing sanctions on the Taliban in response to providing sanctuary to Al-Qaeda. Beijing had its own concerns regarding the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and other affiliated Central Asian militant groups such as Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and their bases and training camps in Afghanistan with Taliban's approval.

After the imposition of sanctions and diplomatic isolation by the international community, Taliban were desperately in need of financial assistance and international legitimacy. The Chinese took their desperation as an

opportunity,²⁵ and established a working relationship with the Taliban regime for economic and reconstructive engagement. In 2000, China signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Taliban government in Kabul for economic and technical cooperation. Two Chinese telecommunication firms, Huawei Technologies and ZTE, signed limited phone service contract for Kabul and Kandahar. A business delegation led by the Taliban visited Beijing as well. Chinese engineers also negotiated with the Taliban to renovate a US-built power station.²⁶ Chinese companies like Dongfeng Agricultural Machinery Company began repairing Afghanistan's power grid and fixing dams in Kandahar, Helmand, and Nangarhar.²⁷

The political contacts were also shaped in February 1999, when a five-member group of Chinese diplomats met Taliban officials in Kabul²⁸ to establish formal opening of trade ties. By the end of the year it allegedly became known that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) agreed to provide low-level military support to the Taliban via Pakistan, in exchange for cutting off training assistance to Uighurs. Yet again, China ensured to proceed with characteristic caution. While visiting Pakistan in 2000, former Chinese foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan declined to meet his Taliban counterpart. Whereas the deputy director of the foreign ministry's Asia Department Sun Guoxiang, a much low-profile diplomat accompanying Jiaxuan, met the then Taliban ambassador to Pakistan Sayyed Mohammad Haqqani in Islamabad. The purpose of the meeting was to get assurance from the Taliban that they would not permit anyone to use Afghan territory against China. Later on, the then Chinese ambassador to Pakistan Lu Shulin officially requested his Afghan counterpart Abdul Salam Zaeef for a meeting with top leader Mullah Omar for the same purpose. Zaeef even in his autobiography describes the Chinese ambassador as "the only one to maintain a good relation with the embassy and with [Taliban-run] Afghanistan."²⁹

In November 2000, a Chinese delegation from the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, an influential think tank run by the Ministry of State Security, visited Kabul and Kandahar.³⁰ Next month Ambassador Lu Shulin with a three-man team visited Afghanistan and met a group of powerful Taliban leaders in Kabul and later met with the Taliban head Mullah Omar in Kandahar. Lu became the first and only senior non-Muslim country representative who met Omar. In exchange for China's requested assurances, Taliban hoped to gain a beneficial relief from the meet up with Chinese ambassador at the international level in the form of warding off of UN sanctions imposed on the group. UN sanctions included ban on travel, arms embargo, flights prohibition from Afghanistan, and mandatory closure of Taliban's overseas offices. Beijing did not veto the resolution but abstained, expressing concern "that the Afghan people would suffer from the measures proposed in the resolution."³¹ Taliban's hopes of receiving a status of diplomatic recognition from China received a setback with the destruction of 8th century Buddha statues in Bamiyan.³²

2001 to 2013

With the 9/11 terrorist attacks, China pledged support to US and offered to share intelligence as the US set out to overthrow the Taliban government. The FBI even set up its office in Beijing. Terrorist financing intelligence was also shared.³³ China welcomed the new interim government of Karzai in Afghanistan and after nine years, on 6 February 2002, formally re-opened its embassy in Kabul.³⁴ In 2003, when the then Afghan vice president Nimatullah Shahrani visited China, both sides signed the Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation, the Letter of Exchange on Undertaking the Project of Renovation of the Parwan Irrigation Project, and the Letter of Exchange on Donation of \$1 million to the Afghan Reconstruction Fund by China.³⁵ Essentially 9/11 came as a relief for China, and economically it picked from where it had left prior to the incident.

As part of Afghanistan's post-war reconstruction, the notable assistance Beijing offered was its pledge of \$150 million aid in January 2002. Beijing also offered to grant \$15 million and \$1 million cash for Afghan Reconstruction Fund during Vice President Shahrani's visit to China (as mentioned above). The bilateral relations were further strengthened when in September 2004 Ambassador Sun Yuxi signed the Declaration on Encouraging Closer Trade, Transit, and Investment Cooperation between Governments of Signatories to the Kabul Declaration on Good Neighbourly Relations on behalf of the Chinese government along with the Afghan government's representatives and five of the other neighbouring countries of Afghanistan.³⁶ Former Afghan president Hamid Karzai also tried to base his foreign policy approach on exerting autonomy from the US for which he sought to strike a balance among the foreign powers in Afghanistan by ensuring multiple sources of diplomatic and economic support.

Karzai made his first official visit to Beijing in January 2002 as Chairman of the Afghan Interim Government. In the following years, President Karzai met with former Chinese President Hu Jintao several times on the sidelines of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summits in 2004 (Tashkent), 2006 (Shanghai), 2008 (Dushanbe), 2009 (Yekaterinburg), 2010 (Tashkent), 2011 (Astana), 2012 (Beijing), and 2013 (Bishkek). Similarly, other Afghan high-ranking officials like former vice president Karim Khalili met with his Chinese counterparts in the SCO prime ministers meetings, and parliamentary meetings between the two countries etc.³⁷

Despite Karzai's tilt towards China, the diplomatic bond between the two countries remained mere routine assurances and verbal pledges from Beijing due to its varying political interests and rising economic insecurity in Afghanistan. Chinese engagement began to change by 2011 with the Chinese officials starting to take interest in the signed agreements at the international forums. Suddenly China appeared to be leading the summits on Afghanistan, and started taking keen interest in the Afghan situation to change the future course of the country by including regional neighbours. Chinese meetings with Taliban and push for workable peace negotiations between political forces of Afghanistan became more visible. This changed political approach of China in Afghanistan was viewed by some observers as geared towards resource-hunting.

However, Chinese analysts uphold that China's only concern in Afghanistan is security. The catalyst for stepping up of Chinese diplomatic activities to build a stable Afghanistan was the anticipation of the gloomy year of 2014, and a realization that the Americans were leaving with a volcanic chaos for the regional neighbours to muddle through. Therefore, in 2012 came the noteworthy visit when the Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang visited Kabul. With this first high-level visit since 1966, the change in traditional diplomatic approach between the two countries became evident.³⁸

Redefining diplomatic trends: 2014-present

The year 2014 witnessed new leadership with new vision and new regional stance in both Afghanistan and China. It brought a striking bilateral energetic shift, as China efficiently emerged from being a discreet neighbour to a greater visible one. Chinese activities in Afghanistan both at the bilateral and multilateral levels with high-level exchanges became more frequent. In February 2014, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Kabul to meet with his counterpart to ensure Chinese support for Afghanistan in attaining smooth political, security, and economic transitions. In July 2014, China appointed its first special envoy to Afghanistan Sun Yuxi, a Chinese diplomat with ambassadorial experience in Afghanistan and India. The special envoy was tasked to save Afghanistan from becoming a refuge for South/Central Asian militants who could destabilize China's western provinces.³⁹

Another major thread of China's diplomatic engagement in 2014 under the neighbourhood diplomacy has been to initiate regional and sub-regional security mechanisms via bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral dialogues with regional stakeholders. The 'Heart of Asia', a multilateral forum launched in 2011 in Istanbul, was endorsed by Chinese government which hosted its 4th Ministerial Conference on 31 October 2014.⁴⁰ The 'Heart of Asia' Istanbul process aimed at bringing all of Afghanistan's regional neighbours together to take on a greater role for a result-oriented security, political, and economic cooperation. Notably, the trilateral dialogues first established in February 2012 between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China had also spawned numerous consultative mechanisms such as Track-II Afghanistan-Pakistan-China Dialogue, first convened in August 2013, as well as India-China-Russia and China-Russia-Pakistan dialogues on Afghanistan. In March 2014, China and Russia also hosted a 6+1 Dialogue on the Afghan issue in Geneva. Presumably, China's idea behind such dialogue is to reach a consensus among the neighbouring countries on Afghanistan crisis as all of them would have to directly deal with the instability. These dialogues even include curbing transnational crimes like drug trafficking⁴¹ which has funded militant groups' insurgency in Central Asia immensely. The PRC law enforcement organs have even adopted the name of 'Golden Crescent' for poppy-growing Afghanistan as it has become a serious challenge for the authorities to curb its flow.⁴²

On the Afghanistan side, President Ashraf Ghani chose China as the destination of his first state visit abroad on 10 July 2015; publicly embracing the diplomatic vibrancy of China. President Xi pledged to beef up security

cooperation between the two neighbours as a common interest of both the countries on the occasion. Xi appreciated Ghani for Afghanistan's support to China's Belt and Road initiative and proposed to have an extensive and inclusive national reconciliation process on an 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned' basis by mediating between all the parties involved.⁴³ Hence, the cautionary approach of avoiding deep involvement in the geopolitical affairs of Afghanistan by confining its role to the economic domain in the country continues to play a dominant role.

Following the visit of Ghani, China's Vice President Li Yuanchao visited Afghanistan on 3 November 2015 to oversee the signing of three agreements on security, reconstruction, and education cooperation. The security agreement talked about the physical security of the Afghans, and ensured a security system at the gates of Kabul to check and investigate the traffic entering the city. The reconstruction agreement committed 500 million Yuan (approximately \$79 million) to the Afghan Ministry of Urban Development as a first tranche of the total 2 billion Yuan (around \$309 million) to support the construction of 10,000 apartments for the families of the Afghan National Security Forces and the police personnel who died in service while the remaining amount would be given to the government officers. With regard to the education agreement, China offered 1,500 scholarships to Afghan students.⁴⁴ China's efforts also became more visible in Afghanistan through efforts and interests like training Afghan security and police personnel,⁴⁵ 781 according to China's former foreign minister Yang Jiechi. China still refuses to commit troops to tackle insurgency though.⁴⁶

In November 2014, Guo Shengkun, the state councillor in-charge of China's domestic security, visited Afghanistan to discuss combating ETIM. Same year in October, Deputy Chief of the PLA General Staff, Lieutenant General Qi Jianguo, visited Afghanistan as a special envoy of the President of China. There had never been as many visits from top Chinese diplomatic, security, and military officials to Afghanistan as were seen in 2014.⁴⁷ In the past decade, Beijing had chosen to keep its official visits discreet. Mostly the Afghan side visited China rather than the high-ranking Chinese officials visiting Kabul. Perhaps China's top leadership or officials wanted to be less visible to avoid becoming extremists' target or being labelled as associated with any one political group of Afghanistan.

Testing points for China in Afghanistan: Pursuit of interests and associated risks

Afghanistan's state of affairs poses a test for China either to pursue its national interests in the country or risk becoming a target of insurgent movement. The pugnacious fighting in Afghanistan has bumped into President Xi's newly formulated policy towards Afghanistan and the region. Taliban, a fractured movement, are still a resilient force, while the National Unity Government (NUG) of President Ghani is clueless on how to deal with the Taliban insurgency and control the potential rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the country. Hence, Ashraf Ghani seeks peace and assistance

from regional China whereas Beijing is apprehensive due to the continuing chaos.

There is an on-going debate within Chinese analytical circles either to do more in Afghanistan or resist regional and international pressures. One segment of the political thinkers like Colonel Dai Xu represents a traditional noninterfering approach of China and prefers Beijing not to take part in the US war on terror because its fire could engulf China. Dai Xu is of the view that China's strategic interests are not much deeply involved, and Beijing should focus on its own interests. By contrast, another segment of analysts like Da Wei argues that 'China could do more' on both Afghanistan and Pakistan without the use of force. Sun Zhe stresses that US war on terror has given China a 'strategic space' which must be carefully considered.⁴⁸

Today's Afghanistan presents the following serious and unavoidable concerns linked to the national priorities of China in Afghanistan:

Security: A national interest with threat pulsations

Containment of Uighurs and ETIM

The top priority and a fundamental concern of China is to maintain stability on its western borders and prevent Uighur separatists from making contact with the terrorists based or being trained in Afghanistan. China fears two-pronged security concerns from Uighur militancy: first, a possible unrest amongst its Uighur population in Xinjiang; and second, a possible terrorist attack carried out by the ETIM elsewhere in China.⁴⁹ To China, the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), and the ETIM have strong links with Afghanistan. China accuses these organizations of carrying out terrorist attacks within the country and also of recruiting and training Uighur separatists to fight for an independent Xinjiang. In the past, China followed a narrow approach towards shielding its territories in the north-western province of Xinjiang from the influence of destabilizing elements from Afghanistan.⁵⁰

In October 2009, senior Al-Qaeda operative Abu Yahya al-Libi, who died in a US drone strike in June 2012, had called on Uighurs to launch jihad against 'Chinese infidels' for reclaiming control over their land in Xinjiang by striking back at the intolerant Chinese.⁵¹ Waves of serious terrorist attacks then followed within China beyond Xinjiang. Most notable among those were massive riots in Urumqi in 2009, explosion on Tiananmen Square in 2013 before the third Central Committee Plenum, mass stabbing at Kunming railway station in 2014 before a parliamentary session, and double-suicide bombing at Urumqi railway station on the last visiting day of President Xi Jinping in 2014. Such attacks have raised highest security concerns about TIP and ETIM involvement in China.⁵²

Taliban in the past provided ETIM with safe haven in Afghanistan. According to ETIM's propaganda, it was involved in fighting against The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). It is difficult to identify the specific affiliations of Uighurs militants in Afghanistan as all of them are not associated with ETIM; some have joined IMU as well. Attacks in China have been forcefully dealt with by the authorities. Hundreds of Xinjiang-based

separatists have been arrested and charged for extremist propaganda. That's why China pushed Pakistan to ban IMU and Islamic Jihad Union (IJU)—and to operate against these militant organizations and other violent non-state actors who propagate anti-Chinese orientations—alongside Pakistan's own fight against armed groups.⁵³

From time to time, since the emergence of Taliban, China has tried to seek assurances from Afghanistan-based militant groups against supporting Uighur militants destabilizing Xinjiang. After 9/11 too, China quietly maintained interactive relations with Taliban leaders to seek out guarantees on the concerned subject. China has based its rationale towards Taliban on the principle of acknowledging them as a core political actor in Afghanistan that would pursue its goals centred on Afghanistan only.⁵⁴ In 2002, the brother of a top Taliban commander Jalaluddin Haqqani visited Beijing. The pre-9/11 understanding between the two maintained at the time which assured Taliban's commitment to keeping a distance from Uighur militant groups in exchange for Beijing's treatment of Taliban as a legitimate political group rather than a terrorist outfit via careful expression when referred to.⁵⁵

Zhao Huasheng views a stable and peaceful Xinjiang as the starting point for China's Afghanistan policy because of the several threats emanating out of Afghanistan. Threat of enduring relations between the separatists in Xinjiang and Taliban remains a challenge to Xinjiang's security. Other threats include spill-over effects of terrorism, destabilization, religious extremism, and drug trafficking within Xinjiang. The Chinese officials call them 'three evil forces', i.e., separatism, extremism, and terrorism.⁵⁶ Beijing fears unchecked spread of radicalization into Central Asia and then Xinjiang. China views Afghanistan as an opportune station for rival or competing great powers to pursue their broader agendas including encirclement of China. For years China kept its patience with the US presence and combat operations in its neighbourhood in the hope of seeing it defeat terrorism and extremist groups in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a crucial centre for anti-terrorist campaigns because it was the first battleground for the post-9/11 war on terror, and remains a spiritual pillar of terrorism in the region. If it fails to achieve triumph then the terrorist groups would not only expand further, but could stage a comeback as witnessed lately.⁵⁷

Troop deployment question

Attached to the security threats are the regional and international expectations from China to fill in the security gaps left by the international players. Beijing has offered to increase provision of equipment and support to Afghan security forces but its official status quo on no troop deployment remains unchanged. On the other hand, many Chinese policy thinkers are probing into the efficacy of current policy. Having deeper realization of the huge risks involved in committing profoundly in Afghanistan, some scholars believe that Beijing has no choice but to bear the cost of being a major powerful neighbour.⁵⁸ Beijing has not contributed to the stabilization and counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan. But if Uighur militant groups in

Afghanistan establish deeper safe havens, and none of Beijing's local partners are able or willing to extend assistance against them, China might set a new precedent in its counter-terrorism strategy and carry out operations beyond its borders.⁵⁹ Until then, China's foreign policy on security and military engagement is clear on maintaining less involvement with no troops on ground policy.

Another likely possibility of Chinese troop deployment in Afghanistan, if ever considered, would be under the auspices of a UN peacekeeping mission. Despite the level of concern attached to security with regard to Afghanistan, China has committed to providing only military assistance. So far the only assistance has been a mine-clearing training course for around a dozen Afghan officers by the PLA. Beijing has even been apathetic to becoming associated with the US and NATO forces committed in Afghanistan. Moreover, even the possible proposal of opening up a logistical route into Afghanistan from western China to transit nonlethal military supplies by road via Pakistan was never approved by Beijing.⁶⁰

President Ghani used the China-Pakistan friendship card with China in a matter-of-factly manner to seek Chinese support in pressurizing Pakistan on curbing militancy. Chinese government, however, realizes the limitations of Islamabad with regard to pressurizing the rogue elements unleashed in the region and has hence opted for Islamabad's suggestion of engaging with the Taliban and other violent non-state actors.⁶¹ Rather than committing to broader international security apparatus, Beijing has shown active interest in getting the Afghan government to strike a deal with the Taliban and is also willing to act as a mediator for the purpose. Therefore, security remains the main underlying reason for China to establish and maintain contacts with the Taliban.

Multilateral framework: A security shield

Another aspect of China's security interest vis-à-vis Afghanistan is to preferably work within a multilateral framework. This strategy covers Beijing's fear of being at the frontline in the eyes of insurgents and is compatible with its non-interference doctrine as well. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has been an apt choice for China to pursue interests in Afghanistan. Since April 2011, SCO has incorporated Afghanistan's instability as one of the top security concerns. During the November 2012 Kabul-Islamabad-Beijing trilateral dialogue, the parties had agreed on seeking a regional solution to the Afghan war while acknowledging the key role SCO as a regional mechanism could play in solving the sprouting security, political, and economic challenges.⁶² A vital aspect that requires assessment is whether the SCO is capable of replacing ISAF and addressing the security challenges in Afghanistan or not? The possibility of SCO taking such role is least possible as it is not a pact-based defence organization like NATO. It also lacks internal consensus on extending security assistance to Afghanistan. Raffaello Pantucci, Senior Research Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, defined SCO as a "hugely ineffective organization."⁶³ While China may highlight SCO as part of its Afghan strategy, it might not work successfully. The Central Asian states are

still not capable of providing for their own security and look towards Russia. China itself is not willing to extend military support to Afghanistan, so unanimity is unlikely in case of joining counter-insurgency operations like ISAF.⁶⁴

China, Taliban, and the idea of national reconciliation

China had welcomed the breakthrough in the Qatar process but was left disappointed when Karzai derailed the process. Support for national reconciliation between Taliban and Kabul has become a fixture in China's diplomatic activity in the post-2014 scenario. Since last year, China has expanded its regular direct contacts with Taliban despite the fact that the movement has branched out into factions. Taliban representatives held meetings with Chinese officials both in Pakistan and in China. To Beijing, as long as the process remains Afghan-led and aims at promoting peace, it is willing to provide a neutral venue for the sake of its own security concerns. In May 2015, China for the first time hosted talks on its own soil, in Urumqi, between the Afghan government and representatives of Taliban factions to plan preliminary consultations about the future negotiations. Taliban and the Afghan government have decided to restart negotiations from scratch which indicates failure of previous efforts.⁶⁵ For now, the peace talks are still focusing on establishing a roadmap for future negotiations. China is willing to put its weight behind promoting these direct talks. The previous round of talks held in 2015 collapsed due to a sudden disclosure of the death of former Taliban chief Mullah Omar.⁶⁶

Quadrilateral Coordination Group

Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and the US have initiated a Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) that urges Taliban militants to negotiate to bring an end to Afghanistan crisis. China is using its limited influence to broker peace talks in Kabul.⁶⁷ The first round of QCG was held in Islamabad, second in Kabul, third in Islamabad again,⁶⁸ while the fourth round was recently held in Kabul on 23 February 2016.⁶⁹ The talks mainly focus on a roadmap, a documented process, as a guideline to lay the groundwork for direct dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban. The draft has envisaged a three-stage process, the pre-negotiation period, direct peace talks with Taliban groups, and the implementation phase.⁷⁰ Taliban are not part of the QCG talks. Pakistan's Adviser to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz provided the list of Taliban representatives willing to participate in the peace process in the first round of the QCG. He put an emphasis on not attaching pre-conditions for talks.⁷¹ The latest round set conditions for the final direct peace talks between Kabul and Taliban though. A joint communiqué issued by the QCG invited 'all Taliban and other groups' to travel to Islamabad to participate in the talks through their authorized representatives.⁷² During the meeting, Afghan officials handed over a list of 10 leaders belonging to different Taliban groups and the Haqqani Network to Pakistan. Afghan government asked Pakistan to bring those influential Taliban leaders to the negotiating table.⁷³ To ensure security

measures, a settlement between Afghanistan and Pakistan was reached on using force against Taliban members opposing the peace talks.⁷⁴

All the initiatives aside, the reality on ground hasn't stopped haunting the peace participants. There are many serious challenges that need to be sorted out first to make the peace process work. One big challenge on the part of China is whether it can achieve peace by using its influence on the Taliban to start negotiating. Would it be enough for China to achieve peace without the use of military pressure, while focusing only on being a mediator and venue facilitator, leaving Afghans to take the lead stance? Analysts are sceptical about China's mediatory role beyond its own borders and whether it can succeed where powerful actors like US, NATO, and regional Afghan neighbours have failed so far.

Taliban: Post-Mullah Omar

Besides concerns over Chinese mediatory role, there is an issue of rising power struggle within the Taliban which has raised doubts about who would represent the group if and when talks with the Afghan government would resume. The confirmation of Mullah Omar's death by both the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan Intelligence brought to surface the confrontations within the group and ambiguity among the participating countries. Taliban, under Mullah Akhtar Mansour, the successor of Mullah Omar, have further become fractious.⁷⁵ A splinter group headed by Mullah Mohammad Rasool Akhund, which rejects Mansour's authority, has dismissed any talks under the mediation of the US, China, or Pakistan.⁷⁶ Although Mansour's faction has retained its office in Qatar, he and his field commanders showed no interest in joining the peace talks.⁷⁷ The group's fracturing under Mansour has weakened the prospects of the preferred outcome strived for by Beijing, i.e., a negotiated political settlement between the Taliban and President Ghani's government. In addition, to demean the future peace prospects, the splinter groups have escalated extreme violence. Taliban militants have reportedly launched offensives with just 100 or more men in 41 districts in 2014, which rose to 65 in 2015. In 2015 alone, Taliban launched three major coordinated offensives in Kunduz, Faryab, and Helmand; each involved at least 1,000 men. Capturing of the urban centre of Kunduz by Taliban for two weeks in the post-US invasion period is alarming for the possibility of any future peace negotiations.⁷⁸

Therefore, to expect the militants to join the current round of peace talks being planned by China would be too ambitious. It might be expected that Taliban would obviate from opting for dialogue now when they are strategically in a stronger position on ground once again. For instance, as Imtiaz Gul, Executive Director of the Centre for Research and Security Studies in Islamabad, said that there were 'practically no incentives' to offer Taliban field commanders.⁷⁹ Furthermore, questions surrounding Taliban motives and fractious organization are uncertain because Mansour's ability to convince others to join peace negotiations is debatable. Questions surround whether China too would remain committed patiently to the peace and mediation policy; if yes,

for how long? Another major obstacle is the present NUG in Afghanistan which not only lacks coherent policies on handling Taliban but also ethnic balance.

ISIS/Daesh and Taliban: Coalition vs competition

Another challenge to peace process is the budding affair of allegiance between the splinter groups of Taliban and Daesh militants. The association of elements of banned IMU with ISIS also worries Beijing about the future of peace negotiations and the idea of a political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Beijing has got involved in a situation where the risks attached with peace negotiations are too high, because only a segment of Taliban is willing to negotiate while the representatives who have broader support within the movement are still absent.⁸⁰ ISIS has been reported to have found a new base in Afghanistan, other than Iraq and Syria. Former Taliban militants joining ISIS are commonly referred to by the US as either ‘reflagging’ or ‘rebranding’. It is estimated that there are about 1,000 to 3,000 fighters who are launching attacks like the recent bombing of the Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad. Perhaps because of the optimism and stern push for peace, Pakistan is confronted by ISIS. According to US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter, ISIS is building ‘little nests’ in Afghanistan’s east. The complexity of the current situation is that Taliban are also battling ISIS for influence.⁸¹

While keeping the worrisome ground realities in mind, Afghans have high hopes from China. An adviser to the High Peace Council (HPC) Muhammad Ismail Qasimyar expressed hope that Beijing could help Afghanistan by playing a role in ending the on-going conflict. The HPC considers Chinese efforts in the reconciliation process as both result-oriented and productive.⁸² The question in the minds of the political thinkers is whether China can end Afghan conflict? If yes, to what extent? The reconciliation process of Afghanistan is a very complicated affair which is difficult to lever even by China. Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic society with many stakeholders in its on-going war and peace setup. Besides the multiple internal factions, these stakeholders also include Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the US and the West. The players having diverse interests have employed different approaches that lead the process nowhere in realistic terms. Hence, the peace approach required for credible outcome is to have a continuous and sincere peace support among the stakeholders with a will to gear efforts towards reducing trust deficits.

For China, diplomacy and the peace process of Afghanistan are pursued likewise. China due to its neutral policies in Afghanistan has become a focus of many hopeful eyes. Although Beijing is determined and plans to stick to being a facilitator in the talks—as it is not party to the war—it is for Kabul to bargain efficaciously with the insurgent groups. The Chinese like the idea of acquiring the status of peacemaker in Afghanistan by convincing Taliban to accept a deal that the US failed to persuade them on over the past decade. China will be involved only to provide a neutral venue for the parties to hold talks though. It will sit back anxiously for a peace plan from President Ghani with military support from Pakistan. Afghanistan is expected to hold parliamentary and district elections in October this year. A breakthrough in negotiations is

imperative by this summer; otherwise all the efforts of Pakistan and China will be overshadowed by political instability in Afghanistan. One will have to admit though that a breakthrough with Taliban is certainly too much to anticipate.⁸³

Economic/commercial interests

The One Belt One Road initiative of President Xi Jinping mainly targets China's troubled western regions. To counter the Uighur unrest in Xinjiang, the central government in Beijing has initiated a two-pronged strategy: first, as mentioned above, Beijing clamps down hard on militant activities; and second, it focuses on economic development to provide employment opportunities and improve socio-economic conditions of Uighurs in order to drive out discontent among the poor. Beijing views improved socio-economic order as the best remedy for the menace of terrorism and radicalization of society. The Silk Road Economic Belt initiative as part of its 'March West' policy requires a stable, secure, and economically flourishing Afghanistan to complement the development of China's western regions.⁸⁴ The idea is to provide Afghans with economic benefits and to teach them to become self-sufficient as well for joining in and benefiting from the region's broader economic development.

With an exit-America-enter-China perception in Afghanistan, both the countries have started to view each other as substantial partners. Energy-hungry Chinese economy seeks energy security from the neighbourhood as well. With abundant natural resources in the form of oil, natural gas, copper, iron ore, and other rare earth metals, Afghanistan provides China with an opportunity to diversify its energy and mineral sources. Kabul is hoping to go through a process of revitalization of its economy via resources to ensure reduction in dependency on foreign aid. President Ghani plans to make energy the bulwark of Afghan economy. He stresses on reviving the significance of Afghanistan as a 'hub of regional trade, transit, and peace' via China's ambitious Silk Road trade route. But profits for Afghanistan via the Silk Road are plausible only if China draws a new access route from Iran's Chabahar port via Afghanistan alongside Pakistan's Gwadar port to access West Asian countries, and Africa.⁸⁵

So far, in comparison to other economic contributors, China's aid to Afghanistan has been too little. In 2013, Sino-Afghan bilateral trade was estimated to be \$338 million, a tiny percentage of a much larger Chinese international trade.⁸⁶ From 2002 to 2010, China's aid to the country totalled 1.3 billion Yuan (about \$205 million) only. In 2011, China provided an additional 150 million Yuan (around \$24 million) of free assistance. China assisted Afghanistan in the construction of infrastructure projects such as the State Hospital in Kabul and Parwan irrigation project, human resource training for more than 800 Afghan officials and technical staff in China, and exemption of export tariffs in 2010 whereby 95 per cent of the taxes on commodities imported from Afghanistan were gradually abolished.⁸⁷ The biggest foreign investment contract in Afghanistan's history of \$3.4 billion has been won by Chinese companies. It was for the development of a copper mine at Mes Aynak, 40 km south of Kabul in Logar province, where in 2007 Metallurgical Corporation of

China (MCC) and Jiangxi Copper Corporation (JCC) won a competitive tender for a 30-year lease. It is estimated to contain world's second-largest copper deposits worth about \$100 billion, which could generate revenue for the Afghan government in the form of about 20 per cent royalty and a bonus payment of about \$808 million for granting exploit rights. The World Bank estimated that Aynak could create 4,500 direct, 7,600 indirect and 62,500 induced jobs. Unfortunately, due to insecurity and a later discovery of a 1,400 years old Buddhist monastery on the site has thrown back the mine development. In late 2014, MCC tried to negotiate a postponement until 2019 with President Ghani while Afghan officials tried to convince the company over on-site security guarantees.⁸⁸

In 2011, China's largest state-owned oil firm, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and its Afghan partner Watan Oil and Gas bid successfully for a \$400 million exploration license to develop three oil blocks in Amu Darya basin in northern Afghanistan. CNPC agreed to pay generously through construction of a refinery, 15 per cent royalties on oil, 20 per cent revenue tax, and 50 per cent or more tax on profits that could approximately generate annual tax revenues of more than \$300 million. Regrettably, this project also came under similar threats by insurgents, and its engineers were harassed on site by men loyal to Vice President General Dostum which led to a halt in construction.⁸⁹

Another project that China won in the country involved exploiting oil and natural gas in the western provinces of Sari Pul and Faryab, the first contract allowed by the Afghan government for any foreign companies to exploit these resources. Under the deal, signed in December 2011, the Afghan government will receive 70 per cent from sale profits. Chinese companies have thus established a footing in Afghanistan to benefit from future regional economic growth. The ground realities, however, made Chinese firms and government rethink their future investment as they responded to violence with freezing of activities. For future economic expansion, China looks for stability in Afghanistan. On bilateral trade, the Chinese government offered Afghanistan tariff-free deal on about 278 commodities starting from 2006.⁹⁰

Three main factors would shape Chinese economic engagement with Afghanistan: First, and most recognizable is the security situation in Afghanistan, since the protection of Chinese economic projects and personnel depends on it.⁹¹ So far both have been in danger. The largest Chinese investment of Mes Aynak in Afghanistan had been attacked almost 19 times and many of the Chinese engineers came under direct threats of abduction that made the staff depart due to the insecure environment. For years, China had followed discreet diplomacy in dealing with the protection of its nationals on Afghan soil but President Xi Jinping has taken a firmer stance. In 2013, a joint statement signed with President Karzai mentioned Afghan willingness for undertaking tangible measures for improving the security of Chinese institutions and people in Afghanistan. Similarly, during his visit to Beijing in October 2014, President Ghani was praised by President Xi for effective measures by Afghanistan for ensuring the safety of Chinese institutions and personnel in the country.⁹²

Therefore, if the security situation remains feasible, China would focus on investing in Afghanistan with more economic aid flowing, otherwise an already restrained Beijing would withdraw its investments. Additionally, it would persist to focus on other options of collaboration like in the education and agriculture sectors where Chinese physical presence may not be required. Beijing cannot risk its reputation and economic status because of the instability in Afghanistan.⁹³

Second, the attitude of Chinese companies is towards resource investment projects in Afghanistan. The concern is that China's contemporary resource projects in Afghanistan are facing setbacks due to Taliban attacks, and future of resource investment looks challengeable. Chinese government does not necessarily have influence on all the decisions regarding resource extraction. If the ground situation remains viable, not only would Chinese economic aid expand, the firms would also take risks of aiding projects in Afghanistan. Chinese firms have technical and local knowledge for competitive bidding for resource projects. Investment in unexplored mineral deposits has significant potential for Afghanistan's economy through tax revenue and creation of job opportunities for the locals.⁹⁴ Chinese companies have also invested in small information technology projects like telecommunications which are likely to continue. Third, for China's economic engagement in Afghanistan, a suggestive attitude of Afghan government will significantly help. China prefers to deliver economic aid according to the need of and requests from the Afghan government as it has been a consistent pattern with other countries as well. In fact, with the Afghan government's suggestion of projects, it will have some influence over them as well.⁹⁵

The point whether these limited investments will achieve Chinese aim of economic engagement in Afghanistan is debatable. So far, China's involvement in Afghanistan's economic development has not contributed much to improving both the country's security and socio-economic conditions. On the contrary, Chinese projects have come under direct attacks despite Chinese companies' efforts and risk-taking in fragile security situation. Nevertheless, Chinese analysts support their country's current approach of engaging with Afghanistan economically even under grave threats. Western critics, however, point towards China's limited and supposedly self-interested investment strategy which focuses mainly on utilizing Afghanistan's natural resources via free-riding because of the security assistance provided by the US and NATO allies.

Can China achieve what the US and West could not?

China's influential and more active role in Afghanistan's future peace and socio-economic development will surely make a difference as Beijing's foreign policy is very different from that of Washington. In its dealings with Afghanistan, China has shown its usual diplomatic policy of directly working with the Afghan government while maintaining a balance between and distance from other political actors like the Taliban. Eventually, everything depends on how much China is willing to give in support of Afghanistan even for its own security and economic interests. So far China has remained an observer and has

not actually contributed in the country with regard to conflict resolution and planning stability. China is yet to be tried if it is willing to take the test. Afghanistan is seen both as an opportunity and a challenge. Clearly peace and stability in Afghanistan will become an opportunity for Beijing to pursue its interests, otherwise the country will be put on the hold option. If the peace process derails once again and the uncontrollable chaos spreads, without even a second thought, China would side-line Afghanistan from all of its economic ventures like the One Belt One Road initiative. It will carry on with its broader development plans with the rest of the regional neighbours though. The decision would be due to the lesson Chinese learnt from their past economic experiences in Afghanistan where they realized that no matter how much dance they had with the Afghan political ducks, their projects and workers still faced serious security vulnerability even in less violent parts of the country. At one point, China had halted its economic activity due to such threats and it can do so again without hesitation. Hence cautious baby steps are on equal footing with the expansion of economic ventures. Beijing-Kabul engagement is driven more by Beijing's own genuine national interests and future gains than concerns for Afghanistan's situation. China in no circumstance can take a risk on compromising its rising regional status in exchange for winning the title of a responsible state.

One crucial strategy that might work for China—unlike the US and others—is the convergence of interests between Beijing and Islamabad. Pakistan army could secure political primacy across the Durand Line with China's assistance. Moreover, Chinese diplomacy is based on patience and cautiousness. China does not wish to condition the terms of peace process nor does it dictate its own ideas for future peace dealings between the Afghan parties to the conflict. US for the past decade had been looking for a winning trophy in Afghanistan while China has been interested only in a stable and peaceful Afghanistan in its neighbourhood. China aims to make sure that it gets the support of all regional states in its peace efforts and wants them to look upon China's role in a friendly manner. For this, China has even begun to muster regional support through a number of group meetings, such as trilateral talks between Afghanistan, China, and Pakistan as well as the US. China has also hosted talks between regional countries called 6+1 involving Afghanistan, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia and US.⁹⁶ Thus, China wants to ensure regional multilateralism instead of unilateralism. As a matter of fact, China is perceived as a great power with increasing influence in the region and with a potential to contribute towards regional stabilization. Despite the deep-seated insecurities and vulnerabilities sensed by China in its western region, where it feels threatened by internal anxieties, Beijing has tactfully stimulated confidence among regional neighbours, especially Afghanistan, by opting for a successful 'Empty Fortress' strategy.⁹⁷

Conclusion

The crux of the recent evolution of Sino-Afghan bilateral relations is the convergence of interests and needs. Afghanistan needs Chinese financial and

economic aid and technical support whereas it also seems to complement China's regional diplomacy, and its future geostrategic and geopolitical scheme. Both China and Afghanistan have been victims of imperial geopolitical games by outside powers. While China has strongly emerged as a power from the past imperial influences, Afghanistan is still deeply engrossed in fighting with the enemies within and outside of the country to bring about peace and stability. Therefore, the changing bilateral ties between Afghanistan and China would be beneficial for Afghanistan, but they are also crucial for China. The evolving Chinese interests in Afghanistan were not solely due to the draw-down of NATO in 2014 but also because of the demands of the emerging Chinese Dream and regional power status. It is in China's national interest to assist Afghanistan so that an unstable and distressed neighbour—infiltrated with homegrown as well as regional terrorists and a proxy battleground for regional contention—does not become an obstruction to China's rise as a peaceful and responsible power.

China's principle of 'non-interference' in the internal affairs of other countries in the absence of a direct threat is at the core of internal resistance to greater Chinese involvement in Afghanistan, particularly in the security sector. While mutual agreement on non-interference is in place, there are constant debates going on about whether it is in China's interest to expand its involvement in Afghanistan or not. This very principle of non-interference has until now kept China in a beneficial position in terms of direct or indirect interaction with various political forces of Afghanistan and for providing a negotiating platform for national reconciliation. For the past few years, diplomatic dealings have become direct but without giving up the essence of the principle. Jiang Zemin magnified Deng Xiaoping's statement by stressing that China should "bide its time, hide its brightness, not seek leadership, but do some things."⁹⁸ Hence, the scholars opted for reconstruction support in Afghanistan instead of committing to security support in the country.⁹⁹ Beijing opted for endorsing national reconciliation process than taking part in the US-backed combat operations. China is well-trained in the practice of strategic patience and this approach will most likely be adopted by China in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁰

China, with an advantage of diplomatic influence both internationally and regionally, in addition to a rising economic capital, cannot afford to remain indifferent to the Afghan situation threatening China's national interests and future development goals. However, being a new player in bringing solutions to regional issues like Afghanistan, China lacks experience in resolving internal conflicts in conflict-affected states as it has always regarded such issues as the internal matters of each country. Sceptics are worried about the scope of Chinese regional policy with regard to handling complex and volatile internal issues of Afghanistan. It is quite evident that Chinese diplomacy and notions of dialogue-based dispute-resolution is not applicable in case of Afghanistan and also not enough to bring peace. Presumably, China itself is still not ready to take on full responsibility in Afghanistan to pursue its decades-long Chinese Dream. In coming years too, China will focus on securing its own borders while

avoiding to take sides or unnecessarily provoking any leading Afghan party. It cannot afford to see its dream getting shattered in Afghan turbulence.

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THE FIRST ENLARGEMENT OF SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded on 15 June 2001, originally included China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The organization was established primarily to address the common concerns of terrorism, separatism, and extremism in the member states, particularly in Central Asian Republics (CARs). The organization announced its first-ever and long-awaited enlargement after 14 years of formation on 10 July 2015 during 15th summit in Ufa, Russia. It officially received India and Pakistan as members and upgraded Belarus from dialogue partner to observer status. It also added Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia and Nepal as new dialogue partners joining Turkey and Sri Lanka. Before becoming full members, however, India and Pakistan will have to fulfil certain statutory and legal obligations. Previously, Pakistan and India have been enjoying observer status in SCO since 2005. Pakistan had applied for full membership in 2006 while India formally placed application for the same at the 14th summit of SCO held in Dushanbe in 2014.¹ The 14th summit also resulted in signing of key documents that set out procedures for accepting new members including a set of requirements that acceding states need to fulfil in order to achieve full SCO member status.²

Admission of new members was a long process in which Russia was keen to admit India, and China was advocating for the admission of Pakistan.³ Besides, the SCO also approved a development strategy until 2025 during the

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15th summit, which set detailed targets and tasks for the organization's development in the coming 10 years, based on a thorough analysis of global and regional development trends. The 15th summit of SCO marked the announcement of expansion with a commitment towards deepening economic cooperation and a resolve for closer coordination in security, which is expected to lift the SCO cooperation to a new high.⁴

Within this context, this paper aims to analyze future implications of SCO's expansion to South Asia. Broadly, the paper is divided into three sections: The first section gives an overview of the origin, formation, and development of the SCO. This section helps in analyzing the implications of the expansion in the context of the underlying principles and goals of the organization. The second section helps in understanding the scenarios and determinants of SCO expansion. The third section explores how this enlargement can boost the global outreach of the SCO and how it is perceived in the global context. It also examines the implications of SCO enlargement in regional context by focusing on what potential opportunities and challenges new members would bring to the organization in the context of adverse bilateral relations between India and Pakistan. Another important aspect of the paper is to examine how the new expansion of SCO is relevant to the stability in Afghanistan in the wake of the drawdown of US forces from the country.

The evolution and development of SCO

The origin of the SCO is found in the cooperation and understanding developed over the years among the members of the 'Shanghai Five' mechanism. The Shanghai Five mechanism was created in 1996 to demilitarize and resolve border issues between China, Russia, and the three Central Asian Republics (CARs): Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.⁵ The forum successfully resolved a 3,000 km border issue along the former Soviet borders in a short span of a few years, which had caused turbulence for centuries.⁶ Besides, the process also helped the members to develop a common approach of cooperation through mutual trust, mutual respect, consultation, and equality that is often referred to as 'Shanghai Spirit'.

The newly independent states of Central Asia were confronted with many challenges because of their structural dependence on Soviet system in the past. Issues of border demarcation, growing instability, surge in terrorism, and formation of Taliban government in Afghanistan in 1996 had increased the concerns of the countries of the region.⁷ The major threats identified in CARs were terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism, which exacerbated with the instability in Afghanistan. Moreover, drugs and illicit arms trafficking—and its link with corruption, crime, insurgency, and terrorism—were posing a threat to the very fabric of Central Asian society.⁸

The common understanding developed on the maintenance of border security and the need for collective approach on growing security threats in CARs motivated the members to upgrade the forum into a formal regional body. The Shanghai Five was renamed as Shanghai Cooperation Organization after Uzbekistan joined it in 2001. The Declaration on the Creation of Shanghai

Cooperation Organization was signed on 15 June 2001 in which the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism was adopted. With this, the process of institutionalization of cooperation commenced against common concerns such as cross-border smuggling, terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism. The last three are also termed as the 'three evils' in SCO framework. The Charter of SCO was adopted by the six participating states in Saint-Petersburg on 7 June 2002, which defined the principles, purposes, and structure of the organization.⁹ The charter espoused the Shanghai Spirit by translating it into SCO principles such as respect for sovereignty and independence, territorial integrity and border stability, non-aggression and non-interference in internal affairs, non-use of force or threat of its use in international relations, seeking no unilateral military superiority in adjacent areas, and equality of all members.¹⁰ Hence, it lists several basic principles of international law as the foundation of the organization.¹¹ Although the SCO has not created any counter-narrative to global events, politically "the SCO member states are resolute supporters of a multi-polar world, the system of international law that took shape after World War II and the leading role of the UN Security Council."¹²

The institutionalization of the multilateral forum allowed its members to enter into various political agreements to promote good neighbourly relations.¹³ The charter also maps out the major goals which include strengthening of mutual trust, friendship and good neighbourliness between the member states, maintenance of peace, security and stability in the region through jointly countering terrorism, separatism and extremism in all their manifestations, and fighting against illicit narcotics and arms trafficking. At the global level, it calls for a democratic, fair, and rational international political and economic order. The charter encourages efficient regional cooperation in such spheres as politics, trade and economy, defence, law enforcement, environmental protection, culture, science and technology, education, energy, transport, credit and finance, and other spheres of common interest to facilitate comprehensive and balanced economic growth, as well as social and cultural development in the region.¹⁴ The SCO attaches great importance to cooperative security based on state-to-state relationship built upon mutual trust and partnership instead of alliance. It also stresses on non-interference in internal affairs, which makes this organization different.¹⁵ Many analysts also believe that this trait of the SCO makes it attractive for many countries to join.¹⁶

The SCO operates through two of its permanent coordinating bodies: the secretariat based in Beijing for the administrative and technical support led by a Secretary-General, and a Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) based in Tashkent. The SCO's current official languages are Chinese and Russian.¹⁷ But with the accession of India and Pakistan, the organization would require the translation of all the existing documents into English, and it is expected that English would become the third official language of SCO.¹⁸

With primary focus on security of the region, SCO member countries organize joint anti-terror military drills, share information and intelligence reports through RATS mechanisms to prevent terrorist acts, and also collaborate

in anti-narcotics campaigns.¹⁹ Despite increasing military cooperation, the SCO does not work as a military-political bloc like the NATO. There is already a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) for military purposes led by Russia in the Eurasian region that also includes few members from Central Asia.²⁰

Apart from collaborating against the three evils, SCO members also attempted to benefit from the collective economic potential of its member states. The organization had approved a formal economic programme in 2003, potentially aimed at making free movement of goods, capital, services, and technologies a reality within two decades. But it has not been implemented due to the diverging national interests of SCO members and the lack of effective joint funding mechanisms.²¹ For this purpose, two non-governmental structures named Business Council and SCO Forum were created in 2006 to coordinate economic cooperation among the business communities of the member states.²² From 2007 onwards, economic cooperation among SCO members has increased, but progress has not been very significant under the SCO framework. Most of the economic projects are handled through bilateral agreements. The SCO framework mainly focuses on regional security, but critics argue that the organization's potential to stabilize its volatile regions remains essentially theoretical with no tangible achievements.²³ There is no denying the fact, however, that joint efforts of SCO anti-terrorist structures have successfully prevented many terrorist attacks in the region since its establishment.²⁴

Scenarios and motivations for enlargement

SCO in the post-9/11 scenario

With the changing dynamics of regional security after the formation of international coalition against terrorism in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, the security configuration of Central Asia and adjacent countries was greatly challenged with the spillover effects of terrorism stemming from the next door Afghanistan.²⁵ As a result of the global war on terror, relations between the US and Russia were improved initially. The US received bilateral cooperation from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan for the war as well.²⁶ The presence of the US and allied forces in Afghanistan had initially eased tensions of the CARs, Russia, and China about the spread of negative effects of terrorism from Afghanistan.²⁷ But the increasing influence of the US in the region under the pretext of war on terror soon led to reservations on the part of Beijing and Moscow. In order to emphasize the viability of SCO as a regional security organization, they reiterated their commitment to fighting against regional terrorism by issuing a joint statement in SCO foreign ministers' meeting in 2002, and highlighted SCO's farsightedness for its pre-9/11 decision to focus on fighting against the 'three evils'.²⁸ According to former Chinese foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan, the SCO was the first international organization that set counter-terrorism as its target.²⁹

China was the major driver behind the development and strengthening of this organization. In addition to China's reservations about the increasing

influence of the US in the region, Beijing's primary concerns were also connected with the security and development in Xinjiang (northwestern part of China sharing 2,800 km border with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). This part of China is vulnerable to the situation in Afghanistan and political instability in Central Asian countries. Due to the fear of separatist movements and infiltration of terrorists into Xinjiang, China was keen to accelerate security cooperation under the SCO framework.³⁰

SCO in the post-withdrawal scenario

In contemporary scenario, the SCO members, particularly China, are concerned about the negative consequences of the departure of international and US forces from Afghanistan. China is, therefore, focusing on combining regional cooperation in both security and economic development. China's interests in the stability of the post-Soviet Central Asia are also connected with its economic gains in the resource-rich region from where it hopes to meet its growing energy demands.³¹

It is feared that the withdrawal will bring instability and put serious strains on the security situation in the region with repercussions for all major regional stakeholders, which include CARs, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia.³² The neighbouring states are raising concerns about the resurgence of extremist and terrorist forces after the complete withdrawal of the US forces.³³ Moreover, it is also understood that Afghanistan has peculiarities that deeply connect its fate to Central and South Asia. One, for instance, is that its internal groups involved in terrorism and drug trafficking have trans-national connections to other groups in and around the region.³⁴ Within this context, it is acknowledged that the SCO can provide a regional framework to intensify cooperation amongst neighbouring states including India and Pakistan to cope with the negative consequences in the post-withdrawal scenario.³⁵ It is also the reason for the recent upgrade of SCO's mandate to make it more comprehensive and multi-dimensional.³⁶

Motivations for enlargement

Despite the growing relevance of the SCO in tackling the trans-nationally connected 'three evils', the organization maintained its original membership for a long time. Many countries, including India, Iran, and Pakistan, had expressed their desire to become full members, but there was little consensus among the member states with regard to its expansion. The organization was young and its membership mechanism was also not developed. The SCO lifted moratorium on membership in 2010 and opened doors for the admission of new members after approving regulations in the Council of Heads of States' meeting in Tashkent.³⁷ The consensus on the recent enlargement developed due to multiple factors.

The uncertain future of Afghanistan could be regarded as the single most important factor that led to the enlargement of SCO. There are many other aspects, however, which prompted the expansion of the organization towards South Asia. One major interest behind the expansion could be the strengthening

of SCO to deal with regional security challenges and to better utilize the interlinked regions for common economic development. With this realization, the SCO needed to bring such countries under its umbrella which would serve those interests.

The new threats of international terrorism with the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) could be considered another aspect that necessitated the SCO enlargement. ISIS got a lot of attention during the 15th summit of SCO aimed at saving the region from further menace of terrorism. The group has been declared more dangerous than Al-Qaeda by SCO officials. The links of ISIS in Afghanistan are identified as another major challenge to the peace and security of the entire SCO region. The solution to this problem is also connected to peace and stability in Afghanistan, and to developing rapid exchange of information between the competent authorities of the neighbouring states. Therefore, the SCO members want to expand cooperation to observer states to jointly coordinate in preventing the citizens of each state from taking part in radical movements in Syria and Iraq.³⁸

Apart from the new security threats and the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan, some analysts view the expansion as also motivated by Russia's pursuit of new friends and strategic partners following friction with the West over Ukraine. Russia's attempt to look towards East is aimed at decreasing its dependence on the West. Likewise, China's 'marching west' strategy is linked with the emerging Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) project. These are considered as crucial geopolitical and economic factors behind this decision.³⁹

Moreover, agreement on the enlargement was also reached because of Russia's flexibility towards the economic ambitions of China in the region. The diverging interests of China and Russia were the main obstacle in the development of crucial transport and infrastructure facilities for regional connectivity in Central Asia.⁴⁰ In the past, Russia had reservations over the ambitious infrastructure projects of China in Central Asia because of the fear that they could undermine its economic interests, which it advances through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Because of its changing approach towards regional infrastructural development, from which it also wants to benefit, Moscow now wants to facilitate economic integration with China through EAEU. In this regard, the SCO could become a platform for developing linkages between them through a consultative mechanism within the SCO framework.⁴¹ Russia has always been conscious about preserving its traditional power and standing in the region. Earlier it was believed that Russia would appear as a competitor if China would aspire for a dominant role in the regional and global politics. Accommodative approach on the part of China has helped in this regard though. It is trying to maintain a delicate balance to avoid undermining Moscow's political interests in Central Asia. Moreover, due to the growing mutual concerns about the security-related issues, both countries are trying to complement each other's national interests in the region. Both have already emerged as partners in bridging the security gaps in Central Asian region. Balancing their interests in economic sphere has now helped them agree on important matters in SCO, including the expansion of the organization.⁴²

The deepening ties between Russia and India over the decades and improvement in relations between Russia and Pakistan could also be considered reasons for SCO enlargement. Russia's support for inclusion of India was aimed at further strengthening its relations with the latter, because the SCO can provide another platform for the two countries to engage in mutually beneficial cooperation. India is looking to achieve more secure and diversified energy sources, and Russia is looking for new energy export markets beyond Europe. Russia's support for Indian entry into the SCO was also aimed at counterbalancing too much influence of China in the organization. By adding India, Russia was interested in taking the organization out of Central Asia and onto the world stage;⁴³ whereas China's support for the admission of Pakistan was crucial for Beijing's fight against religious extremism both within the country and the region, as well as because of Pakistan's geographical significance for regional connectivity.⁴⁴

Implications of the SCO enlargement

Uplifting international standing of SCO

The enlargement of SCO would substantially strengthen its global standing by giving it fresh impetus to develop further with its increasing geopolitical outreach. The new members would add weight to the prestige and international visibility of the organization. The SCO covers one quarter of the world's population with its six members and is considered one of the world's largest regional organizations in terms of population represented (21.8 per cent of the world's total population, and 19.6 per cent of the global land).⁴⁵ Its members and observers collectively possess 17.5 per cent of the world's proven oil reserves, almost 50 per cent of known natural gas reserves, and some 45 per cent of the world's population.⁴⁶ The combined geopolitical strength of the SCO was considered impressive even prior to the expansion with its geographic reach from the South and East China seas up to the Arctic and across to the Caspian Sea and Eastern Europe (see map below).⁴⁷ Now, with the inclusion of the two largest South Asian countries, its population, territory, and share of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) will increase further. It is considered a turning point in SCO's history of development. With the inclusion of Pakistan and India, it will become much bigger and will move beyond the Central Asian region.⁴⁸

Moreover, the newly enlarged SCO will seek to extend its interests to the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, and potentially to the Levant through Iran.⁴⁹

The addition of two new members will not only result in expanding the geographical reach of the organization, but also change its overall configuration and balance of power. More importantly, two founding members of SCO, Russia and China, are nuclear weapons states and permanent members of the UN Security Council. The organization will now have four nuclear weapons states with the inclusion of India and Pakistan that will attract general attention to it.



Source: www.globalresearch.ca

One school of thought believes that with the accession of India, which is considered the largest democracy, the existing perception that SCO belongs to the authoritarian states will be changed. But this expansion would also be perceived as the consolidation of the non-Western countries in support of a multi-polar world. From this perspective, the SCO would be considered a club of countries drawn together—despite their existing disagreements—on the basis of a shared interest in avoiding Western dominance.⁵⁰ With this belief, it is also speculated that further enlargement of this platform could even offer a Eurasian alternative to Western Europe. Some analysts maintain that if BRICS (group of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) is about to become an alternative to the Group of Seven and the Group of Twenty, the SCO could assume the role of a second, non-Western centre of gravity in Eurasia as a counter-weight to Western Europe.⁵¹ While BRICS is not a formal organization, the SCO has a well-constituted structure, which can play its role in this regard. Western analysts maintain that if the EAEU would come up with an economic alternative to the EU, the SCO could emerge as a political and ideological alternative. If it happens, the SCO would lay down the foundations of a multi-polar world as envisioned by Russia and China.⁵²

But these speculations are challenged by arguing that the alternatives offered by BRICS and SCO may not be confrontational because SCO upholds its special nature through promoting constructive cooperation in the region and internationally. It is expected that the organization would continue to add all the leading non-Western powers of Eurasia among its members. Many experts

believe that Chinese commitment towards non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries will continue making this attractive for non-Western, non-democratic countries. The inclusion of India and Pakistan, however, will help in neutralizing its image of promoting a non-Western global order because both India and Pakistan have post-colonial Western-inspired political systems.⁵³

Increasing economic strength of SCO

China and Russia are considered the strength of SCO, the former because of its economic significance, and the latter due to huge post-Soviet political and industrial legacy along with immense energy resources. Likewise, the Central Asian member states of the SCO like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan possess approximately 40 per cent of oil and natural gas resources of the world. In addition to this, the acceding members, India and Pakistan, will multiply its strength through economic, political, industrial, military, and many other opportunities. It will pave the way for increasing the volume of trade among the members and with other regions through expanded regional connectivity and infrastructural development.⁵⁴ The predictions about the enlargement in which India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan were all expected to join would have turned this group to control 20 per cent of the world's oil, half of all global gas reserves, and to represent about half of the world's population. This dream could be realized in the not so distant future. With the resolution of Iran's nuclear issue, its full membership in the organization is also expected in the upcoming summits.⁵⁵ If it happens, the combined economic power of the SCO will expand significantly, as the energy resources of Iran will add to the already substantial reserves in the SCO.⁵⁶

It is expected that the inclusion of India and Pakistan will give a boost to SCO's economic projects especially in Central Asia.⁵⁷ India is the world's ninth largest economy, while Pakistan sits on the crossroads of the SREB and the 21st century Maritime Silk Road (MSR). In this regard, SCO can play a more substantial economic role after enlargement.⁵⁸ Pakistan can become an energy and trade corridor for SCO countries with the development of Gwadar Port. Pakistan is already developing connectivity infrastructure with assistance from China.⁵⁹ Now through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, Kashgar (in northwest China's Xinjiang province) will be connected with Gwadar Port (south-west of Pakistan) through a 3,000 km network of roads, railway lines, and pipelines. It is a major project proposed by China under 'One Belt One Road' initiative that refers to SREB and MSR collectively. The projects were proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 for reviving the ancient trade routes that crisscrossed Asia, Africa, and Europe.⁶⁰ Pakistan can provide an opportunity to connect Central Asia with the Gwadar Port to supplement SCO's efforts for creating trans-continental overland connectivity. In this regard, Pakistan can become an important gateway to the Middle East for China and Central Asia with shortest land and sea routes. Through increasing regional connectivity and economic development, Pakistan will also be enabled to diversify its foreign policy and play a more effective role in the region and beyond.⁶¹

Historically, the Silk Road trade from China to India and Persia passed through parts of what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan. Reconnecting this region through economic integration can help in resolving conflicts peacefully as espoused by the SCO. It will also help in reviving and strengthening cooperation in energy trade via Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipelines as already under consideration. The inclusion of India and Pakistan will also help Russia expand its network to the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean through Central Asia and Pakistan. It is argued that this increasing connectivity will pave the way for economic integration in Eurasia by accelerating the trans-border economic cooperation.⁶²

The inclusion of India and Pakistan will also help in reconsidering the joint financial institution under SCO framework. China advocates for SCO's own development bank, because lack of joint development funds is viewed as a major obstacle in the way of committing it towards development projects in the SCO region. Moreover, Moscow's idea of an Energy Club could also be revisited along with the possibility of creating a free trade zone in the SCO region.⁶³

Impact on the relations between SCO members and the West

The strengthening of SCO is particularly observed with regard to its impact on the relationship between Russia and the West. Russia explicitly expressed its interest in looking towards East for economic partners during the 14th summit of SCO. The change in Russia's behaviour is watched through its growing bilateral economic cooperation with China as well in which a \$400 billion gas deal, agreed in May 2015, was prominent along with the increasing military-to-military cooperation. Russia's 'eastern pivot' gives the impression that it is not isolated as it was perceived in Europe and the US.⁶⁴ Russia's growing tilt towards the East could also be considered a response to the Eastward expansion of NATO and EU that created discontent in Moscow.⁶⁵ Despite denials of SCO member states, many analysts believe that it plays the role of a counter-weight to NATO, and have also termed it as NATO of the East based on their thinking that the organization would someday transform into a military alliance. Such speculations are mainly because of the increasing cohesion among the members pursuing a different international order and their large-scale joint counter-terrorism military exercises, which get a lot of attention in Western media.⁶⁶ Moreover, the fear that the increasing military strength of SCO would serve the interests of Moscow and Beijing may raise security concerns in the Euro-Atlantic region.⁶⁷

Against this backdrop, the Central Asian SCO members do not want to antagonize the West, despite growing doubts by Western analysts. The President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov, who has replaced the Russian president as one-year rotating chair in SCO for the 2016 summit, has shown his discomfort with the development of strong multinational institutions in the post-Soviet region. It shows that the CARs are not in favour of making SCO an anti-Western tool of Beijing and Moscow.⁶⁸ The CARs are aware of the strategic significance of

Central Asia but they are also concerned about the political fragmentation of the region because of growing competition among major powers in the resource-rich region.

The enlargement is perceived differently by Central Asian members of SCO. Central and South Asia are home to numerous interlinked extremist groups yet there was no regional organization with a geographical ambit that would have coped with transnational threats. Moreover, there was no organization that could politically coordinate the extensive ongoing and upcoming transnational infrastructure projects in the region. For CARs, expansion was motivated by two major interests: to cope with growing security needs, and realizing the regional economic potential. Taking this into account, in the short- to medium-term, SCO members would neither be willing nor able to launch a coordinated opposition to NATO or stand in the way of US interests. Moreover, it is expected that the new members already enjoying friendly relations with the West would not cause any major change in the political agenda of SCO, which is committed to fighting the common threats of separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism.⁶⁹

Challenges and opportunities in the context of India-Pakistan rivalry

It is expected that the enlargement will raise SCO's regional and international profile but it will also bring new challenges to the organization. The SCO expansion will inevitably lead to a new balance of power within the organization after the inclusion of India. As of now, the SCO is believed to be heavily dominated by Russia and China despite advocating for and backing the principles of equality.⁷⁰ The six founding members of SCO are considered highly unequal in terms of their resource capacities and international standing. The inclusion of India and Pakistan will give a fresh look to its overall configuration in terms of strength and capacity.⁷¹ Moreover, Pakistan is affiliated with China, while India is mostly understood as a close ally of Russia. These specific affiliations would have its own dynamics in the SCO and would reflect in its future policies due to unfriendly relations between the two neighbours.⁷²

India and Pakistan have unstable and conflicting relations since independence. Apart from other issues, the dispute over Kashmir is the major cause of turbulence in their relations. Both have fought major wars and continue to face problems like cross-border terrorist activities, infiltrations, cross-border firing, and persisting mistrust.⁷³ The Line of Control is a de-facto border between the two countries dividing the disputed territory of Kashmir into Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and the Indian-held Kashmir (IHK). Against this backdrop, the criteria for SCO membership underline that the members should not have any major inter-state conflict. In order to complete the statutory and legal obligations to become full members, India and Pakistan would need to improve relations, especially related to maintenance of border stability. Border stability between the two states is also important to conform to the origin of

cooperation among SCO members that commenced with demilitarization of borders.

Apart from interstate conflict between India and Pakistan, Indian experts are also sceptical about collaboration between the two countries under SCO framework against the alleged terrorist groups involved in acts of terrorism in India.⁷⁴ Cooperation under SCO framework obliges the member states to terminate on their territories all attempts to prepare and carry out acts of terrorism, including those directed against the interests of other states, and to hand over such persons if asked by another state of the SCO in strict accordance with the laws of the member states.⁷⁵ It would be a challenge to the organization, however, to bring India and Pakistan on the same page against the common concerns of terrorism if differences continue to prevail between them.

It means that if the differences between India and Pakistan are brought to the forum, it would make it less effective like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). It is widely believed that if both countries do not improve their mutual relationship even under the SCO, there is a high possibility for the organization to suffer from Indian-Pakistani contradictions and conflicts because of its consensus-based decision-making process. According to Hu Shisheng, Director at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations and South Asia expert, "They cannot bring bilateral differences (to SCO). Otherwise, the group will become dysfunctional. The focus should [be on] adding value to the forum. Not the other way around. That is the genuine hope of the old members."⁷⁶ Keeping in view the SCO's limited scope in terms of resolving inter-state conflicts between the member states, tensions between India and Pakistan would drag the organization into a new scenario.

Notwithstanding the challenges both countries would pose to the organization, India and Pakistan would have little to lose and more to gain from the membership. The SCO would provide an opportunity to India and Pakistan to bridge their differences in the required areas for full membership. They can also harmonize their interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia under SCO framework. As noted by Ishiaq Ahmad, the SCO has helped in harmonizing political ties among its members, particularly between the two dominant ones: Russia and China.⁷⁷ The SCO provides a platform to the leaders of the member states to interact regularly to try to build consensus, reduce conflict of interests, and realize mutual advantages of increased cooperation. China and Russia had serious issues of mutual conflict during the Cold War period, now they are partners after resolving border issues through a comprehensive agreement in 2004. The SCO has played a vital role in increasing trade relations between them.⁷⁸ China has become Russia's largest trading partner with bilateral trade reaching \$95.3 billion in 2014.⁷⁹ While looking at Indo-Pak interstate conflict, many analysts believe that the SCO would serve as a neutral platform for Islamabad and New Delhi to discuss their border disputes and other issues of mutual interest. Being members of the SCO, India and Pakistan would have the opportunity to interact in another forum after SAARC and, through reviewing the potential opportunities of economic cooperation, both countries can achieve

the shared objectives of peace, prosperity, and development in the region. It is also hoped that SCO might be able to play a facilitating role in dealing with the Kashmir dispute. Although the SCO cannot get directly involved in the inter-state conflicts of member states because its mandate does not cover the resolution of conflicts between the member states, the SCO's insistence on promoting good neighbourly relations would oblige them to improve their relations.

The analysts believing in the vision that economic connectivity can play a more positive and stabilizing role in the Eurasian region give optimistic views on the inclusion of India and Pakistan.⁸⁰ It is argued that increased economic cooperation under the SCO forum can help in creating a more collaborative environment in the region. India and Pakistan would have the opportunity to benefit from the economic potential generated by China's 'march west' policy and closer ties to energy-rich Central Asia.⁸¹ It can also result in the removal of India's perception about China's encirclement policy.

Similarly, the entry of India and Pakistan into the SCO could be viewed as a positive step for the two countries to improve their domestic security situations challenged by terrorism, separatism, and extremism. In this connection, Pakistan can leverage support from the SCO to counter extremism and terrorism. Over the past decade, the SCO has been making combined efforts to combat mounting security threats in the region through creation of trans-national anti-terror agencies and staging of joint multinational military exercises. The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) would be extended to India and Pakistan through coordinated activities such as information sharing, staging anti-terror exercises, and confidence building against the 'three evils' under SCO framework. It would thus provide them a broader platform for security cooperation in Eurasia.⁸²

Impact on stability in Afghanistan

As a regional security organization, security issues are at the top of the SCO agenda since its formation. In recent summits, the main focus of the organization remained on counter-terrorism and Afghanistan's stability. It could be the reason that a major step was taken for expanding its regional clout by accepting two new members. There would be three major challenges with regard to the role of expanded SCO in Afghanistan's stability: the resurgence of local international terrorist groups in Afghanistan after the complete withdrawal of US forces, intensification in cross-border smuggling, and the conflicting interests of India and Pakistan in Afghanistan.

Due to close geographical proximity, the drawdown of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan has greater political, strategic, and security implications for Pakistan than any other country of the region. The 2,200 km border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, called Durand Line, is a source of tensions between the two countries because of cross-border infiltration of militants, and smuggling. Control over this border is weak, and most parts of it remain porous. Both sides of the border have become sanctuaries for foreign and local militant groups. Most parts of Pakistan's Federally

Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the semi-autonomous border region with mountainous terrain, fell under control of militants after they took refuge there following the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. It became a hub of terrorists also with the emergence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in 2007. The presence of safe havens on both sides of the border is exploited by terrorists to plot attacks in both countries.⁸³ Therefore, Pakistan—as a front-line state in the global war on terror and a country that faces direct repercussions of conflict in Afghanistan—would be at the forefront of any regional cooperation mechanism to stabilize Afghanistan.⁸⁴

Against this backdrop, Pakistan does not enjoy friendly relations with Afghanistan, despite historical, religious, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic linkages between the two countries. The strained relations revolve around multiple complex problems.⁸⁵ For instance, in spite of sharing the common problem of terrorism on both sides of the border, Pakistan and Afghanistan are haunted by persisting mistrust; notwithstanding the fact that trans-national connections of terrorism in Pakistan and Afghanistan require mutual consultations and coordinated efforts. The unstable political and security situation in Afghanistan also makes individual state efforts less effective on the part of Pakistan. In this scenario, the SCO framework would help Pakistan to enhance anti-terror cooperation with Afghanistan. In order to save the region from the negative consequences of the drawdown of ISAF, Pakistan would get support from SCO to cope with fresh resurgence of militant groups in the border region with Afghanistan. It is already understood that if stability of Afghanistan is compromised, there are ample reasons to believe that eastern and southern Afghanistan, which borders Pakistan, will become the hub of militancy. In such a scenario, terrorism will hit both Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as regional and international states.⁸⁶

Taliban have already started gaining control in the southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan. Reports show that after the drawdown in the number of US and NATO forces, the Taliban are gaining ground once again. Moreover, news reports indicate that ISIS has also steadily expanded its presence in Afghanistan.⁸⁷ Most of the Central Asian experts consider Taliban as a local movement that would not be interested in going beyond the borders of Afghanistan. But the presence of other affiliated terrorist groups in Afghanistan like Al-Qaeda, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and ISIS can pose a threat to the security of the entire region.⁸⁸ Political instability, in the wake of increasing Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, can give rise to the presence of other trans-national terrorist groups. Besides that, Afghanistan produces around 90 tonnes of heroin every year which is transported through Central Asia, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).⁸⁹ Analysts argue that there is a high potential of upsurge in drug trade in case of the outbreak of a civil war in Afghanistan.⁹⁰ In this connection, the countries bordering Afghanistan would need to intensify efforts under SCO framework to settle issues related to border management including border surveillance, information sharing, and also security arrangements to control the infiltration of militants, and cross-border smuggling of arms and drugs.

Contrary to the unstable relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, India's involvement in Afghanistan has been steadily growing in the post-Taliban era. Afghanistan is of immense importance for India from economic, political, and strategic point of view. India is hugely involved in construction and infrastructure development apart from its assistance in training the Afghan security forces. India has given nearly \$300 million in aid to Afghanistan over the past four years, after signing a Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2011. India has funded construction of dams and roads, and is currently investing on south-western Afghanistan to connect it with Chabahar Port in Iran. It would allow the landlocked Central Asian countries that border Afghanistan access to the Chabahar Port. Afghanistan is also crucial to India's energy security, as a pipeline from Turkmenistan to India, the TAPI project, will pass through Afghanistan and Pakistan. Afghanistan could offer huge investment opportunities for Indian companies in several sectors as the country is home to resource deposits worth one trillion dollars, according to the US Geological Survey.⁹¹ Indian companies are already involved in mining in Afghanistan.⁹²

Being the fifth-largest bilateral donor to Afghanistan with over \$2 billion in a pledge to support Afghanistan's stability,⁹³ India aspires for a greater role in the country. India is not just interested in stability; its inroads into Afghanistan are also aimed at countering Pakistan's influence. Indian actions indicate that it has growing tendency to project itself as a regional power beyond the confines of South Asia. From economic perspective, India needs stable and long-term relations with Afghanistan and CARs to secure economic, trade, and security interests in the region. Peace and stability in Afghanistan is also vital for India's safe access to natural and mineral resources found in abundance in CARs and Afghanistan to meet the growing demands of its industry and energy security.⁹⁴ The reason for India's efforts to dilute Pakistan's role in Afghanistan is its persistent security concerns with respect to Afghanistan and Pakistan. India believes that most of the militant groups that are allegedly involved in terrorism in India since the early 1990s—like Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HuJI), Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)—have linkages with Afghan Taliban.

On the other hand, the increasing engagement of India with Afghanistan through help in its economic development in the wake of the departure of ISAF from Afghanistan is seen with great suspicion by Pakistan. Pakistan has increasing concerns over the growing role of the Indian consulates in Jalalabad, Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Herat in destabilizing Pakistan, especially in fuelling violence in its south-western Balochistan province. Pakistan's reservations are based on the apparent support of the Indian intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), for insurgency in Balochistan and FATA.⁹⁵ India, however, defends its continuous role in Afghanistan under the pretext of Indian expertise in democracy, economics, and civilian security. Indians argue that Pakistan should not object to an enhanced role of India without Indian troops on Afghan soil.

The clash of interests and mistrust between India and Pakistan can hinder SCO's efforts to bring stability in Afghanistan in the post-withdrawal

scenario. Afghanistan's future hinges on the convergence of interests between international and regional players, particularly the US, China, India, Iran, and Pakistan. It appears that the US will continue supporting Afghanistan, and the current security situation will determine the potential presence of the US forces in Afghanistan. But analysts maintain that for any realistic and sustainable solution for Afghanistan, there has to be a level of agreement among the key regional players. A peaceful and stable Afghanistan could offer considerable advantages to all regional players, particularly India and Pakistan.⁹⁶

Moreover, stability in Afghanistan is in the interest of all stakeholders including CARs, especially Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Both countries have strategic interests in developing alternative routes via Afghanistan to South Asia to help decrease their dependence on northern neighbours, Kazakhstan and Russia. Successful completion of most of the projects already in the pipeline like Central Asia and South Asia (CASA) power transmission project and TAPI depends on the security and stability of Afghanistan.⁹⁷

The SCO had little involvement in Afghanistan in the past. The major motivation comes from China among all SCO members, presumably due to China's eagerness to see regional players, led by the SCO, handle regional security issues; eliminating the need for extra-regional actors. Chinese leadership has expressed its desire that SCO members "should take it as [their] own responsibility to safeguard regional security and stability, enhance [their] ability to maintain stability, continue to boost cooperation on law enforcement and security, and improve the existing cooperation mechanisms."⁹⁸ China as an influential member of SCO is also determined to play a greater role in stabilizing Afghanistan to protect its investments. Currently, China is the largest SCO investor in Afghanistan, with projects such as the \$3 billion contract to develop the Aynak copper mine.⁹⁹ China is also playing an active role in the efforts to bring stability to Afghanistan through seeking political solution to the problem. In this quest China participated in the first-ever declared direct contact between the Taliban and Afghan government held in Murree, Pakistan, in July 2015.¹⁰⁰ The dialogue was facilitated by Pakistan and backed by two global powers, China and the US. The peace process, however, is disrupted for now due to the increasing fragmentation of the Afghan Taliban after the disclosure about the death of Mullah Omar. Apart from the unilateral and bilateral efforts for bringing stability in Afghanistan, the results of the cooperation are yet to be realized in an expanded SCO.

The lack of involvement of SCO members in Afghanistan is also because of the inability of the organization to finance economic projects and the lack of the political will among SCO members to seriously engage in Afghan affairs. The post-withdrawal scenario and enlargement will motivate the SCO to revisit its institutional capacity for bringing stability in the region by giving more attention to Afghanistan. Otherwise, it could be argued that the SCO's role would remain defensive with no long-term solution to the Afghan problem.¹⁰¹ Although SCO cannot get militarily involved inside Afghanistan due to its commitment to non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, the organization has the capacity to accelerate efforts to prevent terrorist infiltration

from Afghanistan into SCO members and also play a facilitating role in the political stability of the country.¹⁰²

Impact on the effectiveness of the organization

Apart from the political, economic, and security implications of enlargement of SCO, its administrative effectiveness in the post-enlargement setup is also extensively debated. Opponents of the SCO's enlargement argue that more members in the organization will make it more difficult to run, and thus the administrative apparatus will become less efficient.¹⁰³ These arguments refer to South Asia and Central Asia as two different regions with strong contradictions and complex problems.¹⁰⁴ The leaders of Central Asian countries have also expressed their reservations with regard to the new power balance in the organization. Islam Karimov, the President of Uzbekistan, expressed his fears that if India and Pakistan would become full members along with Russia and China, the influence of other smaller members would substantially diminish.¹⁰⁵ While showing his concerns, President Karimov said that the addition of India and Pakistan would add two more nuclear weapon states to the organization.¹⁰⁶ Since four of the six founding members of the SCO were part of the recognized nuclear weapon-free zone, the addition of India and Pakistan—both non-signatories of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT)—could affect the organization's commitment towards nuclear non-proliferation.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, it is also feared that India and Pakistan as big countries have the potential to divert the group's focus to South Asia while overshadowing the importance of Central Asian states.¹⁰⁸ Already considered as less cohesive, the inclusion of India and Pakistan could affect the decision-making of the organization due to its consensus-based decision-making mechanism.

The views regarding the negative impact of enlargement are contested though. It is argued that the SCO's administrative apparatus has not been very efficient from the very beginning and it is hoped that its enlargement can provide an impetus to its reforms. The organization has already improved with the consensus on membership criteria and the increasing balance of interests between Russia and China. It is believed that the admission of other countries would instigate some changes in the SCO's conduct, and a fresh look at the SCO's standing bodies.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

Apart from the diverging opinions on the pros and cons of SCO enlargement, it is likely to have more positive than negative implications. First of all, the expansion shows the inclusiveness of the SCO. According to Sergey Luzyanin, Deputy Director of the Far East Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, it proves that the organization is increasingly strengthening its abilities in new fields and towards new directions.¹¹⁰

Because of SCO's rhetoric in favour of a multi-polar world, the recent enlargement will get more attention at global level. The SCO's charter—that emphasizes mutual respect, equality, and non-interference—is at the centre of its

distinct outlook in the world, but it also brings this organization under strong criticism from its western counterparts. The principles of equality and non-interference which are presented loudly in this organization are widely taken as against the Western-dominated world order which focuses more on promoting democracy and human rights. They are also considered responsible for the ineffectiveness of organization. But the inclusion of India and Pakistan would not necessarily be taken as anti-West, because politically and intellectually India is more inclined towards the West.¹¹¹ The SCO's expected role in the stability of Afghanistan is also seen positively in the West. A stronger SCO would be in a position to play a more effective role in the stability of Afghanistan. Since stability in Afghanistan is crucial for all stakeholders, the SCO would prove to be a strategic partner of the West in the wake of the withdrawal of ISAF from Afghanistan.¹¹²

The organization's overall performance is not viewed positively by most of the experts. However, the trans-national character of common threats exacerbated by the Afghanistan situation continues to make this organization relevant in regional stability. Security issues—including terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism—will remain the primary focus of SCO, but economic cooperation will get more prominence in the years to come. The organization has not achieved much in economic field due to the diverging interests of its two large members, Russia and China. The recently growing understanding between the two could, however, give impetus to economic cooperation and further expansion of the organization. The growing realization of the shared benefits of regional connectivity through increased economic cooperation would also help ensure stability in the region.

Due to India-Pakistan rivalry and the clash of interests between major stakeholders in Central Asia and Afghanistan, the enlargement is critically analyzed. It involves both positive and negative outcomes. It is argued that the SCO's original mission to combat the common threats of terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism within the region would be strengthened further with this expansion because Pakistan is at the front-line of all the battles against these challenges. In this connection, Pakistan and other SCO members can share experiences and stage joint military exercises aimed at counter-terrorism.¹¹³ Conversely, the diverging policies and lack of cooperation on the issue of terrorism in the context of mistrust between India and Pakistan can pose a threat to the cohesion of the organization. This problem would emanate from the inter-state conflict between India and Pakistan. Therefore, contrary to the SCO's limited mandate, China and Russia would need to play their role at bilateral level to improve relations between the two countries for the sake of an integrated approach against terrorism, extremism, and separatism. In order to make the organization more effective, the SCO members will also need to upgrade the SCO mandate for resolving inter-state conflicts between member states. It would be crucial for SCO to influence the peace process between India and Pakistan to avoid any negative impact on the performance of the organization. Pakistan and India would also need to uphold the 'Shanghai Spirit' of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for cultural

diversity, and pursuit of common development, as called upon by Chinese President Xi Jinping after announcement of the expansion.¹¹⁴

To sum up, the SCO is at a crossroads. Overall, with its expansion programme, the SCO is now set to become an Asia-focused organization with sufficient space to consolidate and improve its performance in areas of non-traditional security including climate change adaptation, disaster management, and disease mitigation in Asia. In the long term, it could be expected that the organization can develop further even to set up an Asian Parliament and a conflict resolution mechanism.¹¹⁵

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MULTIPLE FACTORS BEHIND EXTREMISM AND MILITANCY: A CASE STUDY OF SWAT, PAKISTAN

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Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to investigate the primary factors responsible for the rise of religious militancy through a case study of Swat, one of the seven districts of the Malakand Division in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province of Pakistan. The paper challenges the assumption that poverty or underdevelopment is the main cause of extremism and militancy. Although this study concurs that extreme poverty, underdevelopment, or unavailability of basic amenities of life can play a stimulating or catalytic role in the escalation of insurgency; it is aided by several diverse dynamics that together can aggravate situations beyond control. It presents the case of Swat region as a typical example in this context.

Key dynamics behind the rise of unprecedented insurgency during the year 2009 in Swat Valley are investigated here. To this end, primary and secondary data was collected during the fieldwork in a series of interviews with informed stakeholders in the case study area. The paper argues on the basis of the collected evidence that the crisis of militancy was not the product of a single factor as is commonly pointed out. The analysis shows that various ideological, political, constitutional, judicial, and administrative factors paved the way for the intensification of religious extremism and militancy in the Swat Valley. Among the ideological factors, the first Afghan War as well as the on-going 'war on terror' greatly fuelled militancy in the region. Concerning political, judicial, and administrative factors, the incomplete merger of the former princely state of Swat with Pakistan and lack of good governance and judicial reforms over a long

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period of time also increased frustration among the local population which was tactfully exploited by militants and their sympathisers. While the government was inefficient and ineffective to act on time and curb militancy; militants continued to bring untold miseries for the local population by targeting government installations and private property, and destroying hundreds of educational and health facilities. The study argues that after the decisive operation by the military to purge the area of religious militants in 2009, there is now a need to accelerate efforts for restoration of long-term peace and stability in the region. While the study focuses on Swat district in Pakistan, this research has broader implications in relevant settings of weak governance and fragile situations where central governments are unable to establish their writ and authority and address the grievances of local population.

The paper first gives a general overview of the area by focusing on its history, geographic significance, and socio-economic and demographic profile. After giving an account of Swat district, the paper examines key factors that led to the rise of religious extremism in this once very peaceful region. Following this, the study gives an account of the repercussions of militants' insurgency for the residents of the region.

Swat: A brief historical overview

Swat has a distinct identity because of its rich history. It has retained eminence "as a centre of cultural diffusion and a cradle of civilization and witnessed encounters of formidable armies and civilizations."³¹⁹ The archaeological history is roughly traced back to 2,500 years when Swat was known as 'Udyana'.³²⁰ In the second century BC, Swat became one of the significant components of Gandhara civilization. When Fa-Hsien, a renowned Chinese pilgrim, visited Swat in 403 AD, there were more than 500 monasteries across the region.³²¹ Hence, the inhabitants of ancient Swat were the followers of Buddhism for several centuries.

Islam as a religion was introduced in this area in the 9th century. However, Swat came under the Muslim rule during the reign of Mahmood Ghaznavi when he conquered the region in 1001 AD. The arrival of Yusufzai Afghans, a prominent tribe of Pashtuns, in the 16th century marked a turning point in the history of Swat. By the end of the century, the Yusufzais had gained control of Lower Swat thus pushing the original Swatis to Kohistan and Hazara districts.³²² With the passage of time, they extended their control to the entire Swat region including Buner and parts of Dir. Although different Mughal emperors from Babur to Aurangzeb made attempts to conquer Swat and subdue the Yusufzais, they could not succeed in their endeavours and "failed to incorporate Swat in their domain."³²³

After the end of the Mughal rule in India, Swat as a princely state under the British had an interesting history. It was founded as a princely state in 1915 when a "Jirga of a section of the right bank Swat valley"³²⁴ got rid of the rule of the Nawab of Dir and established the youngest of all the princely states of the British India. Swat was one of the three princely states of the Malakand Division along with Dir and Chitral. It was a prosperous and peaceful state in the

Malakand region because there existed reasonably developed infrastructure and basic facilities such as “schools, hospitals, roads, and communication systems.”³²⁵ Similarly, during its existence as a princely state, “there was generally peace and order” throughout the valley.³²⁶ Referring to the reign of the last Wali of Swat, Miangul Jahanzeb (1949-1969), Fleischner asserts, “[Jahanzeb] sought to build on his father’s achievements by providing improved access to higher education, hospital facilities, and modern roads in order to promote economic and social development.”³²⁷ Besides physical infrastructure, Swat as a state (until 1969) had an impressive system of justice that was less expensive, expedient, and accessible to all.³²⁸

Besides, the princely state of Swat had established a remarkable system of administration. The authority was centralized in the hands of the ruler called Wali. From 1915 to 1969 a total of three Walis ruled over Swat. These included Abdul Jabbar Shah (1915-17), Mian Gul Abdul Wadud (1917-49) and Mian Gul Jahanzeb (1949-69), who was the last Wali of the Swat State. While there is no proper record of the rule of the first Wali (Abdul Jabbar), the reign of the subsequent two rulers—Mian Gul Abdul Wadud and his son Mian Gul Jahanzeb—witnessed an organized administrative system. Before the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the Swat state was dependent for currency, foreign affairs, and telegraph and postal services on the British government.³²⁹ After the independence of Pakistan in 1947, the state became dependent on the government of Pakistan concerning the above issues, while remaining autonomous regarding the internal administration of the state. The rulers had centralized powers and primogeniture was the principle of succession. The important ministers were the Minister of State, Minister of Finance, and the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. There was a proper system of taxation, an organized police force, administrative hierarchy, and an efficient judicial system in which all kinds of disputes would be resolved in a speedy manner without any court charges or lawyers’ fees to be paid by petitioners.³³⁰

In 1969, the Swat state merged with Pakistan. Like several other states in different parts of the country that had amalgamated into Pakistan, Swat was converted into a district. Swat was one of the three princely states of the Malakand Division, besides Dir and Chitral. Hence, in the case of these three former princely states, special status was retained under Article 246(b) of the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan through designation of these three districts as Provincially Administered Tribal Areas (PATA).³³¹ On account of special status under the constitution, these districts—unlike other districts of the country—are governed by a different set of rules and regulations which are promulgated by the governor of KP with the approval of the president of Pakistan.³³² Hence, under the PATA regulations, “the provincial assembly cannot legislate for Swat unless the President approves a legislation to be implemented there.”³³³ This issue is later discussed in the context of incomplete merger of the former princely state which resulted in numerous administrative problems eventually contributing to the upsurge of extremism and militancy in the area.

Geographical significance and socio-economic and demographic profile of Swat

Rome has appropriately summed up the geographical significance of Swat Valley by stating that Swat “is situated in a geo-strategic region of the world where the significant regions of Asia—South Asia, China and Central Asia meet.”³³⁴ It means that the Swat Valley has an immense geo-strategic significance on account of its geographic location. Similarly, according to Rehman, “the strategically located Swat Valley in Pakistan’s far North West is surrounded by Chitral, Gilgit, Kohistan, Shangla, Buner, Malakand and Lower and Upper Dir.”³³⁵ Thus, another reason for the geographical significance of this area is that its boundaries are directly linked with all the other districts of Malakand Division. Thus, Swat district enjoys a significant strategic value as it forms the core of the Malakand Division. The district headquarters of Swat is Saidu Sharif while the main town in the district is Mingora which is the only urban settlement in the district and the main centre of trade, commerce, education, health, and public administration. It is also a kind of a transit city for businessmen, traders, and tourists who go up the valley to other towns and villages. The city is situated at a distance of about 169 km from Peshawar, the provincial capital of KP, and is located at a distance of about 253 km from the federal capital Islamabad.³³⁶

The total population of the district was about 1.8 million in 2009.³³⁷ The district has a total area of about 5,337 square kilometres. According to the 1998 census, the last the country had, Swat’s literacy ratio was 28.75 per cent—43.16 per cent for males and 13.45 per cent for females.³³⁸ In 2009, the overall literacy rate was estimated to be 47 per cent in the district—68 per cent for males and 24 per cent for females.³³⁹ However, officials in the district education department claim that current literacy rate is about 67 per cent.³⁴⁰

Factors responsible for the rise of militancy in Swat

This paper argues that the rise of militancy in the Swat Valley was the product of various factors, events, and processes. It posits that it will be naïve to attribute the escalation of religious insurgency in this once peaceful region to just one cause or factor. Issues such as underdevelopment or sense of deprivation coupled with lack of good governance and administrative reforms as well as ideological and political factors played due role in the exacerbation of situation. All these factors are discussed in some detail in the following sections.

The nexus between poverty and militancy

Alongside various other factors, research has shown that underdevelopment or widespread poverty is one of the most potent causes of extremism or violence.³⁴¹ However, as stated above, poverty was not the sole reason behind militancy in the context of Swat as there were administrative and judicial anomalies as well. Nevertheless, coupled with these factors, extreme poverty and sense of deprivation can also be critical in the rise of militancy. For example, focusing specifically on Swat, Peracha et al. have explored the socio-

economic backgrounds of 135 male children exposed to militancy, who were being treated in a rehabilitation centre.³⁴² They discovered that 52 per cent of them came from a very low socio-economic class. Their findings illustrate that “poverty, poor quality of life, large family size, illiteracy, and lack of supervision can serve as potential demographic risk factors in making children vulnerable to militancy.”³⁴³ Hence, additional factors such as those prevalent in Swat, i.e., administrative and judicial problems, extreme poverty, and underdevelopment can exacerbate the situation to a point of no return.

However, as stated above, there is no doubt that underdevelopment or poverty can play a critical role in the rise of militancy, particularly when other factors also exist such as lack of good governance, lack of access to cheaper and speedy justice, and political alienation etc. This paper argues that underdevelopment, poverty, or the inability of the government to provide basic amenities of life to its citizens is not wholly and solely the cause of extremism or militancy. In their unorthodox research on the relationship between poverty and extremism in Pakistan, Blair et al. have challenged the conventional assumption that poor people are more susceptible to the appeal of militant groups.³⁴⁴ According to these authors, as far as the nexus between poverty and extremism is concerned, “there is little evidence to support this contention...particularly in the case of Islamist militant organizations in Pakistan.”³⁴⁵ The spread of militancy in Swat has origins in the overall increase in militant movements across Pakistan. Hence, it is difficult to separate the rise of militancy in Swat from what was already happening in other parts of the country, particularly in KP and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). If Swat was alien to religious extremism before its amalgamation with Pakistan in 1969, so was the case with the rest of the country. Hence, there are other factors that need to be investigated and this study is an attempt to explore those factors.

Impacts of Iranian Revolution and First Afghan War on the rise of extremism in Pakistan

According to eminent historian and South Asia specialist, Ayesha Jalal, “for all the lip service paid to Islam, Pakistan remained a relatively liberal and moderate Muslim state until the 1970s.”³⁴⁶ Therefore, as mentioned earlier, like in the case of Swat, the radicalization of the Pakistani nation and society is not a very old phenomenon. Two events played a significant role in the spread of militant ideologies and have had detrimental impacts on the state and society of Pakistan. To quote Jalal again, “the critical change in the role of religion in Pakistan came in the wake of the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.”³⁴⁷ Thus, these two events have had enormous impacts on the way religion occupied a more central role in the affairs of the state.

Among these two critical events, the coming of the Cold War to the backyard of Pakistan in the form of the First Afghan War (1979-1988) was a watershed episode. Domestically, the Islamization drive of former president of Pakistan General Zia-ul-Haq was also a significant factor that helped in the rise of strict Sunni form of Islam. The result was the appearance of an unprecedented number of religious seminaries or madrassas, not only to impart teachings of

Islam free of cost but also to create “the Mujahideen to fight back the 140,000 Soviet ‘infidel’ troops who by then had occupied Afghanistan.”³⁴⁸ The ultimate outcome was the spread of intolerance over religious and sectarian issues and extremist interpretation of the teachings of Islam. Coupled with General Zia’s (1977-88) strict Islamization drive to prolong his own dictatorial regime, the number of madrassas increased with unprecedented pace during this period aided by ample funding from certain Arab monarchs. At the time of Pakistan’s creation, the country had a few hundred religious seminaries but in the 1990s the total number had crossed 8,000.³⁴⁹ According to Rashid, “in 1971 there were only 900 madrassas, but by the end of the Zia era in 1988 there were 8,000 [registered] madrassas and 25,000 unregistered ones, educating over half a million students.”³⁵⁰ It is believed that in 2001-02, there were nearly 60 religious political parties and over 20 well-armed militant groups, largely known as ‘jihadi’ groups having connections with different madrassas across the country.³⁵¹ Thus, Murphy has appropriately stated that prior to this particular period, Pakistan was not “receptive to extremism and violence perpetuated in the name of Islam.”³⁵² However, the scenario was markedly different after the culmination of the war in neighbouring Afghanistan that left Pakistan faced with “the proliferation of weapons, drugs, terrorism, sectarianism and the black economy.”³⁵³ Hence, it can be assumed that the climax of the Cold War in the form of the Afghan War, which was staged in the backyard of Pakistan, transformed Pakistan from a relatively liberal and tolerant society to a somewhat fundamentalist society. Therefore, it is difficult to isolate the rise of militancy and religious extremism in Swat from its overall development in the rest of Pakistan.

The ‘war on terror’ and its impact on the rise of militancy

Like the jihad of the 1980s against the Soviets, the ongoing turmoil in neighbouring Afghanistan has negative spill-over effects for Pakistan. Following the US-led ‘war on terror’ as a consequence of the events of 9/11, the Taliban regime was toppled in Afghanistan in late 2001. After the fall of their regime, Taliban exploited the extremely inhospitable terrain and semi-autonomous nature of the border areas, and also made good use of their old contacts with the tribal people that had been established during the Afghan jihad. As a result, many of their leaders as well as Al-Qaeda operatives escaped from Afghanistan and sought shelter in Pakistan’s tribal belt along the border with Afghanistan. After regrouping inside Pakistani territory, Taliban started attacks against the US and their allied forces in Afghanistan. With the escalating severity of such attacks inside Afghanistan, Pakistan—and particularly its tribal areas—increasingly came to be known as ‘safe havens of Al-Qaeda’. Consequently, the administration of former US President George Bush exerted significant pressure on General Musharraf, the then President of Pakistan, to take action against Taliban and Al-Qaeda and destroy their sanctuaries in tribal areas of Pakistan. Seeing himself caught between the devil and the deep sea, Musharraf had no other option. Hence, as Hussain asserts, it was an unprecedented move by the government of Pakistan to mobilize troops in this inhospitable and hitherto alien region.³⁵⁴ As a result, the government deployed a military of over 100,000 men along the 2,500 km

long Pak-Afghan border to subdue Al-Qaeda and Taliban-linked militants. Nevertheless, the presence of the US and ISAF troops in Afghanistan, perceived by the Taliban and their sympathizers “as part of a global offensive against Islam led by the US,”³⁵⁵ and the deaths of countless innocent civilians in the ongoing Afghan insurgency considerably aided the rise of militancy in Pakistan. Hence, rather than eradicating militancy, the influence of the Taliban and their extremist ideologies mainstreamed from FATA to various districts of KP, including Swat. In the tribal areas alone, hundreds of pro-government tribal leaders were targeted and killed by the Taliban.³⁵⁶ With the passage of time, militant organizations started to unite against the state of Pakistan which according to them was a stooge of Washington. Consequently, on 14 December 2007 some forty militant leaders commanding around 40,000 fighters gathered in South Waziristan to form a unified front under the banner of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), announcing Baitullah Mehsud as their leader.³⁵⁷ Among notable Taliban leaders were Hafiz Gul Bahadur from North Waziristan Agency, Mullah Nazir from South Waziristan Agency, Faqir Muhammad from Bajaur, and Maulvi Fazlullah from Swat. Therefore, in Swat as well as in the rest of Pakistan, along with underdevelopment, illiteracy, unemployment, and ineffective governance; the rise of current militancy can be attributed to the Afghan War of the 1980s, coupled with General Zia’s Islamization programme in that period as well as the ongoing Afghan conflict across the border. All these factors have helped in preparing the ground for Pakistan’s home-grown extremists, ultimately resulting in the formation of the TTP against the Pakistani state.

Incomplete merger with Pakistan: An administrative and political anomaly

Although all the above factors contributed to the rise of militancy in Swat in one way or the other, there is another major cause of religious extremism and insurgency peculiar to Swat, i.e., its incomplete merger with Pakistan. According to Aziz, “the main cause of the problem of Swat lies in its incomplete merger and integration into Pakistan after the state was merged in 1969.”³⁵⁸ The author further states that although the state was officially merged with Pakistan, “there was no plan how it was to be transformed from a princely state where all the power was vested in a ruler to a district working under normal laws.”³⁵⁹ Hence, after the promulgation of PATA regulations, neither the people of Swat nor their representatives in the provincial legislative assembly had a role in formulating and implementing policies. In the words of Aziz:

“Only the President is authorized to approve the passage of legislation in the form of a regulation for Swat... Thus, even after 40 years after the merger of Swat into KP, it is still ‘Viceroy’s territory’ and continues to be a special area. The full writ of the superior courts does not prevail and fundamental rights are not available. In other words, the region is kept as a *marginalized* part of Pakistan.”³⁶⁰

Consequently, incomplete merger and discriminatory regulations over a long period of time resulted in “poor governance, weak dispensation of justice

and lack of reform to mainstream Swat into KP [that] helped militancy.”³⁶¹ Thus, if the local population in Swat initially welcomed the Taliban, it was because of the less expensive, speedy, and uncomplicated procedure of justice provided by the Taliban.³⁶² The judicial system established by Maulvi Fazlullah resolved numerous cases that were pending in the local courts for many years. It is interesting to note that most of the cases pertained to land disputes. According to Rome, Taliban in Swat “decided cases and disputes quickly without bearing any costs by the parties; solved some age-old disputes and issues; tried to effect conciliation among enemies; and stressed upon women’s right to inheritance.”³⁶³ Rome told the author during an interview that due to ineffective and weak governance resulting in poor delivery of services, the Taliban filled the vacuum left by local administration.

There is no doubt that like the rest of Pakistan, Swat was alien to extremism before its merger with Pakistan in 1969. Hence, it is argued that the merger of Swat with Pakistan created a number of constitutional and administrative problems that gradually developed frustration among the local population. This resulted in issues such as lack of good governance, failure in the delivery of services in health and education, and lack of further developmental works. According to Khattak:

“After the merger of the state of Swat with Pakistan in 1969, there was little further development in the valley. Few, if any, schools were constructed, and the justice system, in which civil and criminal cases alike were delayed for years, caused frustration among the people.”³⁶⁴

Lack of a quick and speedy justice system has also been mentioned by Rome. Comparing the judicial system at the time when Swat was a princely state and then the post-state era, Rome argues, “before the merger of Swat State, whether just or unjust, decisions were quick and cheaper...decisions were properly executed and implemented. With the merger, the position took a U-turn.”³⁶⁵ Similarly, according to Zafar, although lack of economic opportunities “may not have been a main driver of conflict in Swat, the underdeveloped judicial system and ineffective local government certainly created social cleavages and played a major role in the rise of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan.”³⁶⁶ Zafar further states that the sluggish pace of judicial proceedings and “long delays in resolving even straight forward civil claims made people nostalgic for the sharia or Islamic system of jurisprudence that had existed prior to the dissolution of the princely state.”³⁶⁷ This factor was also observed by the author during his field visits to Swat. People, who have had the opportunity to witness the regime of the last Wali of Swat, become visibly nostalgic when narrating issues related to judicial and administrative systems prevalent in Swat prior to its merger with Pakistan. The same factor has been mentioned by Fleischner that “inefficiencies in the judicial system and problems with service delivery progressively degraded the quality of governance to which the people of Swat had become accustomed.”³⁶⁸ However, according to Rome, “the judicial system in Swat was not Islamic as is commonly believed,”³⁶⁹ but was mainly based on customary codes of conduct.

It can be concluded from the whole discussion that there is no single factor responsible for the rise of militancy in Swat or even Pakistan in general. To borrow from Sultan-i-Rome again, the Swat issue was not the product of any solitary factor but was exacerbated by constitutional, judicial, administrative, political, and ideological factors along with the failures of the government and intelligence agencies to fathom the nature of the problem and act on time. Thus, it can be concluded that various factors over a passage of time contributed to the growth of extremism in Pakistan in general and Swat in particular. When Taliban militants were in control of Swat from 2007 to 2009, they made every possible effort to silence their opponents and destroy government infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, bridges, as well as private property such as houses, shops, markets, and orchards belonging to local landlords. The impacts of militancy and subsequent military operation in Swat are discussed in the following section.

Impacts of militancy and military operation in Swat

Taliban in Swat, under the leadership of Maulvi Fazlullah, known as ‘Mullah Radio’ for his illegal FM station broadcasts, continued to strengthen their position during the government of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA)—a coalition of religious parties in power from 2002 to 2007 in KP—considered sympathetic towards them.³⁷⁰ However, it was between 2007 and 2009 that they carried out the most heinous acts of violence to intimidate and terrorize not only their opponents but local population in general as well. Rather than taking a firm and decisive action against the militants, government of Pakistan was trying to resolve the issue peacefully through negotiation. To this end, the government signed a peace agreement with the Taliban in March 2009 and accepted their demand concerning the implementation of the Nizam-e-Adl Regulation; an act that was supposed to establish a kind of Shariah law in the Malakand region. With this, the government effectively ceded the control of Swat to the local Taliban faction led by Maulvi Fazlullah.³⁷¹ Taliban did not stop there though. By April 2009, they moved to neighbouring Buner district at which stage their venture was portrayed by national and international media “as being on the verge of a siege of Islamabad.”³⁷² In the post-peace agreement period, another event occurred which created unprecedented uproar not only within Pakistan but also abroad. “A video of a teenage girl being flogged by a Taliban commander emerged and sparked outrage within Pakistan and around the world as a symbol of a situation that had gone out of control.”³⁷³ Although a year later the government claimed that the video-clip was fake, at the time of its release “both the national and international media took this video-clip at hand, and propagated highly against the peace agreement.”³⁷⁴ With each passing day, the situation was going from bad to worse and the residents of Swat were at the mercy of the Taliban militants with the government virtually non-existent.

Eventually, under heavy pressure from the international community, the military began an intense and decisive security operation against militants in May 2009. After the launch of military operation against Taliban militants in Swat, nearly three million people from Malakand Division were forced to flee their homes and became internally displaced persons (IDPs).³⁷⁵ Such an

unprecedented mass exodus led to one of the biggest humanitarian crises in the history of the country.

Prior to the rise of militancy, Swat Valley was “a popular vacation destination known for its great natural beauty, pristine rivers and the Malam Jabba ski resort.”³⁷⁶ The area was “often compared to Switzerland for its natural beauty and picturesque landscape.”³⁷⁷ On account of the vibrant tourism sector, thick forests with abundant timber available for construction and furniture, fertile lands and orchards, and a developed service sector, Swat had “a more productive economy than other parts of” the province.³⁷⁸ However, the economy was severely affected by Taliban’s insurgency. For example, “more than 400 hotels and restaurants were shut down after the militants moved into the district in 2007.”³⁷⁹ As a result, tourism in Swat “ceased entirely because of security concerns.”³⁸⁰ According to Khaliq, militants destroyed 67 hotels completely while another 107 were severely damaged by the 2010 floods.³⁸¹ Overall, more than 800 hotels were affected during the militancy and floods, which had employed around 20,000 people. The impact was not only on those directly dependent on the tourism industry but also on people whose livelihood was linked to tourism indirectly such as transporters, shopkeepers, farmers, and fruit growers and sellers. Thus, Swat was no longer the same after militancy.

Besides tourism, education also suffered massively at the hands of the Taliban as they frequently targeted educational institutions. The extent of the damage caused by the rise of militancy can be measured from the fact that in 2008, when the crisis had not reached its climax, overall literacy rate in Swat was 53 per cent, which reduced to 47 per cent in 2009.³⁸² The reduction in literacy rate was because of the ban Taliban had imposed on girls’ education and their terrorist activities against both boys’ and girls’ educational institutions. There were a total of 1,576 schools in Swat, many of these built during the era of the Swat state, out of which more than 400 were blown up or badly damaged by the Taliban. According to the latest statistics, there are a total of 1,664 schools in Swat, out of which 1,088 are for boys and 576 for girls.³⁸³ A total of about 397 schools were destroyed by the Taliban, including 184 boys’ and 213 girls’ schools.³⁸⁴ According to a district education official, current literacy rate in Swat is 70 per cent for male and 30 per cent for female. These figures indicate that there has been some improvement in the overall literacy rate in the district, because in 2008-09 male literacy rate was 68 per cent while female literacy rate was 24 per cent.³⁸⁵ Hence, the impact on the education sector was very clear and alarming as most of the students had to drop out or had to acquire education in rented buildings or in the open. While most of the schools have been reconstructed with funds provided by different donors, work is in progress on the rehabilitation and reconstruction of many schools, particularly those located in the remote and hilly areas.³⁸⁶

There is no doubt that Taliban regularly targeted government buildings and installations including schools, health facilities, and bridges. Hundreds of houses, hotels, shops, and fields of standing crops were destroyed in the conflict. Infrastructure such as bridges, health facilities, water supply / irrigation schemes, public office buildings, roads, electricity / gas networks, and hundreds of schools

were totally or partially damaged.³⁸⁷ According to the detailed post-conflict survey conducted jointly by the Government of Pakistan, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank (WB), the crisis of militancy cost the Malakand region over \$1 billion. The study also found that out of the five districts of the Malakand Division, Swat was the most affected district in terms of human losses and damage to infrastructure. Out of the total 664 destroyed or damaged schools in all the five district, 447 schools were destroyed or damaged in Swat district alone. According to the same study, out of the total 63 health facilities fully or partially damaged in Malakand Division, 18 were in Swat. Similarly, out of the total 58 bridges completely destroyed or damaged in Malakand region, 43 were located in Swat. In the same way, out of the total 1,329 km road segments affected during the conflict, 663 km were badly affected in Swat.³⁸⁸

It becomes evident from the preceding discussion that Swat and its residents suffered enormously during the Taliban insurgency. The people of Swat suffered in terms of fatalities as well as damages to properties and loss of incomes as the conflict dealt an unprecedented blow to the economy, physical and social infrastructure, tourism, natural resources, and local administration of the area. After the end of the military operation in July 2009, most of the IDPs returned to their homes to restart their lives. To address the immediate needs of the returning IDPs as well as to restore their confidence in the government, the government of Pakistan also spearheaded an early recovery process by facilitating the return of the IDPs through provision of cash grants of Rs.25,000, transport, and basic food and non-food items. However, there is a need for a sustainable and long-term reconstruction plan to rebuild infrastructure and revive the local economy.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the key dynamics behind the unprecedented rise of militants' insurgency in Swat district of Pakistan. Before discussing the main factors giving rise to religious insurgency, the case study area and its geographic significance as well as its socio-economic and demographic features have been dealt with in detail. After giving an account of the case study area, the study has examined key factors that led to the rise of religious extremism in this once very peaceful region. It has been explored that various ideological, constitutional, judicial, administrative, and political factors paved the way for the escalation of religious extremism and militancy in the Swat Valley. To sum it up, along with ideological factors, lack of judicial reforms, and bad governance were mainly the key causes that developed frustration among the people who were accustomed to a completely different mode of judicial and administrative system during the era when Swat was a princely state. The paper has illustrated that it was an entirely different scenario after the end of the status of Swat as a princely state. The simple but efficient administrative setup of the princely state—particularly the dispensation of rapid and reasonably cheap justice—was replaced with a cumbersome and expensive one. Thus, all these factors together were responsible for the rise of extremism and militancy in this region.

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THE THREAT OF ISIS IN AFGHANISTAN: AN OVERSTATEMENT

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Introduction

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also known as Daesh has made inroads into the already complex situation of Afghanistan. ISIS's network in Afghanistan aims to merge parts of the present day Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan in its domain known as the Khorasan province of its empire extending eastwards from the Middle East. It has chosen the ancient name of 'Wilayat-e-Khorasan' for this region and wishes to annex it to the so-called caliphate of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi who is the self-proclaimed Emir-ul-Momineen of ISIS.¹ ISIS which is considered to be the successor of Al-Qaeda in Iraq is a threat not only to peace and stability in the Middle East but to the international community as well. It adheres to a rigid Sunni Salafist ideology based on Abd Al-Wahhab's 'Takfiri' doctrine which perceives those Muslims as non-believers who do not practise the tenets of Islam.² ISIS is the ultimate culmination of problems that have been mounting in the Middle East for years: brutal dictatorships, religious extremism, sectarian hatred, foreign interventions, proxy wars, and a sense of hopelessness and anger among people. ISIS funds its activities through illicit proceeds from occupation of territory such as looting banks, extortion, control of oil fields and refineries, robbery of economic assets, and illicit taxation of goods. The list also includes money obtained from kidnapping for ransom, proceeds from human trafficking, donations from non-profit organizations, smuggling of cultural artefacts, and

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fundraising through modern communication networks. ISIS gained its largest reserves when it got hold of the town of Mosul in Iraq, some 400 km north of the capital Baghdad, in June 2014. It looted bank deposits estimated to be worth 240 million pounds (\$342 million) in the city. The captured oilfields in the Middle East provide nearly 1.8 million pounds (\$2.6 million) per day to ISIS through oil smuggling to neighbouring countries.³

The physical nexus of ISIS's terror network across countries seems to be strengthening. ISIS is trying to get its toehold in Afghanistan, a country passing through a bloody phase in its history for the past 35 years. To understand the scope of ISIS in Afghanistan, it is important to keep in mind the dynamics of the country and the surrounding region. Afghanistan is a land-locked country, situated at the crossroads of three regional powers: Iran, China, and Pakistan, along with two other regional powers: Russia and India as distant neighbours. The three Central Asian states: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are situated in the north of Afghanistan. Afghanistan is an ethnically diverse country. The majority of Afghans, i.e., nearly 42 per cent are Pashtuns, followed by 27 per cent Tajiks, and less than 10 per cent each of Uzbeks, Hazaras, Turkmens, Aimaks, and Baloch.⁴ The largest majority the Pathans or Pashtuns inhabit the slopes and plains of south and eastern Afghanistan. This Pashtun belt extends eastwards to the north-western part of Pakistan. All Pashtuns, however, do not live in Afghanistan; there are an equal number of Pashtuns living across the border in the tribal agencies and the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province of Pakistan.⁵ Almost 80 per cent of the population of Afghanistan is Sunni, except the Hazaras of central Afghanistan and the Ismailis of north-eastern Afghanistan who are Shia.⁶

This paper argues that the new entrant ISIS does not have a permanent future in Afghanistan although its emergence has made permanent peace in the country a remote possibility by complicating the already intricate relations between various actors representing divergent interests. The tribal, religious, and traditional ground realities would eventually hinder flourishing of ISIS on the Afghan soil since it lacks indigenous roots and deep ideological entrenchment. ISIS's rise in the country is used by the Afghan government to attain further financial and military benefits from the United States to strengthen its own position in Kabul. The Afghan Taliban have a presence and deep roots in the country where they have already been fighting more than a decade-long war against foreign invasion and are a reality to contend with for ISIS. To understand the strengths and weaknesses of the two movements, it is essential to understand the ideological alignment, strategic objectives, mass public support, and sectarian differences between them. All these questions have been addressed in this paper, followed by a conclusion which includes a possible solution to this puzzling situation.

ISIS: An imminent threat

In March 2015, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani stated before the US Congress that the self-proclaimed caliphate of ISIS was a serious threat for Afghanistan. A month earlier, the Pentagon had remarked that ISIS's presence

was 'nascent at best' but this changed into 'operationally emergent' by October 2015. The US commander in Afghanistan General John Campbell added that the group had gained a foothold in Helmand and Farah provinces in the southwest and Nangarhar in eastern Afghanistan.⁷ ISIS fighters have infiltrated through loose border controls around Afghanistan from Syria, Iraq, and also Pakistan. It is estimated that there are approximately 1,000 ISIS fighters in Afghanistan. Reports claiming ISIS's rise in Afghan provinces are abundant in the foreign media stating that it is recruiting Taliban fighters by spending large amounts of money while perpetrating atrocities which have become synonymous with its name. The Afghan Taliban movement also suffered a momentary setback when news about the death of its former leader Mullah Muhammad Omar broke out last year, and ISIS was quick to take advantage of the situation by trying to attract the dissatisfied members of the movement. The situation is further complicated by mistrust among certain factions in the Afghan government on Pakistan's honest attempts at negotiations between the Taliban and the Kabul. This mistrust and problematic attitude of the Afghan government clearly destroyed the amiable atmosphere during the peace efforts between the Taliban and the former in July last year.⁸ The meeting was hosted by Pakistan in Murree and aimed at ending the 14 years of war in Afghanistan while the US and China acted as observers.

Efforts to revive this peace process were actualized in Kabul in January 2016 where Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, and the United States held talks aimed at laying the ground for a negotiated end to the 14 years of war between US-supported government forces and Taliban insurgents.⁹ The ultimate objective of this diplomatic process is to bring the Afghan government and representatives of the Taliban movement together to decide the future of Afghanistan and reach a peaceful settlement acceptable to all stakeholders. International experts on Afghanistan have also stressed the significance of the involvement of Taliban in any process for deciding the country's future. The Taliban now control more territory than at any time since it was ousted by a US-led intervention in 2001, but in spite of intensified fighting on the battlefield, a political solution is considered the likely answer to the unending conflict. Some elements among the ruling elite in Kabul¹⁰ as well as in the US Army do not, however, wish the involvement of Taliban in any sort of peace negotiations. This perspective was aptly voiced by General John Campbell during his address in the House Armed Services Committee in February. The general stated that the US should maintain its forces for the next five years in Afghanistan in order to assist the Afghan Security Forces against Taliban and other insurgents.¹¹ This mindset is not reflected in President Obama's efforts to pressurize Pakistan to include the Taliban representatives in the peace negotiations though. This divergence is deepening as reports of rampant corruption by Afghan government officials and its increasing burden on the national budget are discussed in the US Congress (the US has spent \$6 trillion to maintain its troop presence in Afghanistan since 2001).

On the eastern side of the Durand Line in Pakistan, academics claiming the rise of ISIS on Pakistan's territory ignore certain ground realities, especially

after the ongoing and successful Zarb-e-Azb military campaign cleansed Pakistani soil from thousands of militants and their terror networks.¹² Taking into account the claims by Pakistan's armed forces regarding the dismantlement of militant hideouts, it is not possible for the militant groups to gain foothold in a region which has become hostile to the existence of such militancy.¹³ The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and foreign militant organizations, such as: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Al-Qaeda, and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) have been flushed out of the tribal areas and pushed into neighbouring Afghanistan. As a result, it is highly unlikely for them or their kindred to gain foothold in the same region concurrently. Claims of ISIS gaining hold in Pakistan as well as its being a fertile place for extremist groups are self-contradictory and unconvincing.¹⁴ Pakistan may have turned a blind eye to many militant networks existing and operating from its soil in the past but this scenario has changed altogether after 2002. After the attacks on the Karachi Airport in June 2014¹⁵ and the Army Public School in December 2014,¹⁶ in particular, the public has been repulsed by the attitude of militants. Where there might have been sympathisers previously in various sections of society, few would now openly exhibit support for such militancy. It is incoherent that when one terrorist network has been eradicated from a certain region, another network starts establishing its roots especially when both share the same ideology and have nothing new to offer except extreme brutality. The mass appeal for militant organisations seems to be on the decline in Pakistan at present. It is true that supporters of ISIS have been discovered in recent incidents in Karachi¹⁷ and Lahore¹⁸ but swift action by the authorities only proves zero tolerance for such militant organisations in the post-Zarb-e-Azb scenario. Furthermore, these ISIS suspects are not outsiders but local militants who have been motivated and inspired by the extremist group. Pakistan lacks jihadi space due to the existence of several militant groups and there does not appear to be much room for ISIS except perhaps in some of the tribal agencies and districts. Prospects of ISIS's growth seem bleak at present but Pakistan needs to be vigilant as the group's sympathisers and possible sleeper cells could pose a threat in future.¹⁹

Afghan government has voiced a lot of concerns about the rise of ISIS in Afghanistan, but according to Barnett Rubin, the ideologies of the Afghan Taliban and ISIS are not only distinct but antagonistic to each other.²⁰ At times the two entities are carelessly joined together as jihadi organisations but it is to be noted that the Afghan Taliban are not global jihadists. The Afghan Taliban on the whole are much more mature because they have existed since 1995. They had been fighting a home-enemy during the 1990s, but since 2001 the movement has been giving tough resistance to the US and allied forces. Their ideology may be described as a continuation of the former ideology of the Taliban movement before 2001, that is, a mixture of tribal traditions and their own brand of Islam.²¹ But there are some new aspects to the movement after the onset of the war on terror. For example, they have taken clear positions on maintaining their identity separate from Al-Qaeda and limiting their objectives only to the territorial boundary of Afghanistan. They are also ready to consider a power sharing arrangement with the Afghan government for a peaceful solution

in Afghanistan.²² Furthermore, the Afghan Taliban have always stressed that their jihad is restricted to Afghanistan and its liberation from foreign rule.

After the news of the demise of Mullah Omar, the Taliban movement suffered momentarily and was in danger of splitting into splinter groups with the probability of certain elements joining the ISIS. The latter tried to seize the opportunity during the confusion over Taliban leadership, but it turned out to be short-lived, and was soon followed by the capture of Kunduz by the Taliban, which encouraged the confused groups to gravitate towards the Taliban rather than ISIS. Some observers argue, however, that amid the fluid security situation in Afghanistan, ISIS may gain strength and would pose a threat to both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The Afghan Taliban and ISIS: A comparison

Ideology and leadership

Defining the ideology of the Afghan Taliban is tricky. The Taliban are mainly Pashtuns but there are many Tajiks, Uzbeks, supporters of the former Afghan king Zahir Shah, and even former communists in their ranks. Taliban are Sunni Hannafi and proclaim that they are neither Deobandi nor Barelvi but their puritanical religious orientation brings them close to the Deobandi school.²³ On the other hand, ISIS professes to establish a caliphate over all Muslims and their would-be domain is stretched across the areas comprising the present day Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asian states, and even Pakistan in the East. They also profess an extremely strict version of Islam based on 'literal teachings' of the Quran which they have already enforced in the areas under their control in Iraq and Syria. In view of experts, ISIS's so-called jihad is aimed at gaining territory, control of economic resources, and punishing those Muslims whom the organisation considers outside the realm of Islam, i.e., 'Takfirism'.

The Taliban pledge allegiance to Mullah Akhtar Mansour whereas ISIS considers Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi as the Emir-ul-Momineen. Mullah Omar had been the leader of the Afghan Taliban, formally called the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' since their rise in 1994 until recently²⁴ when it was announced that he had died two years earlier.²⁵ The new Emir of the Afghan Taliban Mullah Akhtar Mansour wrote a letter to ISIS leader in Baghdad to complain that by extending its operations in Afghanistan, ISIS was weakening the jihad against foreign invaders in the country. Some analysts believe that rivalry between the Taliban and ISIS is based largely on controlling trade and smuggling routes passing through Jalalabad enroute to Peshawar and international markets.

Tactical and strategic differences

The most dangerous aspect of ISIS seems to be the indoctrination of young children to train them from an early age, and familiarize them with ammunition from the start. It reflects the fact that ISIS considers military training more important than any serious kind of learning. Taliban on the other hand ensure that young children learn the Quran and Hadith before being ready

for any kind of military training. Emphasis on military training by familiarizing young hands with the use of guns and grenades reflects on the mercenary nature of the organisation; a trained and equipped hand can be hired by anyone able to give a good price for achieving certain objectives. Lack of basic education or any kind of values promotes a psyche akin to what Pakistan experienced in the form of the TTP, which was being used by certain regional actors for their own interests against Pakistan. The TTP had its fair share of criminal, uneducated, and unethical minds which wreaked havoc in Pakistan and now the same kind of groups have taken shelter under the name of ISIS in Afghanistan. The TTP had been targeting military and civilian installations in Pakistan for several years. According to Vali Nasr the number of Pakistanis killed by them on the tenth anniversary of 9/11 in suicide bombings was nearly 35,000.²⁶ After a series of negotiations, peace deals, and military operations spread over more than a decade, the government of Pakistan and military establishment finally lost patience after the attack on Karachi airport on 8 June 2014 and launched a full-scale military operation against TTP terrorists hiding in the mountainous areas of Pakistan near the Pak-Afghan border.²⁷

Since the former TTP members comprise the main fighting force of ISIS in Afghanistan, it is essential to look at some of the characteristics of the parent organisation. The TTP chief Mullah Fazlullah had fled to Afghanistan in 2009. Pakistan government asked the former Afghan president Hamid Karzai for his extradition as well as closure of all militant training camps and hideouts in Kunar and Nuristan provinces in Afghanistan. It is believed that Afghan intelligence had been providing support to the TTP in order to use them as a 'bargaining chip' with Pakistan over the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqanis.²⁸ The Afghan government had been supporting the insurgent movement in Pakistan's tribal areas and it is suspected that they had also been funding the TTP.²⁹ The New York Times reported last year that the US Special Forces raided an Afghan convoy that was taking a senior TTP militant Latif Mehsud to Kabul for secret talks and arrested him (he is still in their custody in Bagram jail). The report added that the Afghan government was using TTP as leverage over Pakistani military in order to dictate their terms for a peaceful settlement. The report further added that Karzai and his entourage were furious when their plan was exposed by the American forces.³⁰ Contrary to this, the Afghan Taliban consider the Kabul government as their prime target since they believe that the government has been imposed on the country by foreign powers.

Sources of financing

One of the advisers of Khan Said (alias Sajna), the head of a splinter group of TTP which separated from it in June 2014, told the media in an interview that they had differences with TTP and considered it 'haram' to take money from kafirs to kill fellow Muslims. This was a clear reference that some of the factions in the TTP were on the payroll of foreign intelligence agencies such as the National Directorate of Security (NDS) of Afghanistan and the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) of India. Sajna's close aide blamed TTP of receiving money from outside sources for bombing mosques and madrassas in

Pakistan and carrying out criminal activities such as robbing banks, extortion, and kidnapping for ransom. Several other allied factions of TTP were also considering whether to remain aligned with it or side with Khan Said.³¹ A report from the US State Department also disclosed that TTP raised funds from stealing and re-selling military equipment, kidnapping for ransom, and robbing Afghanistan-bound military transport trucks belonging to NATO.³² India has invested \$2.1 billion in Afghanistan³³ in infrastructure projects and is suspected to be using its influence and resources in fuelling the insurgency in Pakistan as well as brewing turmoil in Balochistan. Several militants arrested in 2009 disclosed that NDS and RAW were involved in providing money and arms to militants to fight Pakistan Army.³⁴ These militants disclosed that they regularly met intelligence officials in Jalalabad, Kandahar, and Mazar-i-Sharif and received special war training in Afghanistan. An Afghan government adviser told media that India was using Afghan territory to destabilize Pakistan. RAW has close links with the NDS consisting of intelligence-sharing on Pakistan. Several research institutes and think tanks in the US have tried to trace links between TTP and RAW working under the garb of reconstruction in Afghanistan. An article in one of Gatestone Institute's publications states that there is evidence of safe havens for terrorists on Afghan soil which are being used for carrying out terrorist activities in Pakistan.³⁵ It must be added here that India has set up consulates in Jalalabad, Kandahar, and Mazar-i-Sharif. It is also building roads and schools near the Pak-Afghan border. India was one of the countries supporting Northern Alliance before 2001, which makes up the present Afghan government and has enjoyed close links with the predecessor of NDS, the Khadamat-e Aetla'at-e Dawlati (KHAD) for decades. Several intelligence officers in NDS have been trained in India in recent years. Foreign Policy magazine quoted a former US intelligence official as saying:

“The Indians are up to their necks in supporting the Taliban (TTP) against the Pakistani government in Afghanistan and Pakistan... the same anti-Pakistani forces in Afghanistan also shooting at American soldiers are getting support from India. India should close its diplomatic establishments in Afghanistan and get the Christ out.”³⁶

Most important is the Afghan Taliban's own point of view regarding the ISIS phenomenon. They think that the present Kabul government is trying to involve Russia once again in the Afghan affairs on the pretext of a so-called threat of ISIS. The Taliban view President Ashraf Ghani's government as crying wolf over ISIS to manipulate Russia and other Central Asian states to provide military and logistical assistance. The Afghans resent the political engagements between Russia and the Kabul government. The following excerpt has been taken from the Afghan Taliban's official website:

“It is an open fact that the emergence of ISIS in our country is a joint project of Kabul administration and other foreign intelligence agencies. Similarly, some high ranking officials of Kabul administration have also repeatedly exposed these secrets. For

example, few months ago, the then governor of Paktika province asserted that: ‘the National Security Council of Afghanistan has given two hundred thousand dollars in assistance to the families of ISIS fighters in Barmal district of that province’. On 23 November 2015, the so called deputy speaker of Wolasi Jirga (national assembly) publicly stated in open session of the assembly that: ‘our government, military institutions and security council are supporting ISIS (Daesh). I swear by God, the commanders of ISIS are living in Kabul. They go to embassies and our offices...’.”

Therefore, the Afghan Taliban consider the threat of ISIS to be a concoction of the Kabul government to garner support from Russia which they think is neither in the interest of Russia nor the Afghans since the mujahideen are already fighting a war of independence against foreign invaders. The Taliban have also categorically stated that their armed struggle is for the independence of Afghanistan and setting up of an Islamic system in their country. They also desire cordial relations with all regional countries including Russia. This negates any notions of global jihad on their part.³⁷ As far as funding sources for the Afghan Taliban are concerned, Afghan officials have often admitted that ammunition to the Taliban comes from northern Afghanistan through the black market, illegal imports from Iran, and even from local administrators who exchange weapons for immunity from Taliban attacks.³⁸ Other sources of financing include Afghan traders and transporters who have supported the Taliban since 1990s for opening trade routes in Afghanistan and keeping them safe, philanthropist organisations especially from the Middle-East, Ushr from Afghan farmers (compulsory charity from agricultural land), Zakat collections, commissions from local commanders, and last but not the least it has been alleged by US and Afghan authorities that Iranian government supplies funds, weapons, and other facilities to Taliban.³⁹ China has already invested \$3 billion in Afghanistan and has established ties with the Afghan Taliban, and there are even unconfirmed reports that a Taliban delegation went to Russia for this purpose.⁴⁰ The opium produced in southern Afghanistan also helps finance the Taliban insurgency. Although the Taliban did not create the narcotics trade network, the movement has received its initial funding in 1994 from this trade mafia. They are, however, not the only ones to benefit from this lucrative trade as other Afghan power-brokers including members of the Afghan government also benefit from it.⁴¹

Sectarian differences

The sectarian differences between the Afghan Taliban and ISIS could play a decisive role in ISIS’s recruiting capacity. Even the people unhappy with the Taliban may not join their ranks because of an ideology alien to Afghan nature. ISIS’s sectarian inclination which is a mix of extreme Salafist philosophy cannot co-exist in a culture of deeply entrenched customs and traditions. Undeterred by the sudden news of the demise of Mullah Muhammad Omar last year and the consequent dispute within the Taliban ranks over succession, none among the Taliban considered choosing Baghdadi as their new

Emir. It should be noted that nearly all leaders of ISIS in Afghanistan belong to the TTP which has been pushed out of its sanctuaries in the north-western areas of Pakistan into Afghanistan. This is evident by the growth or presence of ISIS in adjoining provinces of Nangarhar and Logar in Afghanistan. The IMU is noteworthy as it has also professed allegiance to ISIS.

On the other hand, the Taliban movement was not entirely constituted of students since it was joined by Afghan war veterans, members from the disintegrated Afghan Army and the mujahideen parties. The movement and its leadership were indigenous to Afghanistan and shared the same Pashtun camaraderie which existed among the Pashtun tribes. It was not the ideology of Taliban or any religious sentiments that led to their success in the 1990s but the war-weariness of Afghan nation, which made it willing to welcome any movement which could pave the way for peace, stability, and deliverance from evil warlords.⁴²

Loose unity of groups

Despite big claims, ISIS has only been successful in drawing few figures from the mainstream Taliban movement.⁴³ ISIS in Afghanistan is composed mainly of runaway members of the TTP who have tried to gain control over a few districts in the Nangarhar province across the Pakistan border.⁴⁴ These deserters from among the Taliban fighters also include those foreign fighters who were unable to reach Syria and Iraq. Former TTP member Hafiz Saeed has been appointed as the ISIS Emir of the so-called Khorasan province. It has also been claimed by local Afghans that ISIS has more money than the Taliban since the former are claimed to be paying \$700 per month to their soldiers while Taliban only pay a tenth of this amount. This amounts to a lot of money in a country where nearly 70 per cent of the population is unemployed.⁴⁵

Like the TTP, ISIS is also a loose array of militant groups with widely varying agendas. TTP in itself was an umbrella organisation, composed of almost thirty militant groups⁴⁶ among which the Tehreek e Nifaz e Shariat e Muhammadi (TNSM) was a mainstream group, operating in Bajaur Agency before start of the military operation Zarb-e-Azb in 2014. The Swat faction of the group had tried to gain control of the Swat Valley in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa but the army in a large-scale military operation in 2007-2009 was successful in seizing control of these areas.⁴⁷ Other large groups operating in Bajaur were Jaish-e-Islami led by Wali-ur-Rehman, Karwan-e-Niamatullah (now defunct), Dr. Ismail's faction, and Maulana Abdullah's militants. Omar Khalid's group had been operating out of Mohamand Agency. The three Taliban groups operating in Darra Adam Khel were *Tehreek-e-Islami*, *Islami Taliban*, and *al-Hezb*.⁴⁸ *All factions in the TTP were not in favour of attacking Pakistan and this dissent had grown over the past two years. Some groups thus split from TTP in favour of peace talks with the government.*⁴⁹ The TTP also included extremist sectarian groups: Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) as well as banned

jihadist organisations like Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islami, Jamiat-ul-Ansar, Jaish-e-Muhammad, and Harkat-ul-Ansar.⁵⁰ The members of some of these organisations belong to southern Punjab and are collectively known as the Punjabi Taliban.⁵¹ Militants from Al-Qaeda, IMU, ETIM, Chechnya, and other Central Asian states were also in close alliance with the TTP, but have now almost been eradicated from the tribal areas or have run away to adjoining provinces in Afghanistan.

ISIS's signature brutality

ISIS is famous for its savage punishments. Its appearance in Afghanistan in 2014 involved the hanging of nearly a dozen Taliban commanders in the Nuristan province. In another incident ten tribal elders were made to sit on explosives and blown up making their bodies scatter over a long distance.⁵² It was reported that the ISIS chief Hafiz Saeed and Mawlawi Abdul Rahim Dost developed differences and broke up after this incident.

Public support

ISIS cannot exploit political vacuum in Afghanistan for the spread of its ideology, the way it did in Syria and Iraq by taking advantage of the political space available as a representative of Sunnis. As compared to the Afghanistan of the late 1980s, the present scene does not require a 'champion' for a political cause. The Afghan Taliban had arisen due to the disenchantment of the population with warlordism and mujahideen most of whom were involved in corruption, rape, looting, and drug trafficking in the state of affairs after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. In 1994, Mullah Muhammad Omar, one of the jihad veterans from Kandahar who had fought under the leadership of Abdul Rasul Sayyaf (one of the mujahideen commanders), gathered 'Talibs' (seminary students) to cleanse the society from the barbarism of the warlords. The Taliban movement came to be known formally as the Tehreek-e-Islami-e-Taliban Afghanistan.⁵³ 'Talibs' had existed even during the Afghan jihad in 1980s. Seven factions of the mujahideen existed during that era, religious students joined them to fight the Soviets. Thousands of religious seminaries were established alongside the Afghan border by the military establishment of Pakistan. Afghan refugees, mostly belonging to the Deobandi school of thought, joined these madrassas.⁵⁴ The main objective was to create religious-oriented fighters to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan and almost thirty thousand students from such madrassas joined the Taliban movement.⁵⁵ The Taliban movement has survived so far by sustaining on the collection of taxes from areas under its jurisdiction including those imposed on poppy. They also obtain cuts from businesses and construction contracts which are adequate for them to sustain themselves. It is pointed out by researchers that Iran is reportedly funding the Taliban to stop the spread of ISIS on the Afghan territory. Iran is reported to be supplying AK-47 rifles, rocket propelled grenades, and materials for making bombs.⁵⁶

Conclusion and policy recommendations

There are distinct tribal, cultural, and religious obstructions to ISIS's success in Afghanistan. Presently, the Afghan territory is either controlled by the government in Kabul or the Afghan Taliban. Interestingly, both are averse to ISIS. There is absence of free territory in Afghanistan for ISIS to establish itself, unlike in Iraq, Syria, and Libya. Therefore, although it is extremely difficult for it to establish its rule on the Afghan soil, ISIS would be a constant thorn in the side of the major actors in Afghanistan since they possess considerable wealth to be able to recruit disgruntled elements from the various sides in the conflict.

Taliban have been around in Afghanistan since the 1990s and even before in the form of mujahideen who fought against the Soviets but ISIS is a new entrant eyed with suspicion, and considered as alien as any foreign invader by ordinary people. Afghans, who are known for their intolerance against any kind of alien rule, would not surrender their unique tribal traditions and religion to ISIS's barbarians. Even during the period when Osama bin Laden was given refuge in Afghanistan while Mullah Omar was Emir-ul-Momineen, many Afghans resented the presence of Arabs among their ranks. They would prefer to fight and die serving their own leaders rather than ISIS who are controlled by leaders sitting in a remote corner in Iraq or Syria, whose ideology and doctrine is alien to their own objectives and motives. The Taliban on the other hand have extensive sources of income, property, and businesses (some of which are located in Pakistan), and are strongly entrenched in the Afghan society. Their ideological and tribal roots are among the common people and they would not give up their positions to outsiders. Furthermore, the Taliban fighters have sworn their allegiance to Mullah Akhtar Mansour as their Emir like they did to Mullah Omar formerly so they cannot swear loyalty to two leaders if they also pledge allegiance to Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi.

Most important is the fact that the Afghan Taliban are not global jihadists and their struggle is limited to the borders of Afghanistan. This comparatively limited ambition makes them open to reconciliation and talks. On the other hand, it would be unimaginable to reconcile with a global jihadist. All these facts coupled with ISIS's atrocities in the parts of Nangarhar province where it has gained ground would not endear it to the Afghan people. Taliban, on the other hand, are deeply rooted in the Afghan society and struggling to fight foreign invaders long before the arrival of ISIS on the scene. The only scenario where ISIS might be able to establish its brutal reign could evolve if the Kabul government disappeared and Taliban also lost all the support they enjoyed among the Afghan people, both of which seem highly unlikely. But if such an unimaginable happens then the Afghans would only have the international community to blame for the savagery imposed on them in the form of ISIS. Nevertheless, the appearance of ISIS on the Afghan soil has endangered the life of ordinary Afghans by adding yet another actor in a complicated scene and making impossible any chances of peace in a country suffering from the ravages of decades of war.

Although ISIS may be in its embryonic state, it has the ability to evolve into a monster that would not only be a major threat for any peace efforts in

Afghanistan but also the security of Pakistan. Since militants are already on the run from the tribal areas of Pakistan and the region is being thoroughly cleansed by the Pakistan Army, these efforts by the armed forces need to be reinforced in a consolidated manner by civilian institutions in the country so that the seeds of extremism are reduced to a minimum. Extremists may be terminated by the use of force but extremism can only be eradicated by eliminating ignorance. As already discussed, groups like ISIS breed as well as exploit ignorance, illiteracy, and abject poverty, therefore, Pakistan should encourage well-educated religious scholars to present the true image of Islam. For this, the state should strictly control funding of religious institutions by foreign donors (including all Muslim countries) in order to eliminate the import of religious philosophies from abroad. Pakistan is fortunate to possess the legacy of religious philosophers like Dr. Muhammad Iqbal who interpreted the essence of Islamic teachings in the modern era. This would prove as the only precaution from an enemy who attacks religious beliefs. By raising public awareness regarding religious matters, any ideology may be shunned which is intrinsically contrary to Islamic teachings.

As far as Afghanistan is concerned, there should be concerted efforts by all its neighbours to strive for a peaceful solution to the decades of war. The neighbours need to refrain from exploiting Afghans for their own vested interests like the TTP has been used by India for its own schemes. India should also realize that the development of transnational extremist groups like ISIS would not be in its interest in the future. If the US deems it feasible to withdraw its presence entirely in the near future, as some of the researchers are advising on the basis of opportunity cost,⁵⁷ ISIS could have a clear field. In such an eventuality, ISIS would not only gain in strength, as it has in other parts of the Middle East, but the scenario would get bloodier than it was in the 1990s after the withdrawal of Soviet troops. Thus it is essential to attain a strong central government which has its jurisdiction over the entire Afghan territory. In this context peace talks between the Afghan Taliban and Kabul government may carry the logical solution to the unending war in the country. Further damages to the peace process would jeopardize chances of long-term stability in the region. The US is already thinking along the lines of two possible solutions: First is to keep the Afghan state functioning with the financial assistance streaming in for years to come and to strike a settlement with the Taliban which would reduce the cost of security forces for the US as well as the perceived threats from the region. The second one is more difficult but it aims for Afghanistan to achieve a self-sustainable status by striving towards a peaceful and supportive relationship with its neighbours Pakistan and Iran. This solution or model would only be feasible if Afghanistan utilizes its enormous reserves of minerals, but any foreign investment cannot take place in an atmosphere of lawlessness and instability.⁵⁸

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