
Significance of Afghanistan in Evolving Regional Security Dynamics: Future Challenges and Options



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Abstract

Afghanistan being located at the crossroads of regions has been a determining factor in transforming security dynamics of the broader region. Its landlocked geographical status and ethnic polarisation enhances its dependence on neighbouring states. Since the past four decades, continuous conflict and war in Afghanistan has affected the whole region while hindering the prospects of political stability and economic progress and development in the neighbourhood. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan under Doha Agreement paved the way for Taliban's assumption of power in August 2021 but after three years in power, Taliban have been unable to allay the fears of the neighbouring states. This paper highlights Afghanistan's prominence as an insulator state and its centrality in preserving peace and regional stability. It identifies emerging challenges that can lead to renewed conflict among states as well as explores less contentious issues regarding non-traditional security and economic cooperation that can create conducive environment to make regional peace an achievable goal.

Keywords: *Regional Security Complex, connectivity, water conflict, counter terrorism, border security, climate diplomacy.*

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Introduction

Since the past four decades, Afghanistan has been a complex regional actor. Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent Afghan resistance against this occupation paved the way for the involvement of regional as well as extra-regional states in Afghan affairs. Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Afghanistan under the terms of Geneva Accords without formulating any agreed upon mechanism for future political set up in Afghanistan. Being a multi-ethnic state, lack of power sharing formula gave rise to infighting thus bringing in neighbouring and regional states in the Afghan conflict. By the mid 1990s, a Pashtun faction, i.e., the Taliban established its control over eighty per cent of the areas in Afghanistan except the northern frontier where Ahmed Shah Masood, a veteran Tajik, resisted the Taliban's advances with the help of Afghanistan's northern neighbours as well as India, Russia and Iran.

Over the years, the conflict in Afghanistan has been transforming the security dynamics in the broader region. Afghan conflict has been a regionalised conflict with regional states' active participation in matters of peace and war in Afghanistan. Peace initiatives put forward at bilateral or multilateral levels could not help in ending the conflict or in bringing peace to Afghanistan. The continued war and chaos as well as the willingness of the warring parties provided an opportunity to the dissident groups from neighbouring states and the trans-national terrorist organisations to seek asylum in Afghanistan and to have sanctuaries on Afghan soil from where they attacked their opponents and the governments of neighbouring countries.

Al-Qaeda had been one of such organisations that was blamed for 9/11 terrorist attacks whereas Taliban for hosting the leadership of a terrorist organisation were held responsible for the attacks as well. The subsequent war on terror that uprooted the Taliban regime continued for almost two decades while making it America's longest war to date. The end of war was signalled with the signing of Doha Agreement in 2020 between the United States and the Taliban representatives. As per the provisions of the agreement, the Taliban were to fulfil certain pledges; formation of inclusive government, respecting and promoting human rights and to abandon supporting terrorist organisations and not allowing the Afghan territory to be used against any other state. Before ensuring the compliance of Taliban with Doha Agreement especially before achieving intra-Afghan reconciliation, the hasty US withdrawal from Afghanistan paved the way for Taliban takeover leaving space for renewed conflict.

Taliban's assumption of power has alarmed international community in general and regional neighbouring states in particular as these states have high stakes in the stability of Afghanistan. The paper highlights the significance of Afghanistan vis-à-vis its geographical location in regional security architecture, its policies towards issues of mutual concern and regional states policies to accommodate Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. While regional security has been a contested concept, the paper has used it with regard to avoidance of conflict in the broader region, it identifies factors having potential to lead to conflict and war as well as highlights likely options that can enhance regional cooperation. The paper contextualises Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as its

theoretical construct that will be discussed in succeeding section.

Theoretical Framework

To identify a middle ground between national security and international security, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) has been enunciated by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever. The theory builds on the foundations of neo-realism while influenced by Copenhagen School. The concept of Regional Security Complexes (RSCs) has been widely used for empirical studies vis-à-vis regional security.

Regional security in the context of RSCs perceives the world as consisting of three phenomena; RSCs, insulator states and global level powers. All states are part of one RSC except global powers having global outreach and influence over multiple regions while between these two levels there is a third level, i.e., the insulators that are not a part of any region or RSC but on the intersection of regions.¹ RSCs are characterised by four inevitable features; clearly defined geographical boundaries, anarchic structure, power polarity and socially constructed patterns of amity and enmity (that can be perceived as security interdependence).²

The term insulator and buffer has been used in the same definitional context which Buzan tries to differentiate as a buffer is internal to the RSC maintaining a space among powers of the particular region whereas an insulator is located 'in the zone of indifference' keeping two or more RSCs separate from one another. With the context of RSCs, the insulators have been conceptualised in terms of 'relative indifference' as security interdependence could not be same but there have been zones

with less security interdependence on either side where two or more RSCs existed. Insulating states fall on the boundaries of indifference between the autonomous regions on both sides.³ The notable examples of insulator states are Burma (between South and South East Asia), Turkey (between Middle East, Europe and Commonwealth of Independent States), Nepal (between South Asia and Northeast Asia) and Afghanistan (between South Asia, Middle East and Central Asia).⁴ Depending on the complexity of security interdependence, insulator states can serve as mini-complex providing neighbours an opportunity to get involve in the territory that borders them. Mini-complexes are relatively small, have less power and may leave room for non-state actors to thrive in the area.⁵

Afghanistan has been a classical example of insulating the three separate RSCs doing more to separate them than to unite them. Afghanistan has been facing issues with Pakistan and Iran as well as with Central Asian Republics (CARs). Prior to 9/11 attacks and the subsequent war on terror, Afghanistan had been facing civil war that was accelerated due to meddling of neighbouring and regional states. Contrary to the logic of insulators, Afghanistan has not been a passive state. Rather, it has been serving to enhance transnational links between non-state actors, terrorist networks, ethnic or religious movements, performing its insulator role as a mini-complex.⁶

Volatile Regional Security Environment

The external security environment of Afghanistan has been characterised by regional security complexes and bilateral relations of Afghanistan with the neighbouring states that have been discussed in the following sections.

Regional Security Complexes (RSCs)

Afghanistan is situated at a place where three regional security complexes exist and in the past these security complexes had immense impact on dynamics of Afghan conflict. These three regional security complexes are Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia. Central Asia, where Russia has been a predominant external military power and net security provider to weak and fragile states to meet their security needs vis-à-vis Afghanistan; South Asia, where India-Pakistan rivalry also extended to Afghan territory; West Asia, where Saudi-Iran ideological conflict contributed in harnessing conflict in Afghanistan as well.⁷

As regards Central Asian regional security complex, after independence in 1991, Central Asian states maintained close defence and security ties with Russia. Their relations have been regulated through Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan are the members of CSTO whereas Uzbekistan has begun defence collaboration with Russia and has re-joined CSTO that it had left in 2012. Through CSTO and bilateral agreements, Russia has been able to retain military bases in Central Asian states, to extend military training facilities and to be the main arms supplier to these states.⁸ Tajikistan, a member of CSTO not only hosted Russia's largest foreign military base but also leased its base near Afghan border to Russia till 2042.⁹ China and Russia along with Central Asian states, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan announced the formation of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in June 2001 with mutually agreed objectives to fight three evils; terrorism, separatism and extremism. The rationale behind the formation of SCO had been

to collectively deal with the security threats emanating from Afghanistan due to continued war and conflict as well as Taliban's meddling in neighbouring states' affairs.

China has increased its involvement in the region that was historically dominated by Russia as its area of influence. Initially, China's presence in the region was in economic sphere through low interest loans and infrastructure development projects¹⁰ and these bilateral economic ties were further strengthened by Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that was announced in Kazakhstan in 2013. Over time, it has also increased its military ties with regional states in the form of joint military exercises, arms sales as well as training of security forces. In future, Chinese and Russian cooperation with Central Asian states in economic and military field will strengthen the regional cooperation but the possibility of strategic competition between the two cannot be ignored as propagated by Western scholars. In the past, to challenge the Russian dominance in its near abroad, US occasionally intervened in the region. Though insecurity and instability in Afghanistan was also a factor but it was mainly due to this competition that trade, transit and energy projects through Central Asia could not be materialised.

As regards South Asian regional security complex, India's Afghan policy has always been Pakistan-centric. Throughout the Cold War, India supported Afghanistan's anti-Pakistan political rhetoric but changed circumstances during the first Taliban regime (1996-2001) limited India's influence in Afghanistan. Rather, it contributed in harnessing Afghan civil war by providing material as well as political support to anti-Taliban Northern alliance. The US war on terror and the post-Taliban political structure provided India with an opportunity to reassert

its lost influence in Afghanistan. In the last two decades, India has emerged as a major donor, relying on using soft power to create a conducive environment to achieve political influence by creating a positive image among Afghan people. Moreover, India extended military training facilities and supplied arms as well as military equipment to boost the capabilities of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). It has been averse to the concept of peace talks between Afghan Taliban and the US government but as Taliban came into power a significant improvement in India-Afghanistan relations has been noted. Similarly, Pakistan's Afghan policy has been formulated while keeping in view its relations with India. Security has been a predominant concern in its relations vis-à-vis Afghanistan and India. Since 1980s, Pakistan has been proactive to ensure the security of western border, to check the increasing Indian influence especially in Pakistan-Afghan border region and to have a neutral, if not a friendly government in Afghanistan that would not allow its territory to be used against Pakistan by India.

Lastly, the West Asian security complex had immense impact on Afghan conflict vis-à-vis Saudi-Iran rivalry, particularly their ideological conflict. Saudi Arabia's pursuance of ideological foreign policy has led to its involvement in Afghan War during 1980s and later its recognition and support to Afghan Taliban reflects the continuation of same policy. Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman's tough stance against terrorism and extremism brought about a change in Saudi foreign policy. On the other side, due to ideological and security reasons, Iran has been an advocate of protecting and ensuring the rights of Persian speaking population and Shiite Hazara community of Afghanistan. Iran has a history of opposing the Taliban and

during the 1990s it had been actively supporting the Northern alliance along with Russia, India and Central Asian states against the Taliban. Notwithstanding its previous policy in Afghanistan, Iran initially supported US-led war on terror and helped in toppling the Taliban regime but later to safeguard its interests; it has been reportedly funding and arming the Taliban factions to weaken the US position in Afghanistan.¹¹

Due to Afghanistan's status as an insulator state located at the crossroads of regions, these regional security complexes have had profound impact on dynamics of Afghan conflict that in return has been a defining factor influencing their security calculations. The following section highlights Afghanistan's bilateral relations with neighbouring/regional states.

Bilateral Relations between Afghanistan and the Neighbouring States

Another important element that contributed in transforming regional security environment has been the nature of bilateral relations between Afghanistan and its neighbours. Among its neighbours, Iran and Pakistan while sharing historical, cultural and religious ties with each other as well as with Afghanistan have been the most consequential regional actors in Afghan affairs since early 1980s. In the current scenario, Afghanistan's relations with Pakistan have been turbulent and other players, especially China and Central Asian states have also factored in Afghanistan's calculations.

Afghanistan shares its longest border (i.e., 2640 kilometres) with Pakistan. Pakistan-Afghanistan relations have seen many ups and downs in the last four decades. Pakistan supported the Afghan resistance force (along with Western countries, China and Muslim states) against Soviet occupation of

Afghanistan, played a role in seeking intra-Afghan reconciliation in early 1990s. Later, it recognised the Taliban regime and extended support to them. After the 9/11 attacks, it reversed its policy and supported Western coalition in the war on terror and facilitated Doha Peace Process between Afghan Taliban and the US Administration for withdrawal of American troops. Since Taliban took over in Afghanistan in August 2021, Pakistan has been struggling to sort out its differences and issues with the Taliban regime but bilateral relations have remained strained due to border fencing, issue of terrorism from the TTP and the repatriation of Afghan refugees.¹²

Iran shares 971 kilometre-long border with Afghanistan. Both states have enjoyed cordial relations before Soviet invasion in 1979. The same year Iranian revolution also resulted in change of regime in Iran. Iran had been proactive in protecting the rights of Afghan minorities and in this regard, bilateral relations between the two states have suffered during first Taliban government. At present, the most pressing issue between the two states has been the discord over sharing of Helmand River water. On political and security issues, both states have been trying to accommodate each other while not highlighting any differences.

Afghanistan's northern boundary was inherited from Soviet Russia by three Central Asian states; Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. River Oxus, the longest river of Central Asia flows for over 1000 kilometres along with Afghanistan's borders with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.¹³ After gaining independence in 1991, the nascent states' nation building challenges were accelerated by security challenges such as threats of religious extremism, drug

trafficking, trans-border terrorism, and the influx of refugees, mainly emanating from turbulent Afghanistan.¹⁴ Similarly, the emergence of ethnicity-based independent states in Central Asia added new dimensions to Afghan conflict vis-à-vis its national and regional characteristics.¹⁵

Uzbekistan shares its shortest but strategic (140-kilometre-long) border with Afghanistan. Termez was the Soviet military hub during Afghan war and was serving during war on terror as a supply line for non-military goods to NATO-ISAF forces for almost two decades. Uzbekistan also hosted an American airbase in the adjoining area.¹⁶ Possessing a rich cultural legacy, Uzbekistan has been the largest state in Central Asia in terms of demography and has the largest Uzbek diaspora in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Of all the Central Asian states, Uzbekistan has been diplomatically proactive in participating in regional initiatives to resolve Afghan conflict.¹⁷ It has been highly concerned about drug trafficking and counter-terrorism challenges vis-à-vis its relations with Afghanistan has participated in counter-terrorism exercises conducted by the Chinese police force.¹⁸ During the previous Taliban government, Uzbekistan's major concern had been the Taliban's support to Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Given its security concerns, Uzbekistan has been reluctant to allow refugees into its territory. Though it initially established refugee camps along Uzbek-Afghan border, the refugees were still repatriated after a few weeks.¹⁹

Tajikistan, among CARs shares the longest border of 1374 kilometre with Afghanistan.²⁰ Besides conducting military exercises with either Russia or China, after Taliban takeover Tajikistan mobilised its reserve force along Tajik-Afghan border

and also accepted asylum seeking members from Afghan security forces.²¹ Tajikistan has been collaborating with China over border security and has announced the planned construction of 11 border posts on Tajik-Afghan border and one border-guard training centre. It is worth noting that in 2019, in view of the prospective US withdrawal, China's military outpost was established near China-Afghanistan-Tajikistan border.²² Tajikistan has been concerned about lack of inclusive government and the marginalisation of Tajik population in Afghanistan that outnumbers the Tajik population in Tajikistan. Tajikistan's Afghan policy has been characterised by past experience of infiltration of militants from Afghanistan into Tajikistan.²³

Turkmenistan shares almost 800-kilometre-long border with Afghanistan and due to its adherence to permanent neutrality it had not opposed the Taliban even during their previous rule. Like Uzbekistan, it kept its consulates in Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif and Herat open and operational and Turkmen officials have been holding discussions with the Taliban officials occasionally on issues of mutual interest.

China-Afghan border (less than 100 kilometre) located in Wakhan Corridor is isolated and non-traversable for most of the year and has been heavily fortified by China.²⁴ China's predominant concern vis-à-vis Afghanistan remains security that has been directly linked to its internal stability in Xinjiang. China had not recognised the previous Taliban regime but it occasionally conveyed its concerns to Taliban leadership regarding presence and activities of East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in Afghanistan.²⁵ China has been pursuing a policy of non-interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs and

after Taliban's assumption of power. It has reiterated this non-interference pledge and has sought guarantees from the Taliban for not allowing the Afghan territory to be used against China. Chinese concerns regarding terrorists include the use of Afghan territory as a base for training, organising or for spreading propaganda. China fears the spillover effects of these activities into neighbouring countries in Central Asia or South Asia which are high priority areas for China in terms of economic investments and security of Chinese nationals.²⁶

Potential Areas of Conflict – Challenges to Regional Security

Presence of Non-State Actors in Afghanistan

Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) has been perceived as a common threat by almost all the regional states. The real concern behind this has been IS-KP's capability to target the foreign nationals from neighbouring states. It reportedly fired rockets targeting Uzbek and Tajik cities as well as attacked a Shia shrine in Iran causing massive casualties. IS-KP also claimed the responsibility for attacks on the Russian and Pakistani embassies in Afghanistan in 2022 in addition to targeting Chinese nationals staying in a hotel in Kabul.²⁷ Taliban while utilising counter-insurgency skills have been successful in bringing down the level of violence in the past two years but the most daunting challenge vis-à-vis IS-KP has been to counter its recruitment policy. IS-KP has been using regional languages as propaganda tool for selecting its targeted audience not only in Afghanistan's minorities but also in Central Asian Republics. Iran and Russia blame the US for supporting and backing IS-KP

operatives whereas Taliban accuse regional states for providing safe heavens to IS-KP.²⁸

Besides IS-KP, the presence of militants in northern Afghanistan and their likely contribution in generating unrest or inciting rebels in respective states has been a cause of concern for Central Asian Republics. Learning from the past experience, neighbouring states have been insisting on the formation of inclusive government in Afghanistan so that armed groups could not incite the sentiments of minorities nor could seek outside support to justify their cause. Notwithstanding the concerns of regional states, Taliban without consulting neighbouring states have devised a unique strategy of disbanding the fighters, dislocating them to different areas and trying to integrate them in Afghan force while giving them monetary incentives.²⁹

Contrary to militants in northern Afghanistan that pose latent security threat to other states, the militants in eastern Afghanistan such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has been posing actual threat to Pakistan's security as the intensity of violence in the country has been on the rise since Taliban came to power in Afghanistan.³⁰ Pakistan has adopted various strategies to deal with the threat, taking diplomatic measures including direct negotiations as well as multilateral negotiations involving China, Russia and Central Asian Republics; fencing the border and closing border crossings; launching air strikes to target TTP hideouts in Afghanistan as well as the forced repatriation of Afghan refugees in December 2023. All the measures taken by Pakistan have not achieved the desired outcome. Rather, they have contributed in further straining the bilateral relations.³¹

Moreover, regional states fear that the Taliban victory might encourage and embolden the restive Islamists in their countries to try to launch insurgency in their respective states. The very fact that a superpower has been defeated in its longest war by an insurgent group not matching its power and capability attracts people and the implications go far beyond the region.

Counter Terrorism – Challenges Ahead

Presence of non-state actors in Afghanistan shows that the Doha Agreement failed to identify any mechanism to ensure the compliance of terrorism related provisions. As the US withdrawal of troops drew near, regional states' concerns increased and, in this regard, a meeting of regional countries including Pakistan, Russia, China and Iran was convened in May 2020 calling for strict action against Al-Qaeda, ISKP, ETIM, TTP and other terrorist organisations functioning against the interests of regional countries.³²

Counter terrorism cooperation between Taliban (depending on their willingness) and the regional states can be initiated either on bilateral or multilateral/ regional level. As regards bilateral negotiations, Pakistan's efforts could not succeed to achieve the desired goals regarding presence of TTP in Afghanistan. Another initiative, a trilateral dialogue, i.e., China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Minister Dialogue had been in place. The fifth dialogue was held in Islamabad in which foreign ministers from three countries pledged to enhance mutual cooperation in the fields of security and counter-terrorism. China asserted that it had opposed any form of terrorism and had been willing to initiate cooperation in fighting terrorism under

regional multilateral frameworks, enhancing cooperative mechanism to Afghanistan's neighbouring countries.³³

As regards the existing counter-terrorism regional mechanism, Afghanistan has been a member of two regional organisations; South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). SAARC has been among the first regional organisations that adopted binding treaty regarding counter terrorism. During the third Summit held in Kathmandu in November 1987, the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism was adopted that came into effect on August 2, 1988, following its ratification by member states.³⁴

An Additional Protocol was adopted at twelfth Summit held at Islamabad in 2004, to modify the Convention in accordance to Security Council Resolution 1373 and the International Convention for Suppression of Financing of Terrorism. The Additional Protocol entered into force on December 6, 2006 after ratification of member states. It has criminalised the collection and acquisition of funds for terrorist purposes as well as it has empowered states to deny refugee status to a person who had committed terrorism related offense.³⁵ Given the nature of relations between SAARC member states, the effectiveness of SAARC counter-terrorism measures remained questionable.

The second regional mechanism regarding terrorism has been SCO's Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Extremism and Separatism that was adopted on June 15, 2001 and entered into force on March 29, 2003. Besides terrorism, the convention also identified extremism and separatism as equally important threats.³⁶ While adhering to universal initiatives to

combat terrorism, it has adopted its own definitions on account of regional realities and has created Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) represented by national security services. It aims at enhancing coordination as well as data-exchanging with member states along with blacklisting individuals and organisations.

In 2009, to bring clarity to definitional aspects, terrorism has been defined as equivalent to political violence to achieve objectives by influencing decision makers through threats of violence or intimidation of individuals, society or state. Incorporation of new provisions allowed member states to enter the territory of other states (with permission of the concerned state) in pursuit of any suspect.³⁷ Given the military nature of prevalent counter-terrorism approaches, SCO also considers the application of International Humanitarian Law in dealing with these evils.

As compared to SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism, Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Extremism and Separatism seems more comprehensive and effective instrument to deal with the Afghan issue. Moreover, it was formulated in the wake of emanating threats from Afghanistan and presence of China and Russia as member states enhances its political value. However, counter terrorism regional mechanisms have been insufficient to deal with menace of terrorism and needs to be supplemented by UN regulated bodies and watchdogs to monitor the developments in Afghanistan.

Lack of Effective Border Management

Besides the presence of non-state actors on Afghan soil and Taliban's denial and lack of action against them, another major hindrance in the materialisation of regional security cooperation has been the lack of trust between Afghanistan and the regional states. Regional states have been apprehensive of Taliban's decision to deploy armed militias on borders as border security forces. They have been concerned about true identity of these militias, their capability as well as intentions to check illegal migration, smuggling of drugs, military equipment and ammunition. Similarly, Afghanistan has been raising questions about the infiltration of anti-Taliban forces in the country. It has been showing concern about regional states' unwillingness except Iran to hand over military equipment worth billions of dollars that was left by the US forces (it either was in possession of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) that fled to neighbouring states or got into the hands of common people which Taliban have already recovered). Neighbouring states' reluctance reflects their concerns about the future use of that ammunition and equipment.³⁸

The issue regarding border security between Afghanistan and its neighbouring states can be addressed by negotiations. Ensuring effective border management could check the illicit trade, flow of migrants as well as arms and drugs and will remove the major irritant, i.e., cross border movement of militants and terrorists. In this regard, Pakistan and Tajikistan have been vocal in expressing their concerns, Pakistan began working on fencing the porous border even before the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan but had been facing criticism not only from previous Afghan government but Taliban

also, with the continued policy of opposing border fencing as well as non-recognition of Durand Line as International boundary.

Apart from Pakistan, Tajikistan has been the second most concerned country regarding border security and has suggested establishing a 'security belt' around Afghanistan that could serve as a buffer against militants operating from Afghanistan and could also allay the concerns of Taliban regarding infiltration of anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan.³⁹ This proposal was endorsed by almost all the neighbouring countries showing their willingness to collaborate with Afghanistan in improving border management, providing professional training to border security forces and supplying border screening equipment.⁴⁰ A further proposal of joint patrolling could also be a feasible option as it will help removing misconceptions about each other's actions.

Lack of Water Sharing Mechanism – A Source of Conflict

Contrary to the expectations, the first issue that emerged as a contentious subject between Afghanistan and its neighbouring states has been the water issue that even led to skirmishes between Afghanistan and Iran. Afghanistan has five river basins, i.e., River Oxus (Amu Darya) streaming towards Central Asian Republics (i.e., Uzbekistan and Tajikistan); Murgab shared with Turkmenistan; Harirud with Iran and Turkmenistan; the Helmand River streaming towards Iran and Kabul River in the Indus Basin, streaming towards Pakistan.⁴¹ Afghanistan has been an upstream country but due to lack of water infrastructure, it has been losing almost 75 per cent of its water to neighbouring states.⁴² Moreover, only one of Afghanistan's rivers is regulated by water-sharing agreement while others are being governed

with regard to international customary law on the basis of principle of equitable share of water. After 9/11, while facing shortage of water, successive Afghan governments have been planning the construction of dams but the process was accelerated by the Taliban government, however, enhancing the chances of conflicts with the neighbouring states. In this regard, the two contentious issues that are mentioned below got prominence.

The first issue emerged in the north regarding the construction of 285 kilometre-long Qush Tepa Canal on Amu Darya⁴³ aiming at irrigating 50,000 hectares of land in three provinces of northern Afghanistan.⁴⁴ The construction work began in March 2022 and as per international law obligations, Afghanistan had to inform water sharing states before initiating construction but Taliban did not fulfil this obligation. After the completion of the canal, 15 per cent of water from Amu Darya will be diverted, leaving downstream Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan with shortage of water.⁴⁵ Afghanistan has been funding the project with its national budget and due to financial constraints, it has provided the contractors with mining rights instead of cash payments. In August 2023, a summit meeting was convened by three Central Asian Republics sharing borders with Afghanistan to discuss the situation regarding water sharing but these states have since been avoiding bringing up the issue with the Taliban government, mostly due to Taliban's reaction to Iranian objections.⁴⁶ Uzbekistan as a goodwill gesture offered technical assistance to Afghanistan to fix the technical fault causing the wastage of water.

The second water issue emerged in southern Afghanistan with the construction of dam over Helmand River, the longest

river (1000 kilometres) of Afghanistan that has paramount importance for irrigation of arid southern province. Afghanistan and Iran share water from Helmand River guided by the rules laid down in a treaty signed in 1973. The construction of dam could affect 70 per cent wheat production in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province.⁴⁷ Since Taliban took over in 2021, there have been occasional clashes over the issue but the latest clash in May 2023 resulted in a few casualties on both sides. Iran closed Malik-Zarang border post, an important commercial crossing and accused Afghanistan of its non-adherence to international law and border protocols.⁴⁸ The Taliban's disregard is evident from the fact that in the middle of negotiations with Iranian officials, Afghanistan announced the construction of Bakhshabad dam on Farah Rud, another river flowing into Iran.

The third water conflict likely to erupt in the near future might be between Pakistan and Afghanistan over construction of dam on river Kabul. The river basin covers 53,000 square kilometres within Afghanistan and 14,000 square kilometres within Pakistan.⁴⁹ The construction of planned dams will result in reduction of water flow into Pakistan affecting irrigation and electricity generation in the north-western region.

Afghanistan's disregard of the concerns of neighbouring states can be attributed to the fact that Afghanistan exports almost 75 per cent of its electricity from other states while aspiring to be self-sufficient in hydroelectric projects. Moreover, the construction of dams will help irrigating lands in southern Afghanistan where water demand has been continuously rising after Taliban banned poppy cultivation and farmers shifted to cultivating alternative more water intensive crops.⁵⁰

Regional Initiatives – Way to Peace and Stability

After highlighting challenges that may contribute in generating insecurity, it is pertinent to identify areas of cooperation that seem comparatively less contentious and could have potential to enhance stability and security in the region.

Economic Initiatives – Regional Connectivity Projects

Given the logic of economic interdependence, economic incentives bring about a change in government policies by reducing the motivations for conflict. As regards Afghanistan's resource base, according to estimates it has been blessed with huge mineral resources; copper, iron ore, lithium, and rare earth worth at least \$ 1 trillion.⁵¹ These resources have remained untapped and could not be utilised initially due to financial constraints and later due to conflict and war that had plagued Afghanistan for decades. Dictated by geography, Afghanistan has served as a historical trade route and due to its geo-strategic location, it has always been portrayed as a hub of trade, energy and transport corridors to ensure its economic survivability. In this regard, many ambitious connectivity projects were proposed from time to time in the past three decades but these could not be materialised due to insecurity and instability in Afghanistan.

After Taliban's assumption of power in 2021, the debate about Afghanistan's economic survival has been renewed. Landlocked Central Asian states identify the significance of connectivity with South Asian states to increase their economic viability and political relevance in regional politics. Major road and rail networks through Afghanistan can provide these states

access to either Chinese-built Gwadar or Russia-India funded Chabahar Port.⁵²

In this regard, a major challenge faced by Central Asian states has been lack of collective intra-regional collaborative efforts for trade and economic activity. Moreover, they lack resources to fund their projects and rely on foreign investment.⁵³ Over the years, these states have developed economic relations with China that has been funding their major projects and has become their largest trading partner, surpassing Russia. In 2022, China's trade with the Central Asian states amounted to US\$ 70 billion whereas Russia's trade accounted for US\$ 40 billion.⁵⁴

It is worth noting that keeping in view China's non-interference policy, the Taliban officials have sought Chinese investment to sustain the aid-dependent economy.⁵⁵ In 2008, China was given mining rights of Mes Aynak copper mine in the Logar province that has been estimated as the second largest copper reserve in the world.⁵⁶ The second important bilateral project signed in 2012 was oil extraction project from Amu Darya basin but due to fall of Ghani government the project has been re-negotiated by the Taliban government with China making it the first major foreign investment project in Afghanistan after Taliban's rise to power.⁵⁷

Encouraged by China's lead in economic sphere, Central Asian states also negotiated with the Taliban regarding developing transport networks.⁵⁸ Uzbekistan, a double landlocked state concerned about its logistical issues established Free Economic Zone Termez in 2018 and later in 2020, Termez International Trade Centre was established extending facilities for storage, logistics and services to the traders.⁵⁹ To increase connectivity, Uzbekistan had proposed 760 kilometre-long

Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railroad project that will pass through Termiz, Mazar-I-Sharif, Logar, Peshawar reducing cargo delivery time by five days. The three countries have already signed a roadmap strategic plan to construct a 573 kilometre Trans-Afghan railway connecting Central Asia with Arabian Sea ports.⁶⁰ Similarly, Iran critical of Taliban's policies to marginalise Shiite Hazara community in the north has not abandoned its proposals, developing Chabahar port and linking it with rail road that will connect to Herat and further northward to Azerbaijan and Russia.⁶¹

Like Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan has shown its willingness to continue with the projects that were launched before the Taliban takeover. It has been negotiating with the Taliban government to restart working on the Afghan part of TAPI and its associated projects. Islamic Development Bank has funded the construction of infrastructure on Turkmenistan side and may fund the same on the Afghan side as well. Western countries and their agencies have adopted a hands-off approach on projects regarding Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover.⁶² As regards Tajikistan, World Bank suspended work on CASA-1000, of which 15 per cent work was completed and rest was under construction. The resumption of work will depend on Taliban's future policies and its relations with Tajikistan as it has been the only Central Asian country not to allow the visit of Afghan delegation.⁶³

The lack of material resources has left Afghanistan as well as Central Asian states on the mercy of external powers to fund the projects. United States had been supporting the regional connectivity projects but the Taliban takeover has changed its policies towards Afghanistan. Russia's involvement in the

Ukraine War and imposition of sanctions has constrained it from funding mega economic connectivity projects in Central Asia or Afghanistan. China seems to be the only major power having capability and will to pursue such projects on long term basis.

Climate Diplomacy – Need for Collective Action

Central Asia has been highly vulnerable to climate change and climate impacts can be observed in the form of melting glaciers, unstable river flow, unusual droughts and floods as well as declining agricultural productivity that ultimately lead to enhancing economic inequalities and inter-state political conflicts over distribution of scarce water resources.⁶⁴ It is estimated that due to changing climate patterns almost 15 per cent drop in water volume of Syr Darya and Amu Darya Basin is expected by 2050.⁶⁵

As per statistics of Global Climate Risk Index (2019), Afghanistan was ranked as sixth most affected country by climate impacts.⁶⁶ Due to melting glaciers and unseasonal rains, Afghanistan has experienced three devastating flash floods. It also underwent the worst drought in last three decades that affected 25 out of 34 provinces, destroying livelihood of 80 per cent of the population.⁶⁷ These climate impacts were highlighted by former President Ashraf Ghani while addressing United Nations General Assembly's 75th session on September 23, 2020 where he called for seeking a regional solution, imitating international models to address the challenge of climate change.⁶⁸

Like every field, Taliban regime also changed the climate policies and abolished the National Water Affairs Regulation Authority (NWARA) that had been established by the previous

government to oversee water management in the country. After Taliban came to power, technical experts, including head of Afghanistan's National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) fled the country.

Following the overall policy, Afghanistan was excluded from global climate change initiatives and its access was blocked to key UN climate funds including Green Climate Fund (GCF). The Conference of the Parties (COP) Bureau of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) announced the non-recognition of any Afghan institution as representative of Afghanistan (fearing that Afghanistan's inclusion in the process might grant recognition to Taliban regime).⁶⁹ Later, Afghanistan was not invited at COP28 climate change conference held in Dubai in November-December 2023. Moreover, with economic and developmental sanctions in place, the climate related projects for Afghanistan have also been halted including \$ 21.4 million rural solar energy project backed by the International Green Climate Fund (GCF) and \$ 36 million project to create a national carbon inventory funded by the Global Environment Facility.⁷⁰

In this regard, an initiative was taken in September 2023 when an EU-funded climate adaptation project worth 3.3 million Euros was negotiated by the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee (NAC) for capacity building of local communities in seven provinces, enabling them to learn climate-smart agriculture techniques and natural resource management.⁷¹

As regards regional initiatives, The Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program, a group of 11 countries from Central Asia, South Asia, Caucasus, Mongolia and China has been working to increase regional cooperation to

mitigate the challenges confronted by climate change such as clean energy generation, water resource and disaster management.⁷² In this context, Central Asia Climate Change Conference 2024 (CACCC-24) was also held in Almaty, Kazakhstan in May 2024 to discuss the issues related to climate change and to explore ways to enhance collective efforts.⁷³

Conclusion

Afghanistan due to its geographical prominence has been instrumental in evolving security dynamics in the broader region. After two years in power, Taliban's approach to key issues seems less compromising as it has not complied with the provisions of peace deal with the US, formation of inclusive government, promotion of women rights and denying space to terrorists. Keeping in view the ethnic polarisation in Afghanistan (as infighting among different ethnic groups caused foreign interference in Afghan affairs), the formation of inclusive government has been a pre-requisite for not only ensuring peace and stability inside the country but also determining the future role of Afghanistan in regional affairs. Mounting resistance against the Taliban rule has been reported in the northern Afghanistan and the Taliban's continuation of policies vis-a-vis marginalisation of women and ethnic minorities will provide recruits to opposing factions, thus enhancing the chances of conflict.

Due to Taliban's non-compliance with the provisions of the Doha Agreement, the regime was denied formal recognition and Western states as well as international organisations initially refused to deal with the Taliban. Notwithstanding such policy, regional and neighbouring states including Russia and China

having high stakes in the peace and stability of Afghanistan and the region have been engaging the Taliban and have accorded quasi-recognition to the Taliban government but durable relations will depend on reflection of political will by the Taliban in addressing the issues of concern.

Regional security and stability hinges on Afghanistan's peace and stability as continued Afghan conflict has hindered the development of the whole region. The contentious political issues such as presence of non-state actors, counter terrorism, water issues and lack of border management have the potential to lead to conflict and their resolution will take time but non-traditional issues such as climate change and economic ventures should be given priority as these can enhance challenges to human security as well.

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