

AFGHANISTAN IMBROGLIO: IMPACT ON THE CENTRAL ASIAN STATES

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Abstract

This paper attempts to find the dynamism in Afghanistan's relations with Central Asian states. It is explained that prosperity without security is not possible and ongoing imbroglio in Afghanistan is directly affecting Central Asian states. The Central Asian states are surrounded by China, Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. These states (with significant influence of India and Turkey) are the key regional players and their socio-economic and political interests are converged on various issues. The political conditions in Afghanistan would directly impact the interests of Central Asian states. Drug trafficking, illegal migration, religious extremism, a ramified corrupt network, porous border and terrorism are subverting peace in Afghanistan and its spillover effects are dangerous for Central Asian states. The military and security situation in Afghanistan has a direct impact on the production and transport of energy from Central Asia to the rest of the world. The response of the regional organizations, particularly the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), with certain commonalities, towards these issues often contrasts with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This paper focuses on the efforts of major powers (Russia, China, and the US) along with neighbouring countries in the peacebuilding in Afghanistan to avoid its spillover effects over Central Asian states.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Central Asia, Peace, Security, SCO, the US, China.

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Introduction

Afghanistan is an important regional state, surrounded by Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Iran. Afghanistan has remained a focus of the great powers during the old 'great game' and it still has strategic importance. Any kind of political developments inside Afghanistan has a direct impact on Central Asia countries. Afghanistan affects the Central Asian countries in many ways. First, the absolute geographic value of the Central Asian states, due to their neighbourhood to nuclear powers, carries a potential of friction between the great powers and even amongst the regional countries. The presence of the United States (US) in Afghanistan is considered, by many scholars, as the part of 'new great game'. If the US extends its presence in Afghanistan (which would be indirect, more likely, as seen in the light of the new South Asia Policy of the Trump administration), the international and regional powers would feel threatened. The possible stay of the US in Afghanistan will verify that the US purposefully intervened and stayed in Afghanistan to become advantageous in the new 'great game'. The second important aspect is the wide range of socio-political issues in Afghanistan and the occurrence of political turmoil, in form of civil war and revolutions, in Central Asian states shows magnetic force between the two regions. The infiltration of extremist elements into Central Asia from Afghanistan, drug trafficking, illegal migration and the possible risk of the replication of Taliban like experiment in Central Asia, are some serious concerns of Central Asian leaders. The third facet is the means of engagement used by great powers in Afghanistan are directly involved in Central Asian states. Stakeholders of state-building in Afghanistan are using Central Asian states as an instrument of their influence. Moreover, the role regional and international organization, including the SCO, CSTO and NATO in Afghanistan is based both on cooperation and conflict.¹

Central Asia states, being part of the SCO, have an important role in the state building processes in Afghanistan. SCO has a key role in integrating the economic interests of the various countries in the region, particularly member states. Thus, the Central Asian states are also linked with the political developments in Afghanistan, which reflects their concerns towards the internal peace and stability in Afghanistan. The fourth aspect is the security impact of Afghanistan imbroglio over the energy and other trade transport of the Central Asian states with the South Asian countries. For example, some rail transport projects connecting Afghanistan with the Central Asian states are seriously compromised due to the security uncertainty in Afghanistan. Moreover, the TAPI gas pipeline project,

¹Irina Ionela Pop, "Russia, EU, NATO, and the Strengthening of the CSTO in Central Asia." *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 3, No. 3 (2009): 278.

originating from Turkmenistan, is at the mercy of security in Afghanistan. The 6+3 proposals by the President of Uzbekistan, back in 2008,² revealed the interests and stakes of the Central Asian states in Afghanistan. According to this proposal, the problems of one's own country should be solved by the Afghans themselves with the assistance of all interested parties, which appears suitable even today.

In this backdrop, the study is set to answer the question of how can Central Asian states avoid the spillover effects of the socio-economic instability in Afghanistan? Moreover, how do the security situation of Afghanistan effects the political developments in the Central Asian states? This study will make an important contribution to the issue of peace and stability in Afghanistan as a factor in Central Asian politics. Different perspectives are being examined and possible way outs are suggested to avoid negative effects of instability.

Historical Lens

Afghanistan had been an important neighbour of the Soviet Union, both shared long border which made it a key factor in the security of the Soviet Union during Cold war era and Moscow itself had held an important place in the foreign policy of Afghanistan.³ After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Central Asian states, viz Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, have emerged as new neighbours of Afghanistan. The porous border of Afghanistan is an important factor adding the prominence of Central Asian states where Tajikistan has almost 1344 KM long border, Turkmenistan 744 KM (approx.) and Uzbekistan shares almost 140 KM long border with Afghanistan.⁴ Keeping in view the geographical proximity of Central Asian states with Afghanistan, it appears that Afghanistan was historically linked to the political developments in the Central Asian countries.⁵ During the 'old great game', both the British Empire and the Soviet Union tried to influence Afghanistan to safeguard their interests. For that, Afghanistan had to pay a huge price in the form of three Anglo-Afghan wars. Later, Afghanistan was sandwiched between the two superpowers and thus remained a conflict zone for decades.

² 'Six Plus Three Group' on Afghanistan is a coalition of the six states bordering with Afghanistan (China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), plus the United States NATO and Russia.

³ Shirin Tahir Kheli, "The Soviet Union in Afghanistan: Benefits and Costs", *Strategic Issues Research Memorandum*, (June 12, 1980), 1.

⁴ Saima Ashraf Kayani, "Afghanistan and Central Asian States (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan): Post 2014." *FWU Journal of Social Sciences* 1, No. 2 (2015): 44.

⁵ Afghanistan remained an important ground for the *Old Great Game* rivalry between the great powers.

At the time of independence of the Central Asian states, the government in Afghanistan (under the president of Najibullah Ahmadzai) started to crumble as it was also backed by the Soviet Union.⁶ The Najibullah government could not sustain itself for more than one year after the formation of newly independent states of Central Asia and it became a hurdle in the good bilateral relationships. With the fall of the Najibullah government in Afghanistan, a civil war erupted between Burhanuddin Rabbani and various factions of Mujahideen. Burhan Uddin Rabban, the president of Afghanistan from 1992 till 1996, however, had mere control over parts of the Kabul⁷ and major territories in Afghanistan were under the control of Mujahideen. During the civil war, the three neighbouring states including Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have approached the political situation in Afghanistan differently.

The Afghan-Uzbek military commander Abdul Rashid Dostum was supported by the government of Uzbekistan in the Civil war of Afghanistan. The role of Uzbekistan in this war was not welcomed by the central government of Afghanistan and the bilateral relationships remained cold; whereas, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan avoided playing any role in the civil war due to their internal weaknesses. After two years long civil war, the Central Asian states revisited their approach towards Afghanistan.⁸ Following the footprints of the international community, the five Central Asian states did not recognize the government of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Pakistan, were the only states gave recognition to the Taliban government. On the other hand, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were supporting the anti-Taliban movements in Afghanistan.⁹ Uzbekistan continued supporting Abdul Rashid Dostum due to the ethnic linkages, and his speeches, which he delivered publically against the Taliban. Tajikistan was also supporting the Rabbani led Northern Alliance (NA) to take back territorial control from the Taliban.

The NA was created after the Taliban's control of the capital of Afghanistan. The organization consisted of all major anti-Taliban groups, including Rabbani, Dostom, Ahmed Shah Masood, Marshall Qasim Faheem, Abdullah Abdullah and the breakaway factions of Mujahideen.¹⁰ The NA was able to retain Panjshir, Takhar provinces and parts of Badakhshan with the support of Tajikistan as these territories were located near the border of

⁶ Anthony Arnold, "Afghanistan." *In The New Insurgencies: Anticommunist Guerrillas in the Third World* (New York: Routledge, 2017): 248.

⁷ Ibid, 241.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (New York: IB Tauris, 2000): 67.

¹⁰ Conetta, Carl. "Strange Victory: A Critical Appraisal of Operation Enduring Freedom and Afghanistan War." *Afghan Digital Libraries* (2002): 6.

Tajikistan. Although the NA was failed to recapture Kabul from Afghanistan, they sustained their bases along the border of Tajikistan due to the support of the Government of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.¹¹ One hospital was also built in Tajikistan with the assistance of India to extend medical treatment to the wounded of NA. With India, Iran was also supporting NA indirectly, through Tajikistan. This shows that Tajikistan not only supported the Northern Alliance itself but provided logistics' support to other countries who were interested in helping the Northern Alliance against the Taliban rule in Afghanistan.¹²

Turkmenistan's relations with Afghanistan, during the period of the Taliban's rule, were more commercial than political. However, Ashgabat was trying to develop political relationships with the Taliban to safeguard their energy exports into the South Asian markets. It was during the reign of the Taliban government when the foreign minister of Turkmenistan Boris Shikhmuradov with his Afghan counterpart, Mawlawi Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil principally agreed to launch TAPI projects in 1997.¹³ Turkmenistan avoided to make any controversial statement about the government of the Taliban and remained neutral in the fight between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. Turkmenistan maintained its neutrality and offered mediation between Taliban and NA. The foreign minister of Turkmenistan, Shikhmuradov visited Afghanistan in 1999 to meet the Taliban leader Mullah Omar. Shikhmuradov tried to convince Mullah Omar to hold talks with the NA. Complying with the proposal by Turkmenistan, Taliban government met with the NA representatives in December 2000.¹⁴ The United Nations (UN) was also given observatory status during the talks; however, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were accused of a negative role during the talks between the Taliban's and NA. Consequently, the talks ended with no results. After talks with Mullah Omar, the government of Turkmenistan released 450 out of nearly 5000 Afghan prisoners as a goodwill gesture.¹⁵ Taliban helped, cooperated and patronized terrorist activities in Central Asian states.¹⁶ It was not only Tajikistan and Uzbekistan who played a role inside Afghanistan during the Taliban government but Taliban

¹¹ Ibid., 5.

¹² William Dalrymple, *A Deadly Triangle: Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2013): 11-21

¹³ Luca Anceschi, "Turkmenistan and the Virtual Politics of Eurasian energy: the Case of the TAPI Pipeline Project." *Central Asian Survey* 36, No. 4 (2017): 409-429.

¹⁴ Farkhod Tolipov, "Toward Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan: The Perspective of the Bordering Central Asian Republics." *In the Regional Dimensions to Security* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 300-400.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jatin Kumar Mohanty, *Terrorism and Militancy in Central Asia* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2006), 118.

themselves hosted Central Asian militants and provided the training.¹⁷ The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) was used by the Taliban to overthrow the secular government in Uzbekistan. Taliban wanted to ignite the sentiments for the Islamic revolution in Uzbekistan, to install a Sharia-based political system. Taliban also supported the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) in an effort to replace the government.¹⁸

Initially, the Taliban were not interested in the making of militants in Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan. Further, no empirical evidence has found the support of the Taliban in the establishment of the IMU.¹⁹ However, the end of the civil war in Tajikistan 1997 resulted in the relocation of some key members of the IMU, mostly took refuge in the safe havens inside Afghanistan. This was the point when the influence of the Afghan Taliban was increasing over the terrorist groups in Central Asia.²⁰ One of the key leaders of the IMU, Namangani, was given refuge by the Taliban government, who was the key leader of Tajikistan's civil war. After taking refuge in Afghanistan, Namangani also started establishing bases in key areas of Afghanistan adjacent to the border of Central Asia, with a purpose to organize and execute their activities. The Taliban government had publicly announced their support to the extremist groups of Central Asia, reasoning that, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan supported NA against the Taliban government.

Apart from the role of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in Afghanistan, the Taliban's were accepting people with common ideology from all around the world. Jihadists from the Middle East, Pakistan, India, and even Western countries were welcomed in the Taliban government. The support of the IMU by Afghan Taliban inspired the small-scattered religious groups to join IMU and execute their goals in an organized manner. Towards the end of 1999, the overall manpower strength of the IMU reached around 4000 in number.²¹ IMU leader, Namangani had relations with the Taliban high profile leadership, who coordinated all activities with them facilitating illegal trade with the Taliban to Central Asia.²² This was an explicit show of IMU-Taliban alliance and this stopped both sides' governments to build a good relationship.

Notwithstanding, the logistic support of the Taliban, IMU could not succeed in its objective to prompt people to bring Islamic revolution in Central

¹⁷ Farkhod Tolipov, "Toward Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan...."

¹⁸ Ibid., 400.

¹⁹ Sadibekov, Ulan. "Understanding the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan through social movement theory, and Analyzing and Evaluating its Potential Threat to Kazakhstan". *Naval Postgraduate School Monterey CA Defense Analysis Department* (2014).

²⁰ Kumar, Jatin and Mohanty, J.K., *Terrorism and Militancy in Central Asia.....*, 118.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Asia.²³ Overall, the relationship between Afghanistan and the Central Asian states had been disrupted for almost ten years, however, in 2001, the US toppled the Taliban government and a new epoch of strategic relations started. The post 9/11 era witnessed stable relationships between Afghanistan and the neighbouring Central Asian states but socio-economic and political instability in Afghanistan still hunts the political environment in Central Asia.²⁴

Factoring Afghanistan into Central Asia's Policy

Afghanistan appeared as an important actor once again in the new 'great game', its geostrategic importance is largely due to its location at the crossroads of migration and trade routes connecting the West and East of the region. This strategic importance of Afghanistan, allows it to play an important role in regional politics of Central Asia. It is quite natural that any kind of political development in Afghanistan will directly impact the politics of the Central Asian countries.

Afghanistan is going through multifaceted internal as well as external challenges, which are likely to haunt stability and peace in the country near future. Irrespective of the fact that a huge amount of external aid is spent over Afghanistan to resolve the ongoing conflict and establish a stable government, the country remains a highly destabilized and divided region in the world. The existing internal problems in Afghanistan includes insurgency, rentier economy, internal displacement of the population, illegitimate and fragmented government, failed institutions and the problem of repatriation of refugees.²⁵ These internal challenges in Afghanistan not only pose challenges to the country itself but the region at large. Insurgent groups along with warlords contributed in extremism and internal power struggle between different tribes have steered political instability. Lack of education, rough terrain, hilly areas with no access to roads and unemployment appeared as causative factors of poverty. Taliban took control in 1996, governed the illiterate poor population, and a large chunk of society became wild. The 9/11 incident added fuel to fire, several people, crossed borders to get refuge and entered in neighbouring countries.

The post-2001 war in Afghanistan is staged between the Islamist Taliban and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), supported by the Afghan government and the NA. The operation in Afghanistan namely Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), led by the US was launched in response to the 9/11 terrorists attack. Since 2001, the ISAF operates in

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Alisher Latypov, "Understanding post 9/11 drug control policy and politics in Central Asia." *International Journal of Drug Policy* 20, No. 5 (2009): 389.

²⁵ Strand, Arne. "Afghanistan: Challenges and Perspectives until 2020." *EU Publications* (2017).

Afghanistan under the UNSCR-1386. Though the main targeted group, Al-Qaeda has left Afghanistan, their hosts Taliban are resisting the ISAF operations. The Taliban are also considered as the subsidiary of the Al-Qaeda group and they maintain contacts with the main leadership of Al-Qaeda.²⁶ The extremist elements in Afghanistan have a spillover effect on the neighbouring countries, particularly Uzbekistan and Tajikistan countries are constantly facing the challenges of terrorists' infiltration from Afghanistan. The situation is serious because the religious freedom of Muslims was long suppressed by the Soviet Union in Central Asia and now they have the capacity to accept religious fundamentalism.²⁷ There is a fear both within Central Asia and the world that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) might take roots in the region. Afghanistan, being the safe haven for such terrorist organizations, can serve as the potential threat to the rise of religious fundamentalism in the Central Asian countries.

Hence, the Afghan factor in the politics of Central Asian countries has a significant role, due to its absolute geographical and ideological attachment. The Central Asian countries have an attraction to the world powers due to their juxtaposition to the nuclear countries, China, India, Russia, Pakistan and potentially Iran. The great powers, the US, China, and Russia have a convergence of economic and geographical interests in Central Asia.²⁸ In a struggle for the great powers to stretch muscles in Central Asia, they need to take into account the political, economic and social conditions in Afghanistan. This means, that the world powers cannot ignore Afghanistan in their pursuit to enhance influence in Central Asia. Afghanistan can either be a catalyst for a country to penetrate in the Central Asian countries, or it could potentially deter the entry into Central Asia.²⁹

An additional standpoint of the role of Afghanistan in the politics of Central Asian states is the presence of a wide range of destabilizing factors within Afghanistan, which could possibly infiltrate into the Central Asian countries. These include the religious extremism, illegal migration, drug trafficking, and a ramified corrupt network and terrorism. The presence of these subverting factors is not only a challenge to the Central Asian states but to the entire region. Central Asian states have been involved in Afghanistan and their role was predominantly 'non-neutral, however, the changing geopolitical dynamics in South and Central Asia has convinced all stakeholders to ensure peace and root out the support to terrorist networks.

²⁶ Anna Matveeva, "Russia's Changing Security Role in Central Asia." *European Security* 22, No. 4 (2013): 478-499.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Chien Peng Chung, "The Shanghai Co-operation Organization: China's Changing Influence in Central Asia." *The China Quarterly*, 180 (2004): 991.

²⁹ Ibid.

New regional alliances, such as CSTO and SCO, are equally important for Afghanistan, big powers (Russia, China) and Central Asian states.

Various countries have their positions over the current Afghan issue, which are determined by their geographical location with respect to Afghanistan, length of borders, ethnic similarities and other common interests in various spheres. Some of the common interests of the countries in Afghanistan are proclaimed through regional and international organizations, such as SCO, UN, NATO, CSTO, Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measure in Asia (CICA), Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Certainly, all the mentioned organizations provide a common ground for countries to cooperation against the destabilizing factors inside Afghanistan.³⁰ Though each of the above-mentioned organizations is important, the establishment of the SCO was a significant event in Afghanistan and Central Asia. The SCO is actively working on anti-terrorism and has established a Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) to both suppress terrorists inside countries and it protects the possible spill-over. The SCO member states are agreed on a point that the outflow of the Afghan terrorist groups will possibly challenge the region. In such an agreed pursuit, they tend to protect the Central Asian borders as well as it is for sure that the possible establishment of the religious fundamentalism in Central Asia will affect the whole region, including China and Russia.

In the broader spectrum, the formation of the SCO is taken as a response to the US increased presence in Central Asia. The role of SCO in establishing an anti-terrorist structure in the region is both cooperating and competing with NATO.³¹ This competition and cooperation among the great powers within Afghanistan are considered as a variable of the new 'great game' notion. Today, SCO is engaged in a wide range of activities, which includes regional economic integration and the settlement of the Afghan issue. Indeed, the settlement of the Afghan issue is pivotal for the success of the SCO agenda i.e. better economic and security situation in the region. SCO has highlighted that the settlement of the Afghan issue is not only a political and military issue but an economic issue as well.³² It is becoming clear to the great powers that the state building process in Afghanistan is not possible without economic incentives and reforms.

³⁰ Anna Matveeva, "Russia's Changing Security Role in Central Asia."

³¹ Ibid.

³² Simbal Khan, "Stabilization of Afghanistan: US/NATO Regional Strategy and the Role of SCO." in *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 7, No. 3, (2009).

Geopolitical Interests of Great Powers in Afghanistan and Central Asia

Undoubtedly, Afghanistan has become a part of a geopolitical puzzle in Central Asia. Therefore, its adjacent area, Central Asia, is also important for the world's leading industrial powers. They have both security and economic interests in the region. Presently the US, Russia, and China are involved in the region and the political commentators termed it the new 'great game'. Central Asia is a landlocked region, bordering with Afghanistan, and it is located at the heart of Asia.³³ The region is rich in natural resources, which provides an attraction for China, the US and Russia. In the pursuit of energy security, the US is looking for alternative options due to the fact that the Middle East is not sufficient to fulfil the energy demands. Moreover, the US is also concerned with China's geographical connectivity with the world market which would be through Central Asian states. On the other hand, Russia enjoys its historical influence over Central Asia. Russia would never let the Central Asian states fall in the Western camp.³⁴ In order to curb US influence in the region, Russia is relying more on its eastern partners. It is only the fear of the US influence in Central Asia that Russia is cooperating with China.³⁵ China is a growing economic power, and there is a nightmare in the US about the possible 'China's rise'; a bulk of literature is being produced over the hypothesis of China's rise in the Western World.³⁶ Apparently, China is increasing its influence throughout the world under the banner of mutual trade cooperation and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is becoming popular all over the world. Among the three big powers in Central Asia, China seems to be the winning one, due to the ever-growing economic corporation with the Central Asian states.

Afghanistan, being a historical buffer state between the formal British Empire and the Russian Empire, is facing several challenges to come out of old 'great game'. Since geography cannot be changed, the historical legacy of Afghanistan is still relevant. The regional proximity of Afghanistan with the Central Asian states makes it a fascination for the world powers. The eighteen years of the US long engagement in Afghanistan is often thought as part of the new 'great game'. However, regional actors, Afghanistan and the Central Asian states, must realize that their peaceful survival is subject to the peace in the region. They must not

³³ Colin S. Gray, "Nicholas John Spykman, The Balance of Power and International order." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, No. 6 (2015): 873-877.

³⁴ Alexander Frost, "The Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and Russia's Strategic Goals in Central Asia." in *China & Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 7, No. 3 (2009): 85-87.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁶ Chengxin Pan, *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics: Western Representations of China's Rise* (Cheltenham-UK, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2012): 2.

detach themselves from the ground realities in Afghanistan, reasonable policies need to be adopted for the sake of peaceful settlement of all dispute. The diplomatic settlement of the Afghan problem would be in the greater interest of the Central Asian states.

In the pursuit of the vested interests, the big powers have always been contributing, in one way or the other, to problems in Afghanistan through the Central Asian states. Actually, global power politics have been pushing great powers to use Taliban since long, however, at the critical juncture Central Asian states need to get closer to Kabul. Afghanistan, being the neighbours of the CAR possess a direct threat of extremist's infiltration into Tajikistan.³⁷ Tajikistan serves as a bridgehead, from where the extremist elements could possibly access the North and it is also considered the mainland where extremists have entered. There is already serious kind of reservations over Kyrgyzstan's situation, due to rising extremism and possible penetration of the extremist elements. The fundamentalists have entered into Tajikistan from Afghanistan, where they align with the homegrown religious fundamentalist groups, which further penetrate into Kyrgyzstan.

Tajikistan has already received (and still receiving) international assistance to enhance its role in fighting the illicit drug trafficking and to stop the inflow of the extremists' elements from Afghanistan. Tajikistan-Afghanistan border is considered to be the weakest in terms of control over the active illegal migration of goods and people. This is the reason; the international assistance is enabling Tajikistan to enhance the control of its Northern Route with Afghanistan. Russians played an active role in supporting the CAR to safeguard from the external threats, has withdrawn its border troops in 2004.³⁸ The withdrawal of the Russia forces increased the threat of possible infiltration from Afghanistan.³⁹ Though the leading world powers, including the US and China, have supported Tajikistan, in enhancing border management, the complete control over the cross-border movement is not possible in the existing arrangements. Tajikistan is also working as an active transit route for the Afghan illegal drug (Opium) trade with the rest of the world.⁴⁰

An important perspective of the Afghan role in the political situation of the Central Asian state is the impact of the former on the transport of energy products of the latter. The security situation in

³⁷ A. H. Mohammadov and Morteza Ashrafi. "Investigating The Challenges of Religious Extremism in Central Asia and its Impact On the National Security of the Surrounding Nations." *Revista Quid* 1, No. 1 (2017): 8.

³⁸ Anna Matveeva, "Russia's Changing Security Role in....."

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Anna Gussarova, "Current Challenges to Central Asia and Afghanistan: Towards a Better World". *Central Asia Institute for Strategic Studies (CAISS) Expert*, (2016): 66.

Afghanistan is directly hindering the transport of energy products from Central Asia to the neighbouring energy deficient countries. For instance, Uzbekistan had constructed a railway line from the Hayraton to Mazari Sharif in 2010,⁴¹ but its operation remained halted due to the security challenges. It would have been a great opportunity to start cargo operations between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, but the bad security situation does not allow the two countries to do so. Similarly, another important rail network project is near to its completion, connecting the Uzen line in Kazakhstan, Kyzylkava, Bereket, Etrek in Turkmenistan and Gorgan in Iran.⁴² So, this important rail project will connect the three countries without relying on Uzbekistan. This tri-nation railway network will also remain under the shadow of extremist's threat.⁴³ The third important energy project is the Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India (TAPI) gas pipeline.⁴⁴ For Turkmenistan, Afghanistan attaches significant importance as it would be the shortest route of import and export with Pakistan and India.

Pakistan and India are the two important competing nations in South Asia and both are energy starved states. Islamabad has signed various agreements with Central Asian states to fetch energy as it is direly needed in industrialized (developed) nations. China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is worth mentioning here through which infrastructure building and industrialization is on its way in Pakistan. On the other side of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan is seeking potential markets to sell its energy in Pakistan and India and working on the TAPI project. However, the success of TAPI lies over the mercy of security and political situations in Afghanistan. Until and unless there is complete political stability in Afghanistan the TAPI project will remain unsuccessful.⁴⁵

Role of Central Asian States in Peace Building

Just like great powers, the Central Asian states have realized the importance of peace and political stability in Afghanistan for their respective development. For this is the reason, some countries have taken initiatives and participated in the resolution of the Afghan issue, the role of Kazakhstan as a non-permanent member of UNSC is pertinent. Kazakhstan does not share a border with Afghanistan, yet it is knotted through historic trading

⁴¹ Andrew C. Kuchins, Jeffrey Mankoff and Oliver Backes. *Central Asia in a Reconnecting Eurasia: Uzbekistan's Evolving Foreign Economic and Security Interests* (Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015): 14-25.

⁴² Gurt. Marat. "Landlocked Central Asia Gets Shorter Railway Link to the Persian Gulf" (Reuters, 2014).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ariel Cohen, Lisa Curtis and Owen Graham. "The Proposed Iran-Pakistan-India Gas Pipeline: An Unacceptable Risk to Regional Security." *Heritage Foundation, Washington, DC*, 30 (2008): 37-49.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

routes. Kazakhstan has observed its two-year term as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC) to focus on the Afghan situation. In 2018, it has organized a visit of Security Council members to Afghanistan.⁴⁶ Moreover, Uzbekistan also remained an active supporter of the peace process in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan, under President Karimov, has proposed the 6+3 formula in 2008 at Bucharest.⁴⁷ He suggested that under the guidance of the UN, the Afghan problem should be resolved by the Afghans themselves and interested parties should only provide logistical support to the local people in settling their disputes. The interested parties in Afghan crises include the US, NATO, and Russia, these states are on the background while other countries directly bordering Afghanistan

The president of Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev, at the NATO summit in 2010, provided the directions of its country towards the Afghanistan situation.⁴⁸ He insisted on four key areas to uplift the situation in Afghanistan; first, the international coalition support to Afghanistan, be increased; secondly, the need to fight against the drug threat in Afghanistan. Third, the rehabilitation of the socio-economic condition and the fourth point was the utilization of all forms of conflict resolution strategies and relations to resolve the conflict in Afghanistan. Nazarbayev also insisted on abandoning the external influence in enforcing decision over Afghanistan.⁴⁹ He supported the maximum role of the local Afghans in the conflict resolution mechanism within Afghanistan.⁵⁰

The Afghanistan peace settlement process also provides an opportunity for the Central Asian states to get rid out of their perennial problems and it would be helpful in making them strong regional states. They can potentially offer good offices for both negotiations among important external stakeholders as well as inter-Afghanistan peace dialogue. Apart from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan due to their controversial relationship with IMU, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan are the most suitable countries to host any possible future negotiations over the settlement of Afghanistan. All of these three countries have minimal stakes in Afghanistan, thus their neutrality, as well as regional proximity, would be an advantage in the negotiations. Kazakhstan carries considerable experience to organize important international forums. The combined efforts of these three

⁴⁶ Luke Coffey, "Central Asian Role in the Afghan Peace Process should not be Overlooked", *Arab News*. (September 26, 2018), <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1378286>.

⁴⁷ Simbal Khan, "Stabilization of Afghanistan: US/NATO Regional Strategy and the Role of SCO." in *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 7, No. 3, (2009): 14.

⁴⁸ Kassymzhanova and M. Dutta. "Activities of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the United Nations on international security issues". *Buketov Karaganda State University*, (Kazakhstan 2017): 53.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

countries would also introduce them as influential regional countries. The Central Asian states have been passive with no representation in world politics since their independence. Despite the strategic importance of this region, the countries have mostly adopted an inward-looking approach, with minimal external engagement. However, in the age of global interdependence, there is a need to play their part both at the regional and international level and now Afghanistan seems to be a potential test case for the neighbouring countries.

Turkmenistan, with its energy-rich resources and distinctive foreign policy feature, have enjoyed stable relations with Afghanistan even during the Taliban regime, therefore it has the potential to engage Afghanistan in various trade agreements. The TAPI gas pipeline project and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan electricity transmission (TAP- 500 KV) is significant proof of its endeavours to bringing peace in the region. Moreover, other commercial activities of Central Asian states with Afghanistan are in line to replace harshness into softness. The Central Asia-South Asia power project (CASA-1000), the Lapis Lazuli Corridor to connect Afghanistan with the Caspian Sea, and the railway project aiming to connect nations including China, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Georgia, and Turkey⁵¹ are some of the promising projects in the region. All of the stated developments are showing the intent of regional integration and it can also transform the present day conflicts into cooperation.

Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, despite having no direct border with Afghanistan, remain interested in resolving the Afghan conflict. Kazakhstan has long been active in providing support to Afghanistan in the economic and humanitarian fields. The main concern of the leader of Kazakhstan was combating drug trafficking, restoring the economy and the social sphere of Afghan society.⁵² Nazarbayev proposed to strengthen the OSCE's mission in the region, which anticipates the development of the peace process in Afghanistan, particularly in the post-withdrawal period.⁵³ Nazarbayev was of the opinion that there is a need to address the very root causes of the challenges in Afghanistan by the Afghans themselves, instead of relying on coercive means to overcome challenges. For Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan is a relevant issue because of the activation of militants and drug traffickers who

⁵¹ Saeed Ahmed, Anzar Mahmood, Ahmad Hasan, Guftaar Ahmad Sardar Sidhu and Muhammad Fasih Uddin Butt. "A Comparative Review of China, India and Pakistan Renewable Energy Sectors and Sharing Opportunities." *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews*, 57 (2016): 216-225.

⁵² Dadabaev, Timur. "We Want a State of Our Own!" Reconstructing Community Space in Bordering Areas of Central Asia." *The Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies*, 2 (2015): 9-32.

⁵³ Rytövuori-Apunen, Helena ed., *The Regional Security Puzzle around Afghanistan: Bordering Practices in Central Asia and Beyond*. Verlag Barbara Budrich, (2016).

penetrate the territory of Kyrgyzstan from Afghanistan through Tajikistan. Over the past few years, the local Islamist groups, mostly young Uzbeks and Kyrgyz from the southern regions, have been trained in Afghanistan.

Thus, the countries of Central Asia are interested in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan, which can lead to the rise of their own economies. Since the geo-economic situation of Afghanistan can be used by the Central Asian republics to develop trans-regional interactions with important actors such as India, Pakistan and Iran. In this regard, the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan was the creation of the contact group "6+3". This initiative is based on the idea of the leading role of the Afghans themselves in resolving the conflict. The active support of other regional and extra-regional stakeholders would be extremely helpful.

Recommendations

After 9/11, the world powers have realized the importance of Central Asian states and Afghanistan. It has become obvious that peace in Afghanistan is not possible with the cooperation of its neighbouring states. Therefore, all stakeholders of peace in Afghanistan focus on Central Asian states too. Moreover, the Afghan government needs to learn how to draw maximum benefits from geographical proximity with resource-rich Central Asia. In order to ensure regional peace and prosperity, few recommendations are given below;

- Great powers (US, Russia and China) have a responsibility to respect the sovereignty of Afghanistan and its people. Eighteen years of failed state-building efforts of the US in Afghanistan shows that the sustainable solution lies within Afghanistan and no external power can bring peace with force. However, the economic help, for commercial activities including small businesses, should be continued as this would reduce frustration and terrorist activities.
- Militancy in Afghanistan is barring China and other neighbouring countries to conduct trade through Afghanistan. Direct talks with the Afghan Taliban may be helpful to bring the local population in confidence. Moreover, China and Russia should, directly or indirectly, facilitate the regional countries particularly the businessmen of Central Asian states to forge trade linkages with Afghanistan.
- Turkmenistan and Pakistan, being neighbouring states, enjoy a considerable advantage over the rest of the countries. These two countries can positively use their influence convincing the Taliban's for negotiations and foreshadowing peace in the region.
- In order to safeguard the Central Asian states from any possible infiltrations of the extremist elements from Afghanistan, joint security

arrangements are of great advantage and its true implementation would be credible.

- Drug Trafficking and the cross-border infiltration of extremist elements have been sources of disruption between the relationships of Afghanistan and neighbouring Central Asian states. However, the way out of these problems lies in the permanent solution to the existing problems of Afghanistan. The representation of different factions in government may be helpful in mitigating skirmishes between local tribes and government.
- The reconstruction and state-building in Afghanistan should be the priority of the regional organizations. Moreover, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) can win the trust of people by ensuring education and health.
- China, as a neighbouring state of Afghanistan and Central Asia, should use its economic leverage to unite all these states because their unity would be the security of other stakeholders.

Conclusion

The security situation in Afghanistan has direct effects on its neighbouring states and it can be anticipated that instability in Afghanistan would halt regional prosperity. Neighbouring states of Afghanistan, particularly Central Asian states have been obstructed by the internal instability and external powers' involvement in Afghanistan. The establishment of political stability in Afghanistan will benefit the whole region. Today, the world powers, the US, Russia and China who have vested interests in Afghanistan, are active with their humanitarian mission in Afghanistan and the local Afghan settlements scenarios are all keen in resolving the Afghan crises. However, it has become clear that the use of military force is not the solution of Afghan crises and comprehensive non-violent solutions (including economic, political and military) need to be explored to deal with the Afghan crises. In order to make Central Asia a prosperous region, Afghanistan must not be dealt as insulator state, it is the time to convert it into a bridge between South and Central Asia. In this regard, economic activities, education and better health facilities can be effective and efficient tools to lessen frustration. Increased trade, road links with Central Asian states, more investments on recreational facilities and infrastructure building will be helpful in shifting Afghanistan from militancy to mildness. China's role has become pertinent in steering peace in Afghanistan and ensuring stability in Central Asia. SCO is an opportunity for all of its members to boost regional interdependency and resolve the problems in Afghanistan. All members of SCO, regardless of differences, should put their efforts to exterminate violence from Afghanistan because peaceful Central Asia would only be a dream without the settlement of

issues in Afghanistan. Central Asia is a proven hub of energy resources; its access to the open market would not be possible without a harmonious environment in Afghanistan. The economic incentives and the availability of alternative trade options can possibly bring a change in the illegal production of drugs. For this, all the active players in Central Asia must promote regional integration, infrastructure developments and trade promotion with Afghanistan.

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