

Indian Outreach in Iran & Afghanistan: Regional Implications with Focus on Pakistan

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Abstract:

Confluence of South, Central and West Asia, by virtue of its juxtaposition to world's largest hydrocarbon reserves and owing to its proximity to Arabian Sea, Central Asian Republics (CARs), China and Russia, offers a space to various regional and global players to control and monitor the entire region. Presence of extra regional forces in Afghanistan, Western commitment to eliminate religious extremism and terrorism, Sino-Russian concerns of containing US hegemony, Indian desire to dominate Pakistan's backyard and Iranian efforts to attract economic wealth of CARs are few of the indicators which can be regarded as the sideshows of "The New Great Game". Indian current collaboration with Iran and Afghanistan can primarily be attributed to its energy security, access to Central Asia and its enduring rivalry with Pakistan. Geographically situated in between, Pakistan views Indian growing outreach in Afghanistan and Iran with considerable alarm as the emerging scenario appears to endorse Indian ambitions of strategic encirclement of Pakistan. "Indian Outreach in Afghanistan/ Iran – Regional Implications with Focus on Pakistan" highlights Indian motives, factors facilitating Indian ingress, how Indian presence in Afghanistan/ Iran will affect regional security calculus and how it is detrimental to national security of Pakistan.

Keywords: Chabahar Port, Economic Wealth, Religious extremism, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan.

Introduction:

World politics has continuously been very vibrant due to fluctuating international political scenario. The variation in global order from bi-polarity to uni-polarity though has culminated into supremacy of USA yet; the power politics is still unbridled. Balance of the global chess-board has been transformed and now control over the energy resources has become the leading motive of the great powers to proclaim their influence in the world politics. For sustaining global economy, hydrocarbon reserves of Central and West Asia are considered vital by each of the global player and there is an imperialistic competition to have an access and control of these resources. The complex game entails security, geopolitical and economic interests not only of Russia, China, USA, Iran and the entire Europe but it is equally critical for India and Pakistan.¹

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Over and above her economic and energy related objectives, Indian outreach in Iran and Afghanistan has also been Pakistan centric with a view to interdict her economic interests, destabilize her western parts, deny friendly relations with neighbourly Muslim countries and pose a two front dilemma.² With Taliban having been ousted from command and Afghan government manned heavily by pro-Indian executives, India has increased its involvement in Afghanistan and is seeking to marginalize Pakistan's role in its war-ravaged neighbour.³ At the same time, India has taken a determined stride into Iran and Central Asia and extending its economic and diplomatic activities throughout the region. Obstinate power struggle coupled with hegemonic designs of proponents of Maha Bharata are therefore; a potent threat not only to Pakistan's security but also have grave consequences for the peace and security of region as well as the world.

Indian Ingress in Afghanistan/ Iran

Before embarking upon the examination of Indian ingress in Afghanistan/ Iran, it is essential to examine evolution of Indian strategic thoughts, her perceived role and strategic design in the region:-

Evolution of Indian Strategic Thoughts:

Evolution of Indian strategic thought dates back to times of Kautalya Chankya whose treatise "Arthashastra" spells out principles of foreign policy.⁴ The salient's are: -

- Aspiration to enhance power and area/ territory.
- Be suspicious/ on guard with regard to bordering states/ neighbors.
- Establish friendly relations with those who are neighbor of enemies.
- Friendship with others should always aim at acquiring benefits.
- All the times be ready for war utilizing all available ploys.
- In war, be merciless/ ruthless.
- Use of psychosomatic warfare, sabotage and propaganda must be made against rivals/ other states.
- Infiltrate own agents in order to act as "fifth columnists".
- Bribery and methods resulting into economic strangulation of enemy states must be resorted to.
- Traitors/ collaborators must be bought at all cost.
- Whenever you are in a stronger position or the enemy is in disorder, you must strike even if you have "peace treaty" with him.
- Using all type of weaponry for destruction of adversary is legitimate.

India's Perceived Role and Strategic Design in the Region:

Gist of perceived Indian designs is appended below: -

- Curtail and diminish sway of external powers in South Asia.
- Bring littorals of the Afro – Asian region under her influence by projecting power and flexing her muscles.
- Economic and political strangulation of Pakistan in the region/ world.
- Achieving the status of a permanent member of United Nation's Security Council.
- Developing good relations with USA, Israel and Europe.
- Strengthen her military apparatus to the extent that it facilitates executing her political policies.
- Overcoming the internal security problems in Kashmir, Assam and Punjab through coercion and political maneuvering while blaming Pakistan for interference in her domestic affairs.

Indian Ingress in Afghanistan:

After 9/11, India has following principal objectives in Afghanistan; 1) Use Afghanistan as a secure conduit for strengthening her economic ties with CARs. 2) Rebuilding road and rail network of Afghanistan in order to boost her economy. 3) Ensure that anti Indian elements (Taliban) do not come to power in Afghanistan. 4) Curtail/ marginalize Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan.

Indian Ambitions

1) To enhance her stature as a key regional/ global power. 2) To Counter China's influence in the region. 3) Safeguard US interests in Afghanistan. 4) Gain access to economic markets of the region. 5) Access to energy rich CARs 6) Pakistan Centric: a) Encirclement of Pakistan. B) Block Pakistan's access to CARs. C) Deny friendly relations with Muslim neighbors. D) Destabilize western parts of Pakistan. E) Pose a two front dilemma for Pakistan by forced employment of Pakistan Army to fight foreign paid radicals in KPK and Balochistan provinces with the objective to weaken its defensive balance capability against India (eastern front).

Afghanistan's Interests in Allowing Indian Ingress. Following are some of the spheres of interests that Afghanistan wants to achieve by allowing Indian ingress: Economic benefits, Infrastructural development, Military aid, Counter Pakistan's position on Durand line issue, and Reduce dependency on Pakistan.

Cardinals of Indian Ingress in Afghanistan

Infrastructural Development. India has planned to construct 218 km road from Zaranj to Delaram to facilitate movement of goods and services. India has helped restoration of telecommunication infrastructure in eleven Afghani Provinces.⁵ Other projects include;

- Extension of Afghan Television net by installing an uplink in Kabul and 34 downlinks (one each in provincial capitals).
- Rebuilding of Indra Gandhi Institute for Child Health in the Afghani Capital.
- Provision of 400x buses and 200x mini buses dedicated for urban areas.
- Gifting of 105x vehicles for metropolis.
- Provision of 286x military vehicles to support ANA.
- Provision of 10x ambulances for public hospitals in 5 different cities.
- Over 80 minor projects in multiple fields are being undertaken.

Energy Sector. Lack of energy resources is a major issue Afghanistan is confronted with and India is fully focused on it. India has already completed number of energy projects. The major one among the list is Salma Dam project which envisions production of 42 megawatt electricity and enhancing the irrigation generation potential of more than 40,000 hectares.⁶ In addition, the project will also be stabilizing water supply to 35,000 hectares. Few additional ventures include; Erection of 220 KV transmission line connecting Pul-e-Khumri with Kabul.; Construction of 220/110/20 KV sub-station at Chimtala for transmitting extra power to Kabul (from Northern Grid).; Rehabilitating the reservoirs of Kuargha and Ameer Ghazi.; Provision of solar panels in different provinces.; Completion of survey/ feasibility study with regard to number of MHPs.; Provision of financial assistance (becoming the largest non-traditional donor).; Providing much needed military assistance for ANA.; Provide support and funding in education and cultural sectors.

Indo-Iran Amity

After the turn of 21st century, relations between both the countries have been growing stronger and stronger in multiple fields particularly the energy, security and the NSTC (North-South Transportation Corridor).⁷ A brief account of strides made by both the countries is appended in the ensuing paragraphs:-

Political Sector. In the recent years Indian projection of pursuing a foreign policy independent of US and Russia greatly helped her in forging a friendly relationship with Iran. There is a spate of activity at high level directed at forging closer relationship between the two countries. Some of the important aspects are as under:-

Joint Ministerial Commissions. India and Iran have instituted a high powered Joint Ministerial Commission for enhanced cooperation in technical, economic and military fields.

Permanent Membership – UNSC. Iran supported India's inclusion in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as permanent member. Iran is professing expansion of Security Council thus supporting Indian admission to it openly.

Kashmir Issue.

Iran has been shifting her stance on Kashmir viz-a-viz Pakistan. Initially it vociferously condemned Indian brute force and atrocities committed on Muslims in the valley, subsequently, Iranian criticism was moderated.⁸ In April 1993, she declared that India and Pakistan should resolve their differences according to the "Simla Agreement" viz-a-viz Pakistan's stance to solve this issue under UN resolutions. Iran at one stage equated Kashmir with Afghanistan, Palestine and Bosnia and urged for its resolution within territorial limits.

Strategic/ Security Relations. After issuance of a joint declaration in 2001, both the countries opted to collaborate in maintenance of stability and peace in the region. In January 2003, a number of agreements were signed by both the countries including a "Memorandum of Understanding on the Road Map to Strategic Cooperation". Up gradation of Russian provided fleet of Kilo class submarines as well as MiG fighter aircrafts, provision of military technology to Iran and utilization of military bases of Iran by India in case of war with its arch rival, Pakistan are few landmark developments. A new era of India-Iran cooperation began with the signing of 12 MoUs in May 2016. The strategically important Chabahar Port deal will greatly facilitate bilateral trade and also facilitates the Indian design of a "Larger Indian Ocean to North Sea Initiative".⁹

Defense Collaboration. In the aftermath of "New Delhi Declaration", both the countries agreed to "explore opportunities for cooperation in defense and agreed areas, including training and exchange of visits". India provides expertise/ counseling to Iran on the matters to include "Iranian Missile Boat operating, Armoured Personnel Carriers/ T-72 Tanks refitting and MiG-29 up gradation. Both the sides have signed agreement which lays down the frame work for Indian assistance in transfer of technology on mutually agreed projects including provision of spares, weapon and equipment. India has offered assistance for the development/ expansion of naval bases including Bandar Abbas, Bandar Khomeini and Bandar Bushahr. Indian Navy has shown interest to sell radar and sensors to Iranian Navy. Training of Kilo class submarines and costal survey of train is also on the agenda.

Economic Ties. In the economic arena, the principal issues have been trade and energy, and the North South Transportation Corridor. Bilateral relations between India and Iran have deepened with a series of MoUs

signed between two nations in 2016. The commercial ties between these two nations are largely dominated by India's import of crude oil from Iran. India is the second largest buyer of Iranian crude after China and Iran was the third largest supplier of crude to India during April to September 2016-17. Bilateral trade between India and Iran reached nearly \$16 billion in 2012 and remained above \$15 billion till 2014. However, total trade dropped to US\$9.35 billion in 2015. After lifting of sanctions from Iran in 2016, the volume of bilateral trade is likely to rise in the coming years. Using other countries like UAE as third party, this quantum can easily cross \$30 billion. Apart from oil and gas, India has invested in number of other economic projects such as construction of 840 megawatt thermal power project, sugar industry, fertilizer industry, Abadan oil refinery and cement industry.¹⁰

Energy Sector. As per New Delhi Declaration, "Iran with its abundant energy resources and India with its growing energy needs as a rapidly developing economy are natural partners". In this context, both the countries mutually agreed that Iran will provide 5 million tons of liquefied gas annually to India for 25 years in addition to 100,000 oil barrels per day. Indian imports of Iranian crude oil account for roughly 85% of Indian imports from Iran each year. The Indian oil and natural gas commission entered into a 25 years contractual venture and secured for India 17% of all oil found in the Persian Gulf. Similarly India has secured Iranian assistance for oil exploration in the Gulf of Bombay and cooperation in off-shore oil exploration and production.

Infrastructure Development. India is heavily investing in infrastructure development in Iran. Few important projects are as under:-

Chabahar Port. Chabahar Port is a joint venture of India and Iran. Indian motive behind this investment is gaining an access to energy resources of not Iran only but also the Central Asian States. Indians also perceive that this would enable them to counter the Chinese effort which they are undertaking by constructing Gawadar Port in Pakistan.¹¹ An agreement was also signed between Iran, India and Afghanistan in which it was decided that Indian commodities moving to Afghanistan and central Asia will be given preferential handling with much reduced tariff at Chabahar Port. Chabahar in combination with Bandar Abbas is Iranian entrepote on NSTC (North South Transportation Corridor).¹²

Highways / Roads. Zaranj – Delaram Highway is being constructed with financial assistance of India. Efforts are underway on completing the route linking Iran with Afghanistan through Chabahar, Milak, Zaranj and Delaram. Indian BRO is constructing the 213 kilometers road. The project is part of the Indian aid package (amounting to 750 million US dollars) to Afghanistan.

North South Transportation Corridor (NSTC). NSTC is a combination of ship, road and railway route that will facilitate move of cargo in between India, Iran, Central Asia, Russia and Europe. Project is result of a joint accord signed in 2002 between India, Iran, and Russia (joined by Kazakhstan and Belarus later) and intends to connect Mumbai through Bandar Abbas in Iran, St. Petersburg and consequently the Indian Ocean with the Baltic Sea/ Europe (with an objective of enhancing trade linkage between major cities to include Mumbai, Tehran, Bandar Abbas, Moscow, Baku, Astrakhan, Bandar Anzali).¹³

Cooperation on Afghanistan. India and Iran both have joined hands in order to ensure that their respective interests in Afghanistan are secured. Tehran perceives that Taliban supported “*Sunni Religious Extremism*” is a monstrous threat to Shiite sect of Iran. Conversely, India considers Taliban to be a manifestation of religious fanaticism which she is confronted with in Kashmir. In contrast to Pakistan, both Iran and India supported minority dominated “Northern Alliance” in Afghanistan against Taliban. Both countries also are making endeavors that Taliban’s return/ reclaiming of power is averted. The joint Indo-Iranian venture in multiple fields and the resultant dividends inveigled Tajikistan to allow India to use its airbase at Farkhor. India also managed to manipulate and Tajikistan allowed use of Ayni air base to Indian fighter aircrafts.¹⁴

Policy towards Iranian Nuclear Programme. In mid 2005, there were speculations that India will go up against bringing Iranian nuclear programme before the UNSC however; in what was regarded as test of character/ stance, India voted with the majority (including USA) on the IAEA resolution which found Iran non compliant of international obligations. The Indian stance provoked massive condemnation/ criticism from independent analysts and opposition parties of India who indicted Indian Government for having betrayed a friend by “capitulating” to US weight. In the recent past, there have been sporadic disclosures of Indian transfer of technology to Iran. It is perceived that the transfers did not form part of Indian policy towards Iran’s nuclear programme but could be an outcome of illegitimate connections that have come up due to enhanced Indo-Iranian ties in energy and diplomatic domain.

Education Sector. More than 8,000 Iranian students are receiving their education in different educational institutes in India. Every year, India is providing 67 scholarships in multiple fields to Iranian students under various schemes. More than 40,000 Iranian citizens also visit India for assorted reasons.

Major Agreements/MoUs Signed between India and Iran. Major accords/ MoUs which so far have been signed between the two countries are as under:-

“Tehran Declaration” signed in April 2001 (setting forth the areas of possible cooperation between Iran and India). “The New Delhi Declaration” signed in 2003 (setting forth the vision of strategic partnership between the two countries). MoU on cooperation in trade, finance, energy, infrastructure and cultural issues was signed during December 2015. During the last visit of Narendra Modi to Iran, 12 agreements/ MoUs have been signed. The most important among them is “The Trilateral Transit Agreement” (Chabahar Agreement) which was signed during May 2016 by the three transport ministers of India, Iran and Afghanistan in the presence of *Prime Minister Modi, President Rouhani* and *President Ashraf Ghani*.¹⁵

Indian Motives and Iran’s Objectives. Both India and Iran have sturdy reasons for embracing and supporting each other. These are briefly described in the succeeding paragraphs.

Indian Motives. Few perceived Indian motives behind enhancement of relations with Iran are as under:-

Meet the Growing Energy Needs. Intimate relations with Tehran are vital for New Delhi not only because nearly 41% of refined oil domestically being utilized by India is being supplied by Iran but perceivably, Iran is the only itinerary which can give them access to energy resources of Central Asian states. If seen in the perspective of bitter Pak-India affairs and fragile situation in Afghanistan, Iran emerges out as the core life line for Indian economy.

Pursuit of Indian Interests in Afghanistan/ CARs. In order to pursue/ secure her interests in Afghanistan in general and Central Asia/ Caspian Basin in particular, strong and cordial relations with Iran are inevitable for India as she does not have any direct access through land routes. For New Delhi, the vitality of the having intimate relationship with Iran can be gauged from the fact that despite strong reservations and disapproval of Israel and USA, India is persistently and indomitably engaged with Iran.

Dominant the Gulf. India wants to dominate the Indian Ocean from Bab-al-Mandab to Strait of Malacca and is aspiring to develop blue water navy with a view to secure her strategic lines of communications in the Gulf/Arabian Sea. The game plan will help Indian design of pulling Iran away from Pakistan/ China and erode their influence in the Gulf.¹⁶

Dampen Support for Kashmiri Freedom Struggle. Iranian officials and print media have been very particular in highlighting Indian atrocities against Indian Kashmiri Muslims. Greater Indian ingress in

Iran is intended to dampen Iranian support for ongoing Kashmiri struggle for freedom from India.

Economic Aspects. India is trying to exploit a vast Iranian market; she may use economic ingress as a political tool for increasing her clout in the region.

Containment of ECO. India is also making endeavors to contain any possibility of emergence of ECO as a strong economic and political reality in the region and thus restrict Pakistan's maneuverability.

Limit Pakistan's Influence. India is endeavoring to curtail Pakistan's erstwhile influence/ collaboration with Iran thus attempting to wean away a traditional friend of Pakistan and isolate her in the region. Warmth in Indo-Iranian bilateral relations also sends a message to US administration that their relations with Pakistan do entail costs. Indian close ties with Iran though are primarily driven by her energy needs yet, joining hands with a country which US has declared "axis of evil" amply conveys the message to USA. This again is an endeavor to create wedge in Pak-US relations in order to isolate Pakistan.

Preclude Possibility of a Muslim Block. The growing relationship with Iran is useful in communicating India's message to the world particularly Muslim countries that India is willing to live peacefully and harmoniously with the "*Muslim World*". This is aimed at precluding the possibility of formation of any Muslim block in the foreseeable future.

Iranian Objectives. Current Iranian inclination towards India explicitly indicate that rather than pursuing/ promoting "Islamic ideology", Iran is more focused in securing her "National Interests". Iran currently passing through hard times and under extra-regional pressures has following objectives:-

Breaking Iran's Isolation. India by virtue of its growing stature in comity of nations is considered as a strong ally by policy makers in Iran. Tehran also believes that relationship with India would not only allow Iran to avoid the strategic isolation but will also result in less intensive/ pliable response from USA and Israel.

Market for Oil and Gas. Iran sees India as the biggest market for its oil reserves. Besides, Iran is blessed with second largest gas reserves in the world. India could be one of the largest buyers of Iranian natural gas which is likely to be Iran's principal sources of revenue generation in years to follow.

Access to Indian Technology. India is a source of intermediate range technology. Iran perceives India as a viable option for the acquisition of technology.

Military Collaboration. The two countries have many reasons for cooperation in the defence field. Both have common weapons of Russian origin and India could provide training, operating and maintenance facilities to Iran. Due to Indian progress in the defence/electronic/nuclear fields, Iran can benefit from India in related technologies.

Implications for Pakistan. Impact of terrorism and the complex/ intricate nature of relations with Afghanistan, Iran and India have seriously affected economic development of Pakistan. Due to rapidly changing environment at the regional and global canvas, Pakistan is confronted with intricate challenges which if not tackled prudently, encompass serious implications. In this context; the growing Indo-Iran-Afghan nexus is likely to be a very huge impediment in the way of improving ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan's bilateral ties with Iran, India and Afghanistan have time and again experienced difficulties; therefore it is pertinent to note that any alliance between the three countries is likely to be viewed by Pakistan with some degree of cautiousness, and, is likely to have repercussions in the future. Meanwhile, arch rival India's coercive diplomacy in the region leaves so much for Pakistan to do as the growing Indo-Iran nexus is an effort to isolate Pakistan and sabotage any effort on the part of Islamabad to improve relations with Iran. India and Iran emerge out as new players of the game due to recent developments whereas; Afghanistan is likely to secure a second sustenance, one with economic advantages. This growing Indo-Iran-Afghan nexus has the potential of creating new challenges for Pakistan, which if not adequately addressed can lead to Pakistan's likely economic isolation. The scenario if materialized will breed following:-

- Increased indo-Pak hostility that may result into conventional showdown or even use of nuclear arsenals.
- Enhanced bitterness/ antagonism between Pakistan and Afghanistan resulting into continued volatile situation in the region.
- Heightened struggle for enhancement of respective sphere of influence by key players to include USA, China, Russia, India, Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- Strategy of alliances for example Indo-US vs China, Pak-China vs India, Indo-Iran/ Indo-Afghanistan vs Pakistan, Russo-China vs USA and so on.¹⁷
- Use of proxy war by different stakeholders to further their designs/ interests.

- Incessant use of terrorism as a tool by different actors to punish/ subjugate their adversary.
- Use of umbrella cover of terrorist outfits/ organizations by smugglers, drug traffickers and criminal gangs to attain their motives.
- Overall instability in the region/ part of the region will impede the economic growth and development.
- The likelihood of the new great game resulting into a large scale conflict involving multiple players causing catastrophe at regional/ global level.

Analysis. Few plausible conclusions drawn through a careful analysis are appended below:-

Major Shift in Security Environment. In the international arena, there is a visible transition from uni-polar moment to renewed great power rivalry. Grand strategies and geopolitics are being crafted by competing powers to gain international dominance on economic, political, military and religious basis.

International Security Trend. There is a sharp rise in proxy wars and terrorism through state / non state actors as means to destabilize, disrupt or destroy established regimes for vested interests without perceived implementable end state.

Mobile Violence & Terrorism. Mobile violence and terrorism are the means being utilized by competing powers to balance conventional asymmetry. Distant war fronts are being selected by the key players to exercise regional/ international dominance with or without support of host country.

Protracted Wars. Greater reliance on non state actors is being laid in order to orchestrate protracted wars. This is purposefully being done to benefit from war economy and attainment of perceived objectives.

War on Economic Front. Economic compulsions have superseded politico-military considerations. Coalitions/ military operations are aimed at undermining opponent's control/ influence on various regions including strategic SLOCs.

Challenges of South Asia. South Asia is faced with a daunting challenge of strategic peril and economic promise. Prevailing asymmetry in conventional forces with divergent strategic objectives coupled with unresolved long standing territorial disputes have complicated the regional security mosaic.

Regional Alliances and Counter Associations. Indo-Iran/ Afghan amity vs Pak-China friendship and Russo-China alliance vs US/ NATO indicate strategy of alliances which encompasses serious politico military and economic implications for the entire region. The entire game plan of

major players like US, China, India and Russia focuses on enhancing respective sphere of influence while curtailing that of the adversary.

Implications of Instability in Afghanistan. A turbulent Afghanistan with no prospects of peaceful future under intense Indo-US influence is brewing internal security issues for Pakistan. India, a bulwark of US policy objectives is continuously squeezing Pakistan's strategic space. Hindutva driven policies to destabilize Pakistan through direct/ indirect involvement remains a security challenge. Pakistan is likely to face "Triple Stretch" for the foreseeable future.

Impact of Iran Economic and Political Revival. Having remained under extreme economic sanctions over nuclear issue and due to divergent interests in Middle East, Iran is endeavoring to create a space through economic and political ventures with neighbors.

Effect of Containment of China. China has emerged as a competing world power with growing regional influence and inclination towards Pakistan. US 'Re-balance to Asia' implying containment of China bears consequential security challenges for Pakistan. CPEC with its economic potentials will remain a lucrative target for anti Pak-China forces.

Future of South Asia. South Asia's future remains clouded with uncertainty. US presence in Afghanistan, the radicalization across the region, increasing Indian ingress in Afghanistan & Iran and persisting political rivalries continue to impede regional growth and economic integration.

Vested Interest of Various States. The presence of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, growing Indian outreach in Afghanistan and Iran, the strategic implications of CPEC project and the Russian influence in Iran has resulted in the involvement of global powers in the already volatile situation. The vested interests of different states have rendered the region susceptible to meddling in the internal affairs of various stakeholders resulting in a cataclysmic environment.¹⁸

Enhanced Inter State Acrimony. The "new great game" and pursuance of respective interests by global stakeholders is affecting the regional stability. The polarization between states has contributed towards enhanced inter-state acrimony where global powers are exploiting the mutual differences of states for their hidden agendas. The Indian outreach in Afghanistan and Iran along with its American patronage is seriously undermining the regional hostility.

Enhanced Indo – Pak and Pak – Afghan Wrangle. The enhanced Indian role in the region is an effort to exploit the petty differences between Pakistan and Afghanistan/ Iran and widen the wedge between the Muslim neighbors. The Indian outreach in Pakistan's neighborhood is

likely to further strain not only the historic contention between India and Pakistan but also the rivalry between Pakistan and Afghanistan/ Iran creating a complex security environment for Pakistan in particular and region in general.

Meddling in Internal Affairs – Role of Hostile Agencies. Enhanced polarization between regional states ensuing from the growing Indian influence and creation of coalition blocks is resulting in meddling in the internal affairs of opposing camps. The hostile agencies are actively involved in manipulating the internal fault lines of weaker states even to the extent of patronizing the different non – state actors and other banned outfits to meet their malicious designs. This trend is proving to be extremely counter-productive as power politics and clandestine role of hostile agencies has further accentuated the situation towards a brewing insurgency in the region.

Counter Weight to Communist Influence. The ever-expanding global stature of China and its inclination towards Pakistan, the Iranian outreach towards Soviet Russia and the possibility of an unstable Afghanistan leaning towards either of the two regional powers has the potential of the appearance of a strong communist bloc. The Indo – US strategic matrix is thus an alliance, however unnatural, to counterweight any such influence in the region.

Ethnic and Sectarian Sentiments. The large population of Pathan tribes on both sides of the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan and of Shia sect followers in both Pakistan and Iran has resulted in a situation where ethnic and sectarian sentiments have at times been stronger than the beliefs of nationalism and patriotism. These feelings are extremely vulnerable for exploitation through a carefully crafted campaign.

Offset Pak – China Nexus. The US presence in Afghanistan and Indo-US strategic matrix aimed at facilitating Indian outreach in Afghanistan and Iran is seen as an endeavor to offset the historical Pak – China nexus. Both the US and India have conveyed their strong apprehensions towards the development of CPEC and the ensuing dominant and influential Chinese role in the region.

Defamation and Diplomatic Isolation of Pakistan. The growing Indian influence in Afghanistan and Iran to exploit the internal fault lines of Pakistan is an attempt towards its defamation at the global level. The role of hostile agencies operating in FATA and Balochistan and their covert support to terrorists is directed towards the desired outcome of the diplomatic isolation of Pakistan.

Chabahar Port Development to Counterbalance Gawadar Port. Enhanced economic ties between India, Iran and Afghanistan and development of Chabahar Port by India to reach the Afghan and Iranian

markets is already being perceived as an effort directed against Gawadar Port. The Indian outreach in the region is proving to be a counterweight to CPEC, the resultant commercial takeoff of Pakistan at the global level and the growing regional influence of China.

Reconstruction and Settlement of Afghan Crisis. Prolonged volatile situation in Afghanistan has been the major contributory factor in the instability of the region. The Russian invasion, rise of Taliban and presence of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan have yielded little in the resolution of the Afghan crisis. The capricious environment has resulted in various banned outfits and NSAs finding conducive breeding grounds for their nefarious activities which poses a constant threat to regional stability. The amicable solution of the issue is thus imperative for the lasting peace and stability in the region/ world.

Measures to Preserve Harmony and Peace in the Region:

Having analyzed the intricacies and implications of Indian outreach in Iran and Afghanistan, following measures are suggested to preserve peace and harmony in the region:-

United Front Against Terrorism. Terrorism knows no boundaries/ frontiers and the entire world faces the threat squarely. For now, most of the Muslim countries particularly Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Libya, Turkey and Iraq are worst affected however; the battlegrounds may change rapidly and the menace can plague/ engulf other countries/ regions. Rather than abetting terrorism to settle old scores, it is critically vital that all countries form a united front, work with utter earnestness and deracinate the peril. Global and regional players who currently are not directly affected by terrorism, rather than acting as mere spectators, must collectively take immediate concrete measures to harness the monster before it is too late. If this is not done and each player continues to pursue their respective interests and agendas, the time is not far when the disaster will engulf the entire region/ world and swirling monster will be irrepressible.

Synchronized/ Synergized Efforts to Eliminate Extremism. For nearly two decades, Central Asian States have singularly been trying to wrestle and eliminate the radical groups. In spite of all out efforts and worthwhile steps taken by Central Asian States (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), the extremist forces in the region have been growing quickly and gradually getting more effective/ agile. Before they turn into monsters, elimination of these extremist groups is essential in order to ensure peace and prosperity in the region. Currently, three anti terrorist centers are operative in Central Asia which includes the “*US airbases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, the Russian airbases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and the SCO counter terrorism centre in Uzbekistan*”.¹⁹ All

these centers are working independently with disjointed efforts. Although Russia and China (within the framework of SCO) have established a “*Mutual Military Trust*” and also have started conducting joint exercises in order to enhance mutual security. Establishment of a “*Mutual Military Trust*” can significantly contribute in enhancing the regional security wherein; rather than considering them a threat, fighting potentials of US troops are used to attain synergy and desired effects.

Regional Alignment for Counter Terrorism and Economic Development. Due to convergence of interests, key regional players to include China, Russia, India, Iran and Pakistan should jointly work out a strategy for regional collaboration in order to fight terrorism and achieve economic growth. The gathering in Moscow in December 2016, third in a row of meetings between Pakistan, China and Russia, underscores the intensifying anxiety over the “*Spillover Effects*” of Afghan quandary in the region. Ending the frigid relations between Pakistan/ Afghanistan as well as Pakistan/ India is vital to break the deadlock on the “*Afghan peace process*”.²⁰ If Pakistan-India, India-China and Pakistan-Afghanistan can freeze/ forget their mutual difference for five years through a mutually agreed formula devised/ brokered at regional level platform, dreams of elimination of terrorism and attainment of economic development/ prosperity will very rapidly turn into reality.

Role of Western Countries. Attaining stability, economic development and affluence in the region would call for substantial support and contribution of Western countries. There is therefore; a dire need to engage Western countries/ conglomerates to play their respective role in cultivating enduring peace and harmony in the region. The foremost thing required to be done by the western countries in this context is formulation of a “*Common European Strategy*” for the “*Trans Caucasian and Central Asian countries*” which at this juncture, does not exist at all and is need of the hour.²¹ Western countries must take into account the root causes of the problems in the region and try to eradicate those through combined efforts. Mistrust and hatred between India/ Pakistan and Pakistan/ Afghanistan which has significantly been enhanced after 9/11 due to Indian outreach in Iran and Afghanistan, emerges out to be one of the leading reasons for instability, insecurity and enhanced terrorism in the region. Rather than working on terminal ends by contributing troops for fighting terrorism or rendering monetary assistance on account of reconstruction/ rehabilitation, if concrete steps are taken to bridge the trust deficit, monster of terrorism can be reined in more quickly and efficiently.

Poverty Alleviation. As per the “*Afghanistan Poverty Status Update*” collectively worked out by “*Afghanistan’s Ministry of Economy*” and the

“World Bank” as well as in the light of “National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA)” data, 36% of Afghan citizens lived below poverty line in 2016.²² Adjoining countries to include Pakistan, CARs, India, Russia and even China have people in significant numbers living below poverty line. Poverty being mother of all evils is the prime cause sprouting terrorism in the region. All countries to include USA, NATO allies and regional players equally share the responsibility to play a more forthcoming role to assist in poverty alleviation in the region in general and the war torn country in particular. Special efforts must be undertaken for increasing trade with Afghanistan. Afghanistan, a landlocked country should be invited to become part of the CPEC. Joining of Afghanistan in the project will have positive impact on its economy. Moreover Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, China, Russia, Iran and CARs must form an economic block. If such block becomes a reality, it would contribute in promoting harmony and peace and also facilitate economic development of all stakeholders.

Facilitate Afghan Peace Process. Economic development and prosperity in the region is dependent on peace and stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Countries in a bid to weaken/ destabilize either of the two must bear in mind that fueling or aiding terrorism in order to settle old scores or coerce a particular country to bring it to its dictating terms would only result in enhanced volatility and precariousness that would swallow up the entire region. There is a dire need that all regional stakeholders must encourage and support “*Intra-Afghan Dialogue*” to arrive at a solution that is acceptable to all factions.

Regional Cooperation versus "Strategic Alliances". Rather than picking and choosing friends and enemies, it is in the interest of entire region to work for peace and harmony. Efforts to encircle or isolate some while having close ties with others will call for reciprocal response on “quid pro quo” basis. This attitude will also give rise to strategy of alliances wherein, bulk of energies/ efforts would be spent negatively with focus on harming/ defeating the opponent. A splintered market discourages the foreign investors to set up their production plants. Common market of a peaceful region encompassing a population of billions would attract the foreign investors and guarantee economic growth and prosperity.

Mutual Dependence. Diversity and profusion of resources in the region call for mutual dependence in order to avoid apt utilization of these resources. For example, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are blessed with enormous mineral resources but being lower elevated, face shortage of water. On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan being higher elevated, have abundance of water at their

disposal but do not possess mineral resources. A prudent utilization of these resources could result into enhanced harmony and enormous economic development. A balanced redistribution of these resources on the principle of “Mutual Dependence” is therefore key to promote greater harmony and judicious utilization of resources.

Altruistic and Tolerant Role by Muslim Countries. By virtue of their geographical location, Central Asian States are more intimately linked to the culture and civilization of Muslim countries. Any extremist approach/ stance by the Muslim world would cultivate the seeds of hatred and disliking whereas; adoption of a balanced approach in line with Islamic virtues would leave a greater and positive impact. Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan rather than indulging in the sectarian issues, should denote true Islamic teachings and culture. World through these countries must know that Islam (religion) is a complete code of life which promotes love and peace and not the intolerance, hatred and extremism. If these three Muslim neighbors decide to forget their differences, exploitation at hands of regional/ extra regional intruders would instantly come to a halt.

Strengthening the SCO. Extra regional players have their vested interests in the region which necessitates that regional stakeholders in unison must take concrete measures which could help them safeguarding their legitimate interests. Extension of membership of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to all Central/ South Asian countries would open new avenues of cooperation within the region. The forum will ensure greater harmony in the region and safeguard interests of all stakeholders more effectively.

Conclusion:

US backed Indian outreach in Iran and Afghanistan has serious implications for the region in general and Pakistan in particular. The challenges are enormous and merit immediate response by all stakeholders if the region is to be saved from the looming disaster. At the global/ regional level, key players particularly USA, Russia, Western countries and China need to identify the repercussions of Indian ingress in Afghanistan/ Iran and take counterbalancing measures which will ensure harmony, peace, stability and prosperity in the region. At the same time, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan rather than pursuing respective interests, must jointly work to subdue the misunderstandings/ trust deficit and eliminate the common enemy i.e. terrorism. Security situation in Pakistan and Afghanistan has direct bearing on the entire region and lasting peace in region will be a distant reality until attainment of peace in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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