

*After reading the chapter, the reader will be able to develop an analytical understanding on the following:*

- Historical background
- Origin of India–Afghanistan relations
- Indian interests in Afghanistan
- Afghanistan as a gateway to Central Asia
- Indian engagement since 2001
- Policy options for India post-2014
- Role of regional players and their power politics
- Analysis of recent visits
- Heart of Asia process
- India–Afghanistan Air Corridor

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF AFGHANISTAN**

The historical study of Afghanistan becomes interesting from the British period. The British, to prevent Russian advancement into Asia, decided to render Afghanistan into a buffer state. It fought three Anglo–Afghan wars against Afghanistan, among which the most significant is the third Anglo–Afghan war of 1919 where King Amanullah succeeded in gaining right to independently govern Afghanistan. The war got concluded in 1919 with Treaty of Rawalpindi, thereby giving Afghanistan the right to be independent of British dominance. King Amanullah subsequently initiated the modernisation of Afghanistan. He was succeeded by King Nadir Shah and Zahir Shah later. It is king Zahir Shah that gave Afghanistan a Constitution in 1964.

Due to internal weaknesses in the regime and heightened Cold War tensions, in 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and installed Babrak Karmal as the head of state. The US tried to counter Soviet presence in Afghanistan by supporting rebels to undertake had. Saudi Arabia propagated the Wahabi ideology while Pakistan a base to the US in the endeavour. The US initiated a fully fledged Mujahedeen campaign in 1980s to counter Soviets. US initiated a Mujahedeen campaign in Afghanistan by training people to wage a war against the Soviet to save Islam. US trained Mujahedeens (fighters) to wage a Jihad (a war to protect the religion) in Afghanistan. US mobilised these Mujahedeens and established a common platform ‘The Base’ (in Arabic language called Al Qaeda) US promised these Mujahedeens that if they succeed in removing the Soviets from Afghanistan, the US would help them to acquire power in Afghanistan. These Mujahedeens unleashed a campaign of violence in Afghanistan making it tough for the Soviets to exist. The internal weakness of the Soviet puppet regime became clear and

Gorbachev replaced Babrak Karmal with Mohammad Najibullah to save Afghanistan. As the Soviet Union failed to save Afghanistan, in 1989, under the Geneva Accord, Soviet Union decided to withdraw from Afghanistan. As USSR withdrew from Afghanistan, the US too stopped all support to the Mujahedeens and did not help them to acquire power in Afghanistan as promised earlier. These Mujahedeens now became angry and decided to take revenge against the US. From 1989 to 1996, these Mujahedeens began to come together and they succeeded in using a common platform to plan a revenge against US. This common platform was called 'The Base' (In Arabic language it means Al Qaeda). As Al Qaeda was used, there were educated students in Afghanistan who became concerned about the future of their country. They knew that Najibullah was a weak ruler as he did not enjoy the Soviet backing anymore. By 1996, these educated students began to come together to establish a group to provide leadership to their country. This group was called Taliban. Taliban comes from the first few letters of the word called TALIB which means educated students. The subsequent ending of the Cold War and Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan post-1989 provided space for Mullah Omar, who was backed by Al-Qaeda, to fully establish a furiously regressive Taliban rule. The Taliban rule, firmly established by 1996, controlled Afghanistan till 2001. It was post 9/11 that US initiated Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Anaconda to counter Taliban presence in Afghanistan. The US Congress granted clearance and authorised the use of military force abroad, clearing the way for the invasion of Afghanistan in October, 2001. The Taliban and Al-Qaeda were tackled with the help of military on the ground. To build up a political consensus, the year 2001 saw a Bonn Conference in the city of Bonn in Germany. The Bonn Conference succeeded in installing an interim government in place.

Subsequently, Hamid Karzai was chosen as the first democratically elected President of Afghanistan in the most crucial period in its history. With the coming of Barack Obama to power as the US President, he shifted the focus on ending the Afghan war. In 2012, the US and Afghanistan concluded a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA). The aim of the BSA was to elicit the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. The US, in the meantime, while discussing and finalising the withdrawal of troops, opened a new front of talks with liberal Taliban elements known as the Good Taliban with an aim to reconcile them to the mainstream. The US, on ground, have continued to focus on nation building in Afghanistan and have worked for the capacity building of the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF). Even after the US troops finally withdraw, the ANSF is deemed to be strong enough at present to prevent the Taliban from recapturing Afghanistan again. Let us now turn our attention to Taliban.

In 2016, in a missile strike by the US, Mullah Mansoor, who had succeeded Mullah Omar as the new leader of Taliban, died. Mansoor was a product of the ISI of Pakistan and was given logistical and military support by Pakistan. After Mansoor had assumed the leadership of Taliban in July 2015, the Taliban was on a rampage. Taliban and its key partner that is Haqqani Networks had initiated a series of urban bombings. Taliban in the recent times is following a two point strategy. It is trying to attack cities, civilians and protected targets like embassies etc. Through this, they are trying to give a message that they can strike anywhere and can assert more power than the state. Secondly, they have started attacking provincial capitals in Afghanistan. After attacking the capitals, they capture power for some days in the capital cities. Through this, they are trying to expose

the limits of Afghani state power.

ISI of Pakistan has its own game plan, They wanted to support Mansoor by giving him military support to satiate his appetite for military weapons while using him as a pawn to bargain for peace thereby enabling the ISI to install a Taliban government in Afghanistan. After the death of Mansoor, there has been a power struggle in Taliban. The power struggle is between Sirrajuddin Haqqani, Rasool and Mullah Yakoob. The power struggle is not merely political. Taliban today controls billion dollars worth opium trade in the Helmund Province in Afghanistan. The middle and the junior leg of Taliban is least interested to join power as doing so would strip them of the power they wield today. The middle and junior leaders in Taliban have already formed their own little empires in Afghanistan and are not supporting the senior leaders in peace talks for the same reason. Hamid Karzai was the first person to understand that if Taliban is not taken on board for talks, then the fate and future of Afghanistan is very bleak. But, as seen, there is no unity in Taliban for talks. There is a belief that many junior and middle level leaders and cadres of Taliban have started deflecting towards ISIS which is striving to create its own version of a franchise in Afghanistan. Pakistan since 1970's feels that it can have a deep say in the affairs of Afghanistan but the Pakistani ISI and the military lack the capabilities for such strategic ambitions. Thus, India will play a larger role in Afghanistan in the future. Anyday, the Taliban will listen more to India than Pakistan because the Taliban is ideologically tilted towards Deobandi school of Islam and India is not only the birthplace of Deobandi Islam but also has a good rapport with the Deobandi leaders. The Quadrilateral Coordination Group (USA, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan) has become a new Concert of Powers group striving for a peaceful and a stable Afghanistan.

## **ORIGINS OF INDIA AND AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS**

The origin of the relations goes back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century Gandhara era. However, in the modern times, the British Great Game got India closer to Afghanistan. In 1947, when India became independent, Zahir Shah was the Afghan King. In 1949, he concluded the Treaty of Friendship with India which opened up diplomatic relations. During 1950s and '60s, India developed its diplomatic proximity with Afghanistan. The 2400 km long boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan is called Durand Line. Afghanistan refused to accept it as a border alleging it divides families on two sides. This created an irritant in Af-Pak relations. In 1979, when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, India did not condemn the invasion but began to instead drift away from engaging directly with Afghanistan as it had become actively involved in Cold War politics while India was the propounder and supporter of NAM. In 1996, with the rise of the Taliban, India joined hands with Russia and Iran in supporting the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (UIFSA), also called as the Northern Alliance and provided it ample support during the Taliban rule. Post US Operation Enduring Freedom and the Bonn-I conference, India supported the development of Afghanistan and sided with Hamid Karzai. India has also continued to engage with Ashraf Ghani as of 2016. An analytical survey of Indian engagement and interests in Afghanistan shall now follow in the subsequent sections.

## **INDIAN INTEREST IN AFGHANISTAN**

India was supportive of the Northern Alliance to counter the weight of Taliban in Afghanistan, and its engagement has broadened post the 9/11 attacks in the US, and the

consequent ousting of the Taliban by Operation Enduring Freedom of the US. India's diplomatic energy in Afghanistan is invested primarily in enhancing its own interests in Afghanistan.

India's first and most important interest in Afghanistan is to ensure that Pakistan does not gain an edge within governing structures of Afghanistan. India feels that if Pakistan succeeds in installing Taliban or a Taliban-sponsored regime in Afghanistan, it will be detrimental to the cause of the regional security of India. On the other hand, Pakistan feels that India should not be allowed to get a hold on Afghanistan and perceives any growing Indo-Afghan proximity as an attempt by India to counter Pakistan by maintaining its presence in Afghanistan. Each has tried neutralising the other's influence in governance and management of Afghanistan, leading to a classic security dilemma where any measure by one elicits a counter response from other. Pakistani military has long supported Talibani elements and helped them flourish near the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan and continues to believe that the presence of the Taliban in Afghanistan would be the most effective way to undercut Indian influence in Afghanistan.

Pakistan continues to maintain strategic depth in Afghanistan and certainly favours less Indian proximity to Afghanistan. As Karzai rose to power in Afghanistan in the post-2001 period, India decided to deepen its engagement with Afghanistan by opening consulates in Herat, Mazar-e-sharif, Kandahar and Jalalabad. Pakistan alleges that India uses these consulates to contain Pakistan as these consulates give Indian agencies an access to gather intelligence from across the border. Pakistan also alleges that India provides assistance to Baluchistani rebels through these consulates. Pakistan has also tried to limit India from undertaking commerce with Afghanistan by refusing to allow transit rights over Pakistan to reach Afghanistan. India has used the alternative route of Iran to reach Afghanistan. As Indian developmental activities continue in Afghanistan, India has realised the need to protect its Border Road Organisation personnel by using the Indo-Tibetan Border Police which is stationed in Afghanistan.

Despite all tactics adopted by Pakistan to keep India out of Afghanistan, India continues to deepen its ties with the region by engaging with Afghanistan. Apart from ensuring that the region does not fall into the orbit of Pakistan giving it leverage against India, another crucial policy determinant of India in Afghanistan is to ensure zero spillover of extremists to India. India has been a victim of state sponsored terrorism from Pakistan and engages with Afghanistan to ensure no spillover of extremism or Islamic radicalism happens in India. If Pakistan succeeds in helping the Taliban establish a footing in Afghanistan, this would enable Pakistan to train extremists and militants in the uncontrolled Taliban region and use them against India and more specifically, against Kashmir. In fact, at present, the extremists fighting in Kashmir owe their patronage mostly to Pakistan's ISI and have drawn inspiration from the resistance offered by Afghan *mujahideen* against the Soviets during the Cold War. India was under the impression that after 9/11, the US would put pressure on Pakistan to dismantle the Jihadi networks that operate from Pakistan, considering that India too had been a victim of terrorism emanating from Pakistani soil. However, a reluctant approach by Islamabad to clamp down on the Jihadi cells in their territory has given the Jihadis the needed space for growth. Pakistan even continues to use Jihad as a part of its grand strategy as it gives them the power to influence the region.

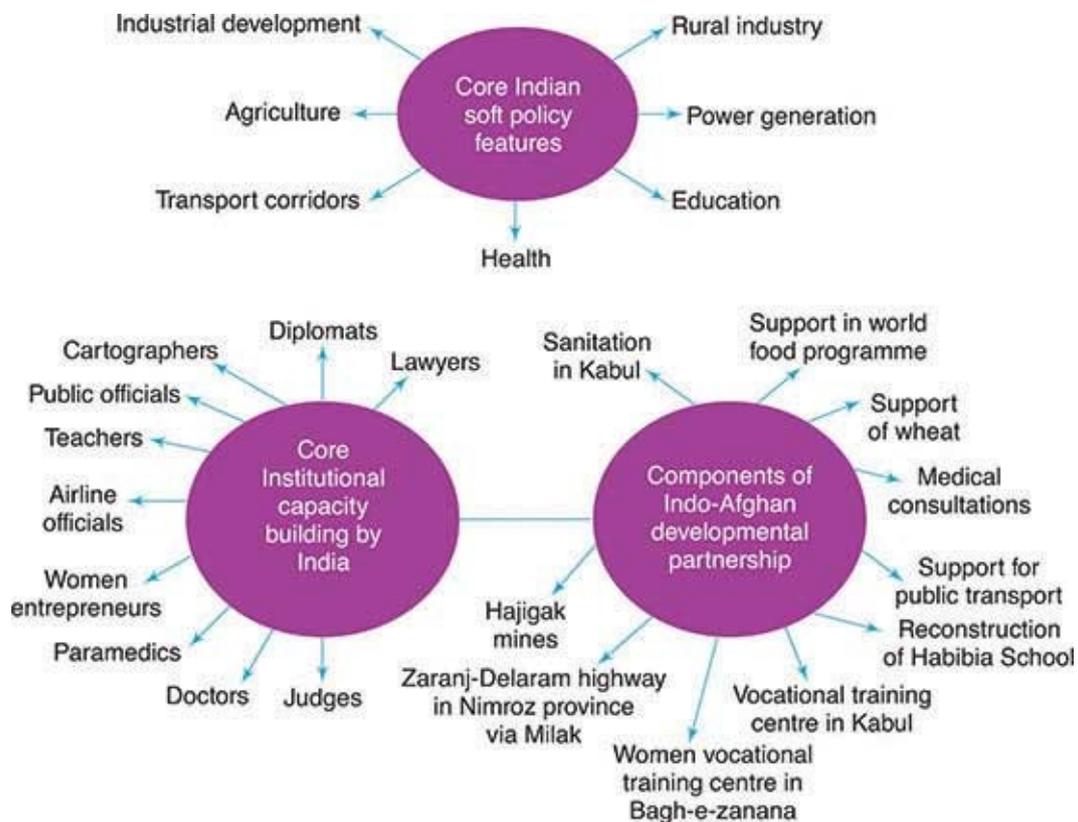
## **AFGHANISTAN AS AN OUTREACH TO CENTRAL ASIA (CA)**

Central Asia is crucial for India's energy security and an outreach to CA is crucial. India established a base at Ayni in Tajikistan, which was used to assist the Northern Alliance during the Taliban regime. In the Afghan chessboard, Iran seems to be a crucial player for many reasons. Firstly, Iran favours engagement with Afghanistan to assert its regional power. Iran certainly does not want Pakistan to deepen its roots in Afghanistan as Iran sees Pakistan as a Saudi Arabian ally. Iran is a Shia nation while Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are Sunni nations. It's the sectarian divide that configures the Iranian perspective of Pakistan. At the same time, Pakistan is also intensely uncomfortable with the India–Iran–Afghanistan axis that has every possibility of emerging. India is deepening its proximity with Iran to reach Central Asia. India is developing the Chabahar port of Iran for this purpose. As the geopolitical influence of CA in the region increases, more and more players would be involved. The US is not keen to witness greater Chinese and Russian proximity in CA while China and Russia use Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to keep the US influence under control in CA. The US favours deeper Indian engagement in CA as this will counter growing Chinese influence. As USA–Iran ties have improved, the US favours an Indo–Iranian foray into CA to contain Chinese influence in the region. As the US began to withdraw its troops in 2014, it started cooperating with Russia. It was a diplomatic masterstroke as it gave a stabilising effect in the region. Russia opened up its airspace for the US to transport its troops and supplies and this served Indian interests as cooperation between US and Russian decreases the significance of Pakistan, which in turn suits India.

India's post-2001 engagement has to be also seen in a different context. India, today, successfully uses Afghanistan as classic case to assert its regional hegemony. As India's economic and military profiles grow, India would be trying to use Afghanistan to establish its own credentials as a regional security provider and a regional stabiliser. India knows that its ability to emerge as a great power in the near future hinges upon its strategic capacity exercised in dealing with its own region. Afghanistan has a pivotal place in this regard in Indian Foreign Policy.

## **INDIAN ENGAGEMENT SINCE 2001**

In 2001, after the Bonn–I conference, India immediately increased its engagement with Afghanistan. During the Taliban regime, between India and Afghanistan, what had continued in the name of diplomacy was merely the existence of a liaison office. In 2002, India upgraded the liaison office to an embassy. India began to support the Afghan government for political development. It also engaged with all ethnic groups in Afghanistan since 2001, which has given India a broader acceptance in the country. India has provided almost 1.2 billion Dollars for the reconstruction of the Afghan society and has pledged 2 billion Dollars for overall development. Indian assistance has been largely focussed on infrastructure, irrigation and defence.



## Afghanistan and Bollywood

Bollywood is the most popular Indian connection in Afghanistan. A lot of Bollywood films have been close to Afghan hearts. Taliban, during their rule in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, imposed a ban on Bollywood films been screened or seen. This ban was highly ineffective. In Afghanistan, the reason that Bollywood is popular is because it has deep echoes with the psyche of Afghan society. Bollywood cinemas are based on the theme of a larger-than-life Bollywood hero fighting injustice. This synchronises well with the Afghan society, which has also faced and continues to face immense injustice. The society is able to connect it with the ground reality and thus Bollywood films provide a platform for common Afghan men to vicariously render their lives into grandiose narratives and successfully elide their real life with their strongest fantasies. This has contributed to people-to-people development in the two nations.

As US began to focus on the war on Iraq, which gave Pakistan the opportunity to seek its lost strategic space in Afghanistan. Pakistan began to sponsor the Haqqani networks who initiated widespread attacks on Indian workers in Afghanistan. Indian officials in the Border Roads Organisation were affected. The Indian embassy was attacked both in 2008 and 2009. Over a period of time, the US began to initiate a dialogue with the Taliban, giving rise to a debate called the Good Taliban versus the Bad Taliban. The US argued that certain liberal elements in the Taliban could be brought to centre stage to work in Afghanistan. The US also helped in setting a stage for Pakistan to play the role of a mediator in Kabul with the Taliban negotiations.

All these changed ground realities and India became marginalised due to the increased role accrued of Pakistan. Pakistan was now valued in the strategic calculus to

foster reconciliation between good Taliban and Afghanistan. This time period also saw Obama announcing an exit from Afghanistan by 2014. The US, in order to ensure that it does not offend Pakistan, discouraged any proactive Indian role in Afghanistan. India gradually came to see that its politico-economic-cum-cultural soft policy to engage with Afghanistan had not been yielding any strategic benefits except a success in winning the hearts and minds of the Afghani people. The subsequent period saw a steady decline of the Indian presence in Afghanistan. But all this did not demotivate India to the extent where it thought of retreating completely.

In fact, India stayed back and decided to chart out an independent strategy. To preserve its interest in the changing strategic landscape of Afghanistan and because of the commitment of NATO forces to withdraw, India stepped up its decision to provide training to the ANSF. It began to rework its engagement with Russia and Iran and also made a strong attempt to reach out to various sections of the Afghan society. Indian cooperation with Russia and Iran is important in context of the period of renewed efforts as none of them favour Sunni dominance in Afghanistan and are committed, for the benefit of India, to keep out Pakistan.

In 2011, India and Afghanistan concluded a Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA). The idea was now to use the SPA to regain the lost strategic space.



## **POLICY OPTIONS FOR INDIA POST 2014**

Despite the ongoing strategic partnership between India and Afghanistan, the overall policy of India in Afghanistan lacks direction. India has not resorted to a forward policy of stationing its military in Afghanistan but has increased defence equipment supply to the nation. The Indian policy cannot even be called one of masterly inactivity. India has not resorted to the policy of weakening Pakistan by destabilising Pakistan from within as it has preferred political investment through dialogue. The dialogue with Pakistan often gets affected due to disturbances on both sides but it broadly remains committed to a dialogue level only. India has not officially sided with the US by being a part of USA's Global War on Terrorism but seeks US cooperation in stabilising the region. Indian policy has favoured a regional engagement for a broad solution. It remains to be seen in future as to what options India may take as presently, it resorts to a supreme mix of all of the above strategies to suit its self-interest.

Broadly, the Indian policy is to assist developmental activity in Afghanistan. It would continue to diplomatically support people-centred soft policy initiatives and create infrastructure with a broad focus of ‘winning hearts and minds’. India, thus, continues with the Afghan led, Afghan oriented, people-centric inclusive policy. India, in 2017, taking a positive note of Statements by US President Donald Trump on a proactive role for India in Afghanistan, has initiated a new India–Afghanistan Developmental Partnership Agreement (DPA). In September 2017, during the visit of Afghan foreign minister to India, the two sides concluded the DPA and India announced 160 High Intensity Development Projects in Afghanistan.

## **ANALYSIS OF INDIAN PM’S VISIT TO AFGHANISTAN— DECEMBER, 2015 AND JUNE, 2016**

The Indian PM, Narendra Modi, visited Afghanistan in December, 2015 where he dedicated the parliament building constructed with Indian assistance to the people of Afghanistan. In the Parliament, the PM addressed the members of the Meshrano Jirga and the Wolesi Jirga. In the same Parliament, a block has been dedicated to former Indian Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The PM committed 170,000 tonnes of wheat supply to Afghanistan and provided support by supplying a contract to develop 1000 new buses in Afghanistan, which is expected to help in job creation. Undertaking strategic cooperation, the Indian PM handed over four Mi-25 helicopters to Afghanistan.

India had also decided to open a new consulate in Hyderabad. In June, 2016, the PM again visited Afghanistan. He was conferred with the Amir Amanullah Khan Award. It is the highest honour awarded to any civilian by Afghanistan. The PM inaugurated the Salma Dam, constructed with Indian assistance. Afghanistan decided to name it the Afghan–India Friendship dam. The project would irrigate fields of 640 villages in Chiste, Obe, Koshan, Karokh, Pashtun, Zarghun, Gozura, Injil, Zindijan and Ghoryan. It will generate 42 megawatt and irrigate 75,000 hectare land on Hari Rud River. The equipment to create the dam was sent via Bander-e-Abbas port and roads.

## **ROLE OF REGIONAL PLAYERS AND THEIR POWER POLITICS**

The previous subsections have surveyed the entirety of the Indo–Afghan strategic reality. As far as Afghanistan is concerned, it knows that Pakistan is the key to a stable Afghanistan. However, till the time Pakistan does not stop sponsoring Taliban and halt cultivating anti-Afghanistan forces, the situation will be fragile. Pakistan wants to use Afghanistan to maintain strategic depth against India and till the time it does not do away with this policy, it will remain a stumbling block to regional peace. Turkey, in 2010, organised a conference on the future of Afghanistan. This led many to speculate about the role of Turkey vis-à-vis Afghanistan. The Turkish foreign policy establishment feels the urge to revive the Ottoman empire and Turkey is looking at finding a suitable diplomatic space in the region to increase its influence. Although Russia has, as stated in previous subsections, allowed the withdrawal of NATO troops through the Northern Distribution Network routes, it certainly favours less of US presence in the region.

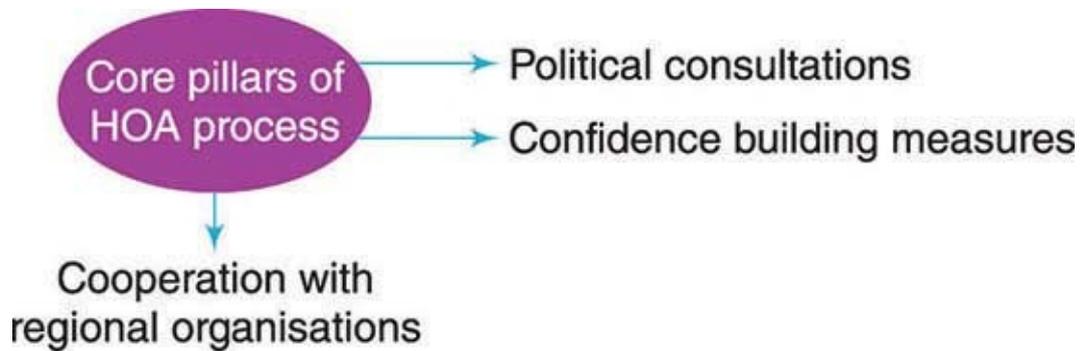
As far as China is concerned, it is not comfortable with US military presence in the region. China is an aggressive player in Central Asia and as it creates a resource-centric policy to garner resources from Central Asia, it would favour a stable Afghanistan. China

certainly favours the absence of Taliban in Afghanistan and is cooperating with the US and Pakistan in the negotiations with the good Taliban. China knows that the presence of a force like the Taliban in Afghanistan can act as a springboard for extremism in Xinjiang and revive Uyghur militancy. However, due to its all-weather friendship with Pakistan, it prefers not putting pressure on Pakistan to dismantle terrorist networks as it knows that if Pakistan maintains strategic depth against India in Afghanistan, it will weaken India in Afghanistan and subsequently Central Asia. This would indeed be favourable to China as it would then not fear Indian competition with respect to the resources of Central Asia. On the other hand, the US favours more Indian presence in Central Asia to counter China and keep a check on the growing dominance by China in central Asia.

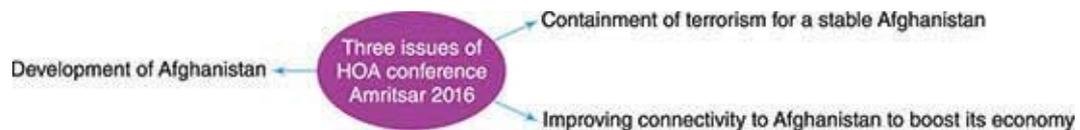
Russia is concerned with rising ISIS presence in Central Asia and it feels that ISIS and Taliban can use Central Asia as a base to target Russia. Russia feels it could be targeted by the ISIS and Taliban duo due to its support to the Shia Iran and Syria. Russia feels that an anti Russia coalition could be created by the Sunni groups like ISIS and Taliban. Russia feels that ISIS and Taliban could use narcotics trade from Central Asia to weaken Russia. This has compelled Russia to be an important stakeholder in Afghanistan and is negotiating with Taliban. Iran feels that ISIS and Taliban can create troubles for Iran in the Eastern fringes where Iran has a border with Afghanistan. Also Iran fears that in the long run if Afghanistan becomes unstable, it could lead to a refugee influx from Afghanistan to Iran. Keeping these threats in mind, Iran is also trying to offer refuge to Taliban and is harbouring a breakaway faction of Taliban (breakaway from Mansoor faction) led by Mullah Zakir. The future of Afghanistan depends upon the commitment of US in the peace process. Obama had given China a leadership role in Afghanistan but the Trump Administration has asserted that it will not allow China to flex its muscles in Afghanistan where it has spent tremendous resources. Trump Administration has complicated the entire situation due to difference in perception. During the Obama administration, US and Russia were of the view that Taliban is a part of the solution and thereby focussed on integrating Taliban to the mainstream. But, now the Trump Administration has conveyed that Taliban is a part of the problem and not the solution while Russia continues to feel that Taliban is a part of the solution. Thus, this difference in interpretation of Taliban has put Taliban and Russia on a divergent path. This new interpretation of US has put it on a similar path advocated by India because India since the beginning has asserted that Taliban is a part of the problem and not the solution. This is likely to manifest as a new phase of Indo-US cooperation in the future of Afghanistan.

## **HEART OF ASIA PROCESS**

In 2011, in Istanbul, Turkey, the Heart of Asia (HOA) process was launched as a platform involving regional players to ensure a stable and a secure Afghanistan. There are 14 participating countries and IT supporting countries in the HOA process.



India is one of the participating countries and has held the chair of the HOA process in 2016. The 6<sup>th</sup> Edition of HOA Istanbul Process of Afghanistan was inaugurated by Narendra Modi and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in Amritsar in December 2016. The theme of the conference was “addressing challenges, achieving prosperity”.



The two-day conference at Amritsar was attended by delegates from over 40 countries. During the conference, Pakistan pledged 500 million Dollars to Afghanistan which the Afghan president refused to accept and rather advised Pakistan to use the wealth to dismantle the terrorist networks in Pakistan. At the end of the conference, Amritsar Declaration was concluded with a strong focus on addressing issues related to terrorism. The Declaration appreciated the European Union for its establishment of the Self Reliance Mutual Accountability Framework (SRMAF) to support development of Afghanistan and, for first time, the declaration spoke about security threats to Afghanistan and violence caused by ISIS, Haqqani networks, Al Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohamad. The Declaration asserted the need for early conclusion of comprehensive convention on International Terrorism. The Declaration appreciated the efforts of the Afghan government in bringing Hizb-e-Islami Gulbuddin Hekmathyar within a peaceful framework. The declaration emphasised on the need to strengthen cooperation amongst the states of HOA process in the fight against terrorism, extremism and radicalisation. The Declaration asserted that the member states of HOA Process should take steps to divert the energies of youth from extremism. A proposal was made to initiate a dialogue on drafting a regional counter terrorism framework strategy. A special emphasis in the Declaration was laid upon improving regional connectivity to boost economic cooperation. Regional initiatives like TAPI pipelines, CASA–1000, the Chabahar Agreement, Five Nation Railway and Silk Road Economic Belt were appreciated.



## Why was Amritsar Chosen as a Venue for HOA?

Amritsar was chosen as a venue for the HOA conference in line with the Modi government’s policy of showcasing other cities through international conferences. The major theme of the HOA, as examined above, is connectivity. Amritsar was deliberately chosen as it lies at the heart of the Grant Trunk Road connecting Bangladesh to Peshawar. More so, India tried to convey a strong symbolic message to Pakistan by holding the conference in Amritsar. It showcased that Pakistan remains

an irritant in facilitating regional connectivity. India used the conference in Amritsar to press Pakistan to allow entry of trucks and transit to Afghanistan via the Attari–Wagah border.

## REGIONAL PLAYERS AND GREAT GAME

We shall now turn our attention to the role of regional players and their policies related to Afghanistan. An analysis of Afghani history clearly tells us that most of the regional and global actors have used Afghanistan and have ensured that it perpetually remains in a state of instability. The situation has assumed a new sense of urgency after the departure of the NATO troops in 2014. It is in this context—to manage the transition—that the role of regional players has assumed significance. When Ashraf Ghani assumed office as the Afghan President in September 2014, he spent the initial few months in improving ties with Pakistan. He expanded his engagement with the military set up of Pakistan. Ashraf Ghani’s engagement with Pakistan was based on the logic that Pakistan is the key to engagement with the Taliban.

Even the US wanted an engagement of Afghanistan with the Taliban. But since 2014, Pakistan’s ISI has been using Taliban to instigate violence in Afghanistan. After giving enough time to Pakistan to mend ways, Ghani finally understood that courting Pakistan would yield little or no result. In a joint session of the Afghanistan Parliament in April 2016, Ghani threatened to drag Pakistan to the United Nations (UN) for inciting violence in Afghanistan. After the death of Mullah Qmar of Taliban, his successor Mullah Mansour was also killed by the US in a drone strike in Baluchistan. It is in this context that regional cooperation has emerged as a viable model for ensuring stability in Afghanistan. However, the goal of envisaging regional cooperation remains a distant one due to regional power struggles.



China has mostly undertaken economic investments in Afghanistan while following a hands free approach at the political level. At the economic level, it has made its presence felt in the Mes Aynak copper mine project where it intends to extract copper to the tune of 100 billion dollars. It was in September 2012 that China decided to end the policy of masterly inactivity. It decided to engage with Pakistan to ensure reconciliation with the Taliban. It also decided to train Afghan forces and police.

China has been concerned about the security situation post the withdrawal of the US troops. China is of the opinion that the Taliban should not be allowed to re-establish control in Afghanistan as they could lead to a spark of insurgency in Xinjiang province amongst the Uyghur. China has become all the more cautious about the role Pakistan would play in the future as rumours of Pakistan training the Uyghurs have surfaced.

The coming of Modi government in India has also led to a shift in India’s Afghan Policy. India, under its new regime, has communicated to Afghanistan that it will favour a

strong and prosperous Afghanistan and would remain committed to the development of Afghanistan even after US troops withdraw. In fact, India has expanded its security profile in Afghanistan and provided military jeeps and four Mi-25 attack helicopters. India has understood that it has to fight its own battle in Afghanistan and cannot rely on US for solutions. India still asserts that the root cause of the trouble in Afghanistan is Pakistan's incitement and sheltering of the Taliban whereas China refuses to accept the Indian view. Thus, both China and India have different perceptions on how the future transition of Afghanistan should be managed. Since 2012, another unique situation witnessed in the region is the renewed relationship of Russia and Pakistan. Russia, since 2012, has professed a new interest in Pakistan, which has manifested in the form of multiple high level bilateral visits and a defence exercise between the two in 2016. Russia is expanding its alignments in Asia and Pakistan has assumed a central position in the Russian foreign policy. However, whatever be the shape of the Russia-Pakistan relationship, Russia can never replace the US when it comes to defence aid to Pakistan.

India and Iran are also deepening their engagement primarily to reach out to Afghanistan and Central Asia without going to Pakistan. Any Indo-Iranian cooperation that is undertaken is perceived by Pakistan as an attempt to encircle it. Though Pakistan and Iran have also tried to improve their ties, yet nothing concrete on ground has so far been achieved. When the US announced that it would withdraw its troops from Afghanistan starting 2014, it generated more apprehensions in Iran. This was because of the departure of the US would automatically mean more leverage to Pakistan in the region. Since 2014, Pakistan too has been at the forefront along with Afghanistan and China, initiating a dialogue between Afghanistan and the Taliban. As negotiations happen, it gives Pakistan a new influence in the region. This is not appreciated by Iran as it undermines the Iranian influence in the region outright. Thus, there is a possibility that Iran may revive support to proxies (the Shia Hazrana Community in Afghanistan) to undermine Pakistan. The present US President Donald Trump has already conveyed his displeasure with the US-Iran nuclear deal. This may compel Iran to further ignite the regional rivalry again. It is in this context that India's soft power attributes can help stabilise Afghanistan. The recognition by Ashraf Ghani of the fact that India is a credible player has brought India back into the Afghan calculus. Since India has invested around two billion Dollars in Afghanistan, this has helped India to generate tremendous goodwill in the country. India has also decided to address the feeling of neglect amongst the minorities in the provinces of North Afghanistan by undertaking investment in the area. How India will manage the instability in Afghanistan in future will finally determine the rise of India as a global player. Afghanistan, in this context, is a litmus test for India.



## **India and Afghanistan Air Corridor—The New Great Game?**

The two countries in June 2017 established an Air Corridor which was envisaged by Ashraf Ghani and Modi in 2016. The air corridor will be a big enabler to the bilateral trade and will send a strong message to Pakistan that despite its obstructionist behaviour, India will continue to engage with Afghanistan. In 2010, Pakistan and Afghanistan concluded an Afghanistan Pakistan Trade and Transit Agreement

(APTTA). Under the APTTA, Afghanistan could send goods in trucks till India (at the Wagah border near Amritsar, Punjab) but its trucks had to return back to Afghanistan empty. Also in APTTA, Pakistan could send its trucks via Afghanistan to Uzbekistan and the Pakistani trucks were allowed to carry goods back from Central Asia. In 2016, Ashraf Ghani asserted that if Pakistan does not allow its trucks to come back with goods from India, Afghanistan would block Pakistani access to Central Asia. But, despite assertion by Ghani, Pakistan refused to budge. Ghani subsequently decided to seek help from India and the help from India finally manifested as the Air corridor agreement between the two.

## *d of Section Questions*

1. Examine the evolution of India's Neighborhood Policy from Nehru till the end of Cold War.
2. What are the core elements of Neighborhood First Policy? Discuss the major challenges.
3. Examine India's Aid Diplomacy in the neighborhood?
4. Stratospheric diplomacy is a new element in India's Neighborhood diplomacy. Discuss.
5. Examine the impact of the China factor in Indo–Bhutan relations?
6. “Due to the economic blockage in Nepal, India's story has not won and its soft power policy stands to be eroded.” Examine this statement in the light of Soft Power diplomacy concept promoted by Joseph Nye.
7. India–Bangladesh have transformed their relationship at defense and hydro carbon levels. Examine core components in both.
8. “Rohingyas could emerge as a serious threat to India's security interests.” Discuss.
9. India–Sri Lanka Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement will transform Bay of Bengal as a hydrocarbon hub. Discuss.
10. Afghanistan has been a prize that Pakistan and India have fought over directly and indirectly for decades. Examine.