

Prospects for Cooperation, Competition and Confrontation in Central Asia

An Indian Perspective

by Gopalaswami Parthasarathy

While the Soviet Union was collapsing in December 1991, India was faced with its greatest economic crisis since its independence in 1947. Following a turbulent election campaign in May 1991, which saw the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, a minority Government led by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao assumed office. The country faced an unprecedented economic crisis, being forced to mortgage its gold reserves as its foreign exchange reserves steadily dwindled. The collapse of the Soviet Union, which was its largest trading and economic partner, also had serious implications for India's security, as over 80% of India's defence equipment was of Soviet origin. The last decade of the twentieth century, therefore, saw a drastic restructuring of India's economic and foreign policies. But by 1998, the country had recovered enough to withstand the impact of the Asian Economic Crisis, while simultaneously resisting international pressures that followed its nuclear tests of May 1998.

Paradoxically, US-India relations grew stronger and attained a measure of stability and resilience only after India's nuclear tests, while relations with Russia, which steadily declined in the Yeltsin era, drew strength, with the assumption of office by Mr. Vladimir Putin, as Russia's President. The relationship with both the US and its European Allies on the one hand and the Russian Federation on the other, have now attained new dimensions, in the first decade of the twenty first century, as India appears headed for a sustainable growth path in its economy, of 8% to 9% annually. In these circumstances, when the centre of gravity of economic power is shifting from the western world to Asia, India can be said to be moving globally towards a "hedging" strategy of "engaging with all major powers, but aligning with none". Thus, while India naturally engages and cooperates with China in forums like the G 20 and BRICS and on issues like Climate Change and World Trade negotiations, there are concerns about the directions China's policies will take as its national power grows. There is wisdom, many Indians believe, in the path adopted by China when it decided to take the road of economic liberalization and rapid economic growth in 1979. Its Supreme Leader Deng Xiao Ping then advised his compatriots to follow a policy of "lie, low, bide your time," in international affairs. India's policies will be geared towards working for an international environment conducive to its economic growth, with the establishment of a stable and viable balance of power in Asia.

Central Asia is generally defined as the region of Asia extending from the Caspian Sea in the west to China in the east, Afghanistan and Iran in the south, and Russia in the north. Historically, it has been at the crossroads for the movement of people, goods, and ideas between Europe, West Asia, South Asia, and East Asia. Invasions of the subcontinent from the coming of the Aryans and Alexander the Great, to the Mughals and Persians, have emanated from, or come through this region. But, with the expansion of Czarist Russia and Imperial Britain, this region has remained the cockpit of great power rivalry. Contrary to expectations that the collapse of the Soviet Union would end Great Power rivalries, especially in India's neighbourhood, what one witnessed was a new "Great Game" for access to the oil and gas resources of the Caucasian Region and Central Asia and an attempt to "contain" a weakened Russia, by the eastward expansion of NATO, to the very borders of Russia. With the Russian economy driven by its vast oil and gas reserves and mineral wealth showing signs of recovery from the beginning of the 21st century, this rivalry has impacted developments all across the former Soviet Union, ranging from Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

That the quest for the energy resources of Central Asia was going to become a crucial determinant of the post Cold War approach of the US became evident, when the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 1994 was described as a "factor for stability," by a senior State Department official and senior Taliban functionaries were welcomed and hosted in the USA by the UNOCAL, which was seeking to exploit the gas resources on Turkmenistan, for transmission by pipelines to India and elsewhere in Asia. As the Taliban led by the reclusive Mullah Omar and backed by Pakistan's ISI and substantive Saudi Arabian support moved to take over Afghanistan, the country's Central Asian neighbours Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan joined Iran, alarmed by growing Wahhabi influence, India, concerned over the use of Afghan territory for Jihad waged from its western neighbourhood and Russia, which was concerned over the spread of Islamic extremism to its Caucasian Region, to support the "Northern Alliance," drawn predominantly from the Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara populations of Afghanistan.

Osama bin Laden returned to Afghanistan in the midst of these developments. While Mullah Omar fervently believed in the establishment of a worldwide Islamic Caliphate, bin Laden was determined to target the United States and Israel, and bring about regime-change in Saudi Arabia by ousting a Monarchy he saw as defiling Islam's Holy Land, by allowing the presence of American troops in the desert kingdom. In February 1998, bin Laden announced from Kandahar the formation of an "*International Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders.*" Radical Islamic groups from across the globe were soon associated with this Front, which from its very inception included Al Qaeda, the Taliban, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Abu Sayyaf from the Philippines and various Chechen groups. These were joined by five radical groups from Pakistan, which were committed to backing not only the Jihad in India, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir, but also the Taliban in Afghanistan and other Islamist causes, like the Chechen armed insurrection, against Russia. Amongst the predominantly Punjabi Pakistani groups associated with the Front was the *Lashkar-e-taiba*, whose leader Hafiz Mohammed Saeed proclaimed that "Jews, Hindus and Christians are enemies of Islam." Members of this group have been arrested for involvement in terrorist activities across the world. Yet another Punjabi Pakistani group, the *Jaish-e-Mohammed* and its leader Maulana Masood Azhar, are known to have a close relationship with bin Laden and Mullah Omar. This group has participated in "*Jihad*" against American forces in Afghanistan and was responsible for the attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001. Both these Pakistani groups have been declared as terrorist organizations under U.N. Security Council Resolution 1267. These developments, followed by the attacks on the US Embassies in Dar

es Salaam and Nairobi, together with the attack on the USS Cole, set the stage for the terrorist strikes of 9/11 in New York and Washington DC.

Responding American moves to dilute their influence in Central Asia, Russia and China established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Russia sought to counter efforts to activate NATO along its borders with the establishment of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The SCO was founded in 2001 and its members include Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. While the SCO has indicated that it has no plans to become a military bloc, it does recognize that threats of “terrorism, extremism and separatism,” necessitate the involvement of armed forces. India, Pakistan and Iran are “observers” to the SCO. The SCO has envisaged the establishment of Joint Energy projects involving the exploration and production of hydrocarbons, Following military exercises in the Ural Mountains, where 4000 Chinese troops participated, the Russian Defence Minister spoke of the SCO taking on a military role in the future. The CSTO set up in 2002 includes Armenia and Belarus apart from Russia and the Central Asian members of the SCO. The CSTO is a predominantly military organization, whose activities include counterterrorism and peacekeeping. The CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha has hinted that Iran could be considered for membership if it applies. China has provided the economic muscle to the SCO by extending a \$ 10 billion loan for SCO members facing economic difficulties, because of the global economic slowdown. With vastly improved road and rail communications, China is emerging as the most significant trading partner for the landlocked Central Asian States. Two Chinese pipelines are nearing completion—one to carry oil from the Caspian Sea across Kazakhstan and the other to carry natural gas from Turkmenistan across Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. But, given its vast resources and existing pipeline networks, Russia retains substantial influence in the emerging energy scenario of the region.

Problems of access to the landlocked countries of Central Asia have necessarily limited India’s trade and economic cooperation with Central Asia. Given the turbulent situation in Pakistan and Afghanistan, India has signed agreements with Iran and Russia for transport corridors to the Central Asian States and the Caspian. Ties with Central Asian States have been strengthened in recent years. Uzbek President Karimov has paid two State visits to India. The Zaranj-Delaram road constructed by India in Afghanistan now links India and Afghanistan through the Iranian port of Chah Bahar and provides access to Uzbekistan through Mazar-e-Sharif. There has been a steady expansion of economic and defence cooperation, with efforts underway for cooperation in the energy sector. Economic ties with Kazakhstan have also grown in recent years. An inter-Governmental Agreement on nuclear cooperation covering the supply of uranium ore by Kazakhstan and the construction of nuclear reactors by India, is to be signed shortly, together with a commitment of Indian investment in the mining sector. Moreover, the two countries have agreed to conclude an agreement shortly between India’s Oil and Natural Gas Commission and Kaz Munai Gas, on oil exploration and production of the Satpoyev Oil Block. Since Pakistan does not allow India overland access to Afghanistan, India has depended on the Aini Air Force Base near Dushanbe and an outpost it set up in Farkhor on the Tajik-Afghanistan border, to assist the Northern Alliance for relief supplies to Afghanistan.

India’s largest economic assistance programme in its western neighborhood has been in Afghanistan. Indian humanitarian assistance included setting up camps for putting the “Jaipur limb” on disabled people, providing food assistance and medical services. India has set up five medical missions which still continue. India promised a million tons of foodgrains assistance, which could not be shipped across to Afghanistan through Pakistan, because of

Pakistan's objections. The wheat is now converted into high protein biscuits for regular provision to school going children and shipped through Iran. The second part of India's program includes the three major infrastructure projects -- the Nimroz project connecting Seistan province in Iran to the Kandahar-Herat highway, the Pul-e-Khumri transmission line and the Chintala sub-station, which is part of a scheme implemented together with the World Bank and ADB to bring Uzbek electricity to Kabul. The third big project in this sector is in the Western province of Herat, where India is building the 42 mw Salma Dam Project on the Hari Rud River. In the social sector, India has set up clinics and schools, even small irrigation works, electrification, micro hydel or putting in an array of solar cells for powering institutions. This is called the small development project program. There are 50 such projects -- typically less than \$1 million each -- in all parts of Afghanistan, conceived and executed by local and provincial governance. Finally, Indian developmental cooperation includes efforts to rebuild the state structure in Afghanistan. India offers 500 placements in its training and educational institutions for professional training apart from 500 undergraduate and graduate scholarships for Afghan nationals to study in India. Moreover, in Kabul, there two programs - one of which is being run by the NGO SEWA, to train 1000 war widows and destitute and orphans. They are being trained in four different types of occupations so that they can stand on their own feet. There is also a development program in the capital to train 1000 Afghan youngsters in different trades like masonry, plumbing, machining electric work and women in industrial stitching and tailoring".

While the surge in American forces and military operations in Helmand in Kandahar may have temporarily scattered the Taliban resistance, Southern Afghanistan will remain particularly prone to Taliban sponsored violence and terrorism challenging the writ of the Afghan Government, as long as the "Haqqani Network" and its Al Qaeda and Pakistani allies operate out of their safe havens in the Tribal Areas of Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province and Mullah Omar's Quetta Shura enjoys sanctuary on Pakistani soil. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently observed: "Some Pakistani officials know more about al Qaeda and Taliban than they actually let on. I believe that somehow in the (Pakistan) Government, there are people who know where bin Laden, al Qaeda, Mullah Omar and the Afghan Taliban leadership are". Mrs. Clinton said that the US expected more cooperation from Pakistan to help bring to justice, capture or kill, those who attacked it on 9/11, adding: "We cannot tolerate having people encouraged, trained and sent from Pakistan to attack the US". President Obama recently observed: "We also have to help make the case that the biggest threat to Pakistan, right now is not India, which has been their historical enemy, it is actually militants within their borders" The major diplomatic challenge the United States and its allies face in Pakistan to deal with the Taliban threat in Afghanistan is in devising military and economic strategies to deal with the havens and support the Taliban and its allies receive from across the Durand Line.

Any analysis of developments in Afghanistan would confirm that tensions in the country and across its neighborhood have primarily resulted from external interference and great power rivalries. The arbitrary division of Pashtun lands at the Durand Line in 1893 to serve British Imperial interests, has resulted in continuing tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan. No Afghan Government, including the Mullah Omar led Taliban dispensation, has ever accepted the Durand Line as an International Border. As early as 1907 the British and Russians divided Persian Regions bordering Afghanistan into spheres of influence with agreement that the two Imperial powers would consult each other on matters relating to Afghanistan. During World War 1, Amir Habibullah Khan steered a path of neutrality for Afghanistan, despite pressures to back Turkey. Afghanistan joined the League of Nations in 1934, waiting until the Soviet Union joined, so as not to appear to be taking sides in favor of the UK. In 1937 Kabul

concluded the Saadabad Pact, a non-aggression treaty with Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. Immediately after the outbreak of war, King Zahir Shah's government proclaimed its official and legal neutrality in the conflict.

Afghanistan predictably became a member of the Nonaligned Movement in the wake of Cold War Rivalries. The overthrow of the Daoud Regime in a Communist takeover in 1978 and growing Soviet influence in the country led to the signing of an Executive Order by President Carter on July 3, 1979, authorizing funding for anti-communist guerrillas, with aid being channeled through Pakistan's Inter Services Military Intelligence Agency (ISI). Many Afghans believe that it also enabled Pakistan to ensure that differences with Afghanistan over the Durand Line, which were based on Pashtun nationalism, were subsumed by its championing of Pashtun rights and traditions within Afghanistan. The Soviets, in turn, committed the historic blunder of invading Afghanistan on December 27, 1979. The foundation for what transpired subsequently in Pakistan and Afghanistan was laid by the American determination to oust what President Reagan described as the "evil empire", even though this involved supporting General Zia-ul-Haq, to prolong military rule in Pakistan, with the support of right wing and Islamist parties like the *Jamat-e-Islami*.

Afghanistan's problems are, even today, exacerbated by developments and rivalries beyond its borders. Both Russia and China would welcome a return to stability and an end to Taliban style extremism in the country, but are holding back from providing whole-hearted support for the American led NATO forces in Afghanistan, because of concerns and suspicions about a long-term American military presence in Afghanistan, undermining their interests in Central Asia. Iran, which has extended significant economic assistance to the Karzai dispensation and was in the forefront of opposition to the Taliban leadership, shares similar concerns about the American presence in Afghanistan. India and Pakistan likewise share mutual suspicions about the role of each other in Afghanistan. The Bonn Conference contained a request from conference participants to the UN, for the international community "to take measures to guarantee national sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity of Afghanistan, as well as the non-interference by countries in Afghanistan's internal affairs". This is possible only, if in the words of former UN Under Secretary General C.R. Gharekhan and former US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Karl Inderfurth, the international community recognizes that to attain "the long-term goal of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, Afghanistan must have better and more reliable relations with its neighbours and near neighbours, including Pakistan, Iran, China, India and Russia".

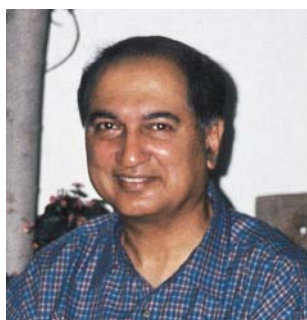
Saudi Arabia, which has substantial influence and interests in Afghanistan, will also necessarily have to be co-opted in such an initiative. Recent statements by Prince Turki al Faisal indicate Saudi support for the Government of President Hamid Karzai and a readiness to play a positive role in emerging developments in Afghanistan. What is needed today is for the United States and Russia to work together with the countries that Mr. Gharekhan and Mr. Inderfurth have referred to and with Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours, in order to attain the objectives outlined in Bonn. Mechanisms for guaranteeing the observance of the principles outlined at Bonn are vital for security, stability and progress across Central Asia. Afghanistan is now a member of SAARC and once it formally accedes to the SAARC Free Trade Area, will have duty free access for all its agricultural products to India and other SAARC members. A major source of terrorist funding has been the growth of poppies in Afghanistan. With Iran now an Observer in SAARC, all Afghanistan's neighbours should be facilitated to improve regional connectivity for easy access of Afghanistan's agricultural products to their markets. The international community has to play a key role in financing projects that enable Afghanistan's rural population to move to new areas of agricultural

production, which have easy access to neighbouring markets in SAARC and SCO member States. Historically, Afghanistan's rulers have sought to avoid getting drawn into the vortex of rivalries of external powers. The international community has to devise measures to keep Afghanistan insulated from such rivalries and from external interference in its internal affairs.

The recently published National Security Doctrine of the Obama Administration states: "We will seek greater partnership with Russia in confronting violent extremism, especially in Afghanistan". This has to be translated into meaningful diplomatic and security cooperation, with the understanding that the International Community, together with regional powers, has vital stakes in achieving the objectives outlined in the Bonn Declaration of 2001, of guaranteeing the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Afghanistan, while strictly observing the principle of non-interference, in its internal affairs. The restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan is crucial to the development and progress of the entire region of Central Asia.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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