

Looking for the right approach

Historically Indian and Afghan leaders enjoyed extremely close relations, before and after the end of British colonial rule in South Asia. Due to the friendship with the Soviet Union, India was one of the first non-aligned states to recognise the communist regime installed after the invasion of the Red Army in 1979. The Indians also appeared very keen to support successive Afghan governments in order not to lose mutual economic and political ties. However, with the Taliban's assumption of power in the 1990s, which had close ties to India's arch rival Pakistan, the country was turned into a hub for anti-Indian militant activities, thus leading to the deterioration of India-Afghanistan relations. Since the last decade, the Indian government has been trying to re-establish its pre-Taliban relationship. Therefore, India restored full diplomatic relations and established an unusually large consular service across Afghanistan followed by extensive development assistance. India was not necessarily encouraged by the international community in this endeavour. Especially the US was afraid that any enthusiasm and approval for India's activities in Afghanistan would provoke its major ally Pakistan, one of the key-actors in Afghanistan. However, most importantly, India's engagement was favoured and endorsed by many Afghan leaders who were educated in Indian universities and still had great affection for their host country. Furthermore, India is still benefitting from its former support for the victorious Northern Alliance which was able to include many of their leaders in the current government. Since the overthrow of the Taliban India has emerged as a major actor in the on-going reconstruction process of Afghanistan. In order to renew its ties with the county, India has pledged two billion US dollar until 2014 in development aid, making it to one of the most significant donor countries. Today

India's assistance more or less covers all kinds of civilian aid, including infrastructure, agriculture, transportation, communications, trade, investment, mining, education etc. In contrast with US/NATO/ISAF activities India has been focusing on low-visibility projects. It has emphasised from the start the need for coordination with local authorities to enhance their ownership. As a result Indians have gained much esteem among Afghans as a credible and reliable partner. Since 2011 New Delhi has been increasing its engagement with Afghanistan in security related areas. For example India was and still is the only country to ever sign a defence oriented Strategic Partnership Agreement with Afghanistan. Consequently the strategic thinkers in Iran and Pakistan became increasingly worried about the real implications for New Delhi's engagement in Afghanistan. Generally one can identify following sets of Indian interests: First, there are economic interests. Afghanistan is not only seen a manufacturing hub, providing much needed resources such as minerals, but also as a potential market for Indian products. Second, the attainment of energy security required to reduce India's dependence on energy supplies from the Middle East. Third, to ensure India's own national security through hindering a return of an extremist, militant Taliban regime in Kabul; this includes curtailing the spread of arms- and drugs-trafficking. Fourth, from a geostrategic perspective, Afghanistan is seen as a corridor and hub for trade and transit, as a gateway to and from South and Central Asia, to large extent granting access into West Asia, Russia and even Europe. But besides these factors, there is no doubt that Afghanistan is also identified as a significant geopolitical constraint on Pakistan. In this context, some analysts are convinced that New Delhi is very eager to secure and expand its interests in Afghanistan 'by all

means'. This includes the establishment of a pro-Indian regime in Kabul as well as gaining reliable allies in Afghanistan's neighbourhood. Or at least guaranteeing that regional actors stay neutral in New Delhi's rivalry with Islamabad. To sum up, India's most fundamental interest lies in actively promoting political and economical stability in a regionally integrated Afghanistan, while at the same time preventing external influence in domestic political developments. However, since achieving this strategic portfolio as well as safeguarding India's developmental progress is becoming increasingly difficult, the debate of a military engagement among New Delhi security circles is gaining momentum.

Nevertheless, India should not be tempted to "fill the gap" with

bility in Afghanistan. It is also not sure how the different ethnic groups especially the non-Pashtuns will react when a 'Pashtun-Taliban conglomerate' (re)gains power in Kabul. Having this in mind, one has to raise the question if the Afghan security forces will establish themselves as non-partisan and loyal agents of the state or actively take part in power struggles. All these factors increase the likelihood of a civil-war after 2014 in which India will irreversibly be drawn in.

Second, Afghans might show deep affection towards India and appreciate its 'soft power' approach but this does not mean that they want to experience Indian combat troops on their soil. Consequently New Delhi will not only lose the good will of the people but also risk the achievements

economic interests. Therefore, India's role is not directed against the stability and sovereignty of any state in the region. In light of the Soviet and the US/ISAF experiences, decision makers in New Delhi have to understand that any robust military engagement in Afghanistan appears unsustainable and unwinnable; this is unlikely to be any different for India.

Therefore, a military intervention would lead in the wrong direction. India needs to continue and intensify its successful multi-sectoral, soft-power approach and to envisage deeper engagement in areas like security sector reform, especially civil-military relations and police reform as well as building civil-society capacities. However, supporting the Afghan economy and ensuring that the government is able to gain sufficient revenues in order to maintain its level of security forces, including adequate remuneration in order to keep them loyal, remains the most important mosaic in India's engagement in Afghanistan. From this perspective, India will have to make difficult choices between 'soft power' and 'hard power' (including the military option), whether to ignore or take into account Pakistan's interests and security concerns in Afghanistan, how to position itself in the Iran-US conflict, and last but not least how to deal with China's growing activities in Afghanistan. To conclude, even though India's is not necessarily caught up in a catch-22 situation in Afghanistan, the success and prospects of its engagement remain uncertain.

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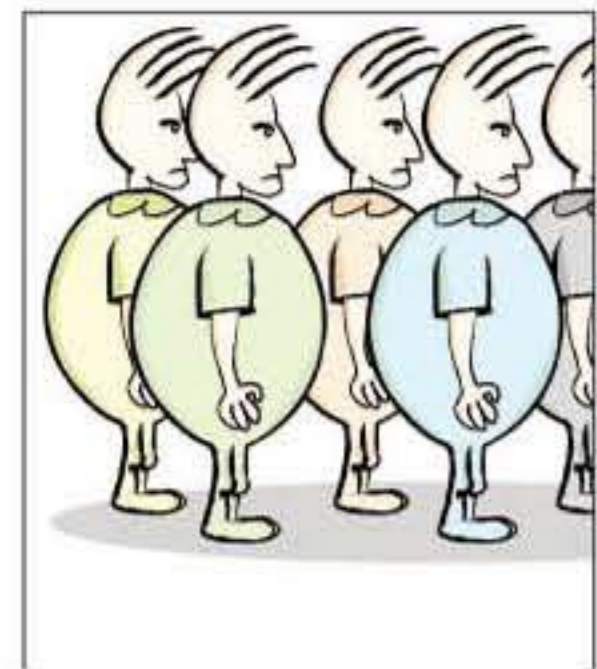
a major military commitment which would inevitably arise after foreign forces leave Afghanistan in 2014. There are a couple of reasons to further deepen this point.

First, besides the re-emergence of the Pakistan factor and the Taliban in Afghan politics, the unfavourable US-Pakistan alliance, Pashtun indifference towards India, and the geographical limitations, there is an incoherent policy and confusion among NATO/ISAF states about how to deal with India's involvement in Afghanistan. Many of them see any Indian role still as to controversial and stick with Pakistan as the supreme partner in order to achieve peace and sta-

of its development projects which would increasingly become the anti-Indian activities.

To sum up, Afghanistan is often seen as a test case for India's foreign policy, its growing regional and global prominence, and especially for its hegemonic aspirations.

But critics have to understand that the need for engagement in Afghanistan is not just an expression of India's international ambitions as a rising power. Instead it must be acknowledged that this is a legitimate matter of national defence interpreted as regional security and stability. It is without any doubt also a question of securing straightforward eco-



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