

Clash of Interests among Afghan and Foreign Players
and Limits to Cooperation to bring Peace and Stability
in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

Clash of Interests among Afghan and Foreign Players and Limits to Cooperation to bring Peace and Stability in Afghanistan

A thesis presented to the Graduate Program in Global Studies

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The purpose of this research is to find out how different domestic, regional, and international stakeholders view the current situation in Afghanistan. This paper is a humble endeavor to lay down the interests of all the major parties currently involved in Afghanistan. Also, how the respective players' interests clash with one another is thoroughly presented in the paper. Some of the specific questions which I have dealt in this paper are: What are the different interests of the major parties involved in the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, and what role these players have been playing in the country since the US' invasion of 2001? The points of convergence and divergence of interests among the respective parties are also examined. This question is very important to devise future strategies to bring peace and stability in the country. An overview of all the major previous efforts for reconciliation and an analysis for future prospects for peace is also presented in this paper.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Afghanistan has held immense importance for the world during the last 15 years. In the 19th century, the region which is modern day Afghanistan served as a buffer zone between the British Empire and the Imperialist Russia. The last quarter of 20th century saw the country embroiled into a theatre of Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. After the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1988, the country plunged into a decade long civil war. While the West including the US, remained largely aloof to the country during the 1990's, regional actors supported their favored factions. Russia, Iran, India, Pakistan, and Central Asian states chose their favored proxies in the conflict. The 9/11 attacks, planned from the mountains of Afghanistan by al Qaeda brought the US back to the region. The transnational terrorist networks which had been able to find safe heavens in Afghanistan during 1990's with the help of an extremist Taliban regime, found themselves at war with the coalition of ANA (Afghan National Army), NATO, ISAF and US' troops in the wake of 9/11 attacks.

Terrorism and extremism in Afghanistan pose a serious security threat for the region. Besides that different regional and international players have developed economic and political stakes in the country due to its proximity to the landlocked and untapped resource rich Central Asian countries. China, Russia, Iran, India, Pakistan, and the US have all tried to pursue their own economic and political interests in Afghanistan which often clashed with one another. However, the eradication of terrorism has been at the forefront of all the international actors' interest since only a stable Afghanistan could pave a way for sustainable economic activity. Surprisingly

though, US remained unsuccessful to seek a vibrant international cooperation to combat extremism and terrorism in Afghanistan. In this paper, I will lay down the interests of respective local, regional and global actors which are playing an important role in Afghanistan and explain some of the points of convergence and divergence of interests with one another? Different dynamics of international cooperation vis-à-vis Afghanistan between and among international players to combat extremism and terrorism in Afghanistan will also be presented. For the last two decades, various terrorist groups comprised of Uygur, Chechen, and Kashmiri militants operating from Afghanistan have posed a serious security threat to China, Russia, and India respectively. These countries are also in a fierce competition for economic and political gains in Afghanistan with their US and Western counterparts as Afghanistan serves as a strategic corridor to Central Asia. This competitive environment has led to the clash of interests among the major stakeholders at the cost of coherent strategy to fight an ever increasing trend of terrorism originating from Afghanistan.

Methodology

This paper is an effort to point out the interests and objectives of major local and foreign actors involved in Afghanistan. Drawing on the literature in political science, this paper first describes the major stakeholders in Afghanistan, and then explains each party's interests and objectives. Also, their past role in the country has also been discussed. Academic work of various experts on the region, particularly Ahmed Rashid and Christine Fair has been used to present a picture of the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. Both of these experts' scholarship have been particularly helpful in explaining the role of neighboring countries particularly Pakistan in Afghanistan. Ahmed Rashid's work 'Descent into Chaos' and 'Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the West' has been used and quoted many times in this paper.

Christine Fair's latest work 'Fighting to the End; Pakistan's Army Way of War 2015' has also been very helpful in this paper to understand the dynamic of present conflict in the region.

Similarly, Riaz M. Khan's work "Afghanistan and Pakistan: Conflict, Extremism, and Resistance to Modernity" has helped in compiling a historically informed work regarding the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan.

A 2014 publication by Chatham House "Who Wants What: Mapping the Parties' Interests in Afghanistan" by Matt Waldman and Mathew Wright is used to outline some of the major stakes parties share and fight for, in Afghanistan. Similarly various other articles published by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace have been used to point out the conflict of interests among the parties. Drawing upon the scholarly work of many authors, points of convergence and divergence of interests among the parties have been presented, which would be very useful to devise future strategies for a peaceful settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan. All the major previous attempts for attaining peace and bringing the most active Afghan insurgent group i.e., Taliban, have also been discussed along with the reasons and causes of their failure.

Major Stakeholders in Afghanistan

In this paper, only the most important local Afghan, regional, and global stakeholders in Afghanistan will be discussed. Local Afghan actors, namely the Afghan government, Afghan Taliban, and the Northern Alliance will be covered in the Chapter 2. Whereas the Chapter 3 will cover the specific interests of global and regional powers like the US, the UK and other NATO allies, in addition to Russia, China, and Central Asian states. The interests of regional powers like India, Iran, and Pakistan will also be discussed in Chapter 3. All the major actors currently involved in Afghanistan, whether local or foreign have a wide variety of interests, ranging from geo-strategic, economic, political to sociocultural, and, reputational. A thorough insight into

these interests and objectives and their significance to the respective parties is very important in order to come up with the possible solution to the ongoing conflict.

In Chapter 4, the previous attempts for reconciliation and future prospects for peace are discussed. As with any other conflicts in the world, there are various points of convergence and divergence of interests among the stakeholders. These points of convergence and divergence will be explored in the Chapter 5, since they are very important for the purpose of conflict resolution in this particular region. It is also very important to note that there are enough points where most of the parties' interests converge, which suggests that there is sufficient room for a possible future settlement. However, divergence of parties' interests and mistrust between them makes peace in the region difficult to attain. Given the ample convergence and divergence of parties' interests, any peace settlement would certainly require serious efforts, political will, and, outside facilitation.

Chapter II: Afghan Stakeholders

Within Afghanistan, apparently there is a convergence of interest between many actors, including, to certain degree, the Taliban, in terms of avoiding a full-scale war or disintegration of the state, and preservation of territorial integrity. Keeping effective security forces, reduction of extremism and violence, and receiving international aid and assistance over the longer run are also some of the points on which most of the parties agree. Some other areas where there's some convergence of interests are preservation of country's sovereignty and avoiding manipulation by foreign political forces. To some extent, all of the Afghan parties to the conflict also have a common interest in attaining sustainable peace, enforcement of the rule of law, and, de-concentration of power. In the near future, conditional inclusion of the Taliban in the political process can be proven to be a shared interest for everyone in the country in order to ensure sustainable peace, especially given the recent arrival of ISIS phenomenon in Afghanistan. Some of the major points of divergence among Afghan actors include the nature of political system implemented presently as well as the presence of foreign forces in the country. Application of Sharia, which is a strict Islamic system is one of Afghan Taliban's major interests, and hence it clashes with the interest of Afghan Government and Northern Alliance who propagate a democratic system and civil liberties. Although in most conflicts, we ought to take into account the interests of the parties involved in the particular conflict, but in the case of Afghanistan any settlement would not be possible without considering the interests of Afghan population. The reason for this is that decades of instability and violence in the country has led Afghan populace prone to the propaganda of different violent organizations, and unless their

genuine grievances are addressed, a peaceful resolution to the conflict is unforeseeable. Hence, efforts to bring peace and stability in the country will prove to be futile unless legitimate demands and concerns of the Afghan population are met. In order to do so, the process of conflict resolution must be carried forth in such a manner that it involves the participation of the members of Afghan society, not only the local parties to the conflict.

Afghan Government

The present Afghan government which is dominated by the Presidency has a wide range of interests. One of the foremost interests of the Afghan government is to keep hold of politico economic and military power. The current Afghan government was formed in 2014 after the controversial election which led to the formation of a coalition government with an independent candidate Ashraf Ghani becoming as the President and leader of the National Coalition of Afghanistan becoming as the Chief Executive Officer of the country. Therefore, the top office bearers in Afghan government have depended heavily on the politics of clientelism and patronage to gain support from the masses. In generally, the Afghan government resists decentralization and seeks high amount of international assistance and funds without jeopardizing its sovereignty (Rosenberg, 2014).

During their election campaigns, both the presidential candidates emphasized upon breaking the monopoly of the president over major departments. Ashraf Ghani proposed doing so by strengthening the ministries, whereas Abdullah Abdullah suggested to form a viable parliamentary system. For the formation of Afghan government after the elections in early 2014, US secretary of state John Kerry helped both the candidates, broker a deal. In the agreement that followed, both the candidates agreed to work together and strive for establishing the

parliamentary system, which would eventually lead to deconcentrating powers from the premiers to the provinces. However, many months down the line, fulfillment of that agreement is yet to be witnessed, which is not strange given that usually in countries with a fragile domestic environment like that of Afghanistan, leaders are reluctant to give away powers (Rosenberg, 2014).

The present day Afghan constitution has given immense powers to the president, from the right of assigning governors to allocation of funds to the provinces. The former President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai while governing the country since December 2001, ensured that most of the powers and privileges remain concentrated in the hands of the President. Other than that, he also resisted efforts to grant more autonomy to the provinces as well as discouraged the rise of political parties. Considering the thick ethnic divisions in the society, abundance of war lords, and, weak writ of the state, in most of the modern history of Afghanistan, the President House has depended on the politics of patronage. Wherein the strongest section of the government runs a policy of 'divide and rule' so as to carry out a balancing act between different tribes, clans, and, ethnic groups. If the Afghan presidency loses its authority to allocate resources and appoint administrators or governors to the respective regions and provinces, it also, thereby, loses its significance in the face of a parliamentary system (Chatham House, 2014).

Due to its disproportionate reliance on foreign aid, the government of Afghanistan has also an interest in maintaining good governance and promoting the rule of law, to meet the donors' criteria. It is also to be noted here that meeting the criteria would not go as far as to disturb the status quo of the country, where the resource-sharing is largely managed by and distributed among the elites. So, ensuring constant inflow of aid and foreign assistance from a wide array of donors is also one of the strong interests of Afghan government, due to limited amount of local

sources of revenue. It is also an important thing to note here, that Afghan government wants a bigger pool of donors to draw aid from, so as to not become disproportionately dependent on one, which might compromise the sovereignty or integrity of the country (Chatham House, 2014).

The Afghan government also has an interest in maintaining stability in the country and keeping strong security forces so as to meet the challenges of extremism and insurgency. However, some critics make an argument that some of the political forces in the country (other than Taliban) actually do have an interest in low level insurgency, which would draw security concerns from the Western governments and hence more funds and assistance. However, the government would never ignore the dangerous level of violence and instability which might jeopardize its authority and legitimacy, and have an adverse effect on its ongoing negotiations with the foreign investors and countries for the contracts of minerals' and mining extractions (Rosenberg, 2014).

To uphold its credibility at home and abroad, the government also has an interest in upholding country's sovereignty and reducing outside interference in its internal affairs. Although it is to be mentioned here that some groups within the government do profit from their external backers in different forms of rents (Chatham House, 2014).

Northern Groups

The northern groups, which were formerly known as the northern alliance, is a coalition of non-Pashtun ethnic groups in Afghanistan. To understand the interests and stakes of the northern groups, it is very important to understand the demographics of Afghan population since it's a multiethnic society and interethnic relations have played a very vital role in the Afghan conflict. Pashtuns are the majority ethnic group in the country, with them being 45-50% of the entire population. Afghan Taliban have been historically Pashtun dominated. Whereas Tajiks form

around 25-28%, followed by other minority groups like Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Turkmen combined forming 20% of the country's population. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and with the rise of Pashtun-dominated Taliban in the early 1990's, the leaders of non-Pashtun ethnic groups formed a united front against the Taliban under the banner of Northern Alliance with the foreign backing of Iran, India, Russia, and Central Asian states. After the US-led alliance overthrew the Taliban government in 2001, many leaders of Northern Alliance got prominent roles in the new government. But northern groups are too fragmented to have their interests presented in a coherent way. But generally, they would want to hold on to and expand their power in a Pashtun dominated country (however Pashtuns don't form the majority of population) (BBC, 2001).

The leaders from Northern Alliance seek more authority over decision making when it comes to allocation of resources and appointing governors to the provinces. Since President Ashraf Ghani, a Pashtun was elected as the President of the country in last year's elections and ethnic politics play a great role in Afghanistan, most of the northern leaders want a constitutional change which would take away some major powers from the President, while they also support more autonomy to the provinces. Since the present non-transferrable vote system results in their underrepresentation in the parliament, many northern leaders have expressed a desire to see a more representative electoral system (Waldman & Wright).

Considering their historic rivalry to Taliban, most leaders of the northern groups have an interest in ensuring that Taliban don't take over Kabul again and are wiped out from their respective regions. However, Taliban insurgency on a relatively small scale is in the interest of some of the northern leaders since it allows them to seek foreign funds and make security and development contracts with the foreign companies as well as the Afghan government. But simultaneously,

they are concerned about the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. In the wake of the recent withdrawal, many have begun to rearm and reassert themselves in order to defend their areas of influence and regions against largescale Taliban assaults (Chatham House).

In the recent attempts by the Afghan government for negotiations with the Taliban, northern leaders have sought seat at the table in order to ensure that their demands are forwarded and communicated to the Taliban as well. It might be interesting to note here that many northern leaders, who were/are former warlords might not have a strong interest in maintaining the rule of law in their constituents, which would threaten their monopoly over resources.

Afghan Taliban

Afghan Taliban is a group of Islamic fundamentals who is currently waging an insurgency in Afghanistan. It is composed of several different factions, all having varied goals and interests. The group took over Kabul in 1996 and ruled Afghanistan until US invasion in 2001. During Taliban's regime (1996-2001), a very strict interpretation of Islam i.e., Sharia, was enforced in Afghanistan, which received international condemnation. Women and all opponents of the regime in particular bore the brunt of Taliban's harsh rule. Pakistan, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia, were the only three countries which recognized Taliban government in Kabul (Rashid, 2012).

The group originated in early 1990's amidst the chaos prevailed after the fall of Communist regime in Kabul in 1992. Mostly it consisted of Afghan students from religious seminaries, which taught Deobandi tradition of Islam. After the capture of Kandhar in 1994, the group started spreading in the rest of Afghanistan under the leadership of Mullah Muhammad Omar, and was initially welcomed by common Afghans which had become tired of corruption and violence perpetrated by the Mujahidden warlords. In 1996, the group was able to take over Kabul

after decisively defeating the Northern Alliance which was led by Ahmed Shah Massoud.

Throughout the 1990's, Pakistan's ISI is believed to have fully supported Taliban movement. It is important to note here that Afghan Taliban was largely Pashtun dominated as opposed to Northern Alliance (Fair, 2015).

After the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Taliban's government was overthrown and they were driven out of Kabul with the air support provided by the US and ground assault of the Northern Alliance. However to this day, the Afghan Taliban continue to fight against the Afghan forces, US troops and other Allied forces in Afghanistan. The Taliban's resurgence and revival has been largely attributed to the financial and logistical support provided to them by the government of Pakistan, however Pakistan has denied such claims. The official line of the government of Pakistan remains that all the support to Afghan Taliban was dropped after the 9/11 attacks and following US invasion of Afghanistan. The group remained until the supreme leadership of Mullah Muhammad Omer until his death in 2013. After that, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor was selected as the supreme leader of the group, however just recently he is reportedly injured or killed. As of a couple of months ago, Afghan Taliban are supported by more than 10 different factions who have different agendas and objectives (Fair, 2015).

Because of the diversity and guerilla tactics adopted by the group, it is very difficult to ascertain the specific interests that Afghan Taliban have, while carrying out the insurgency. There is a clear difference between the statements given out by the Taliban leadership and the actions carried out by its foot soldiers. One can easily discern the difficulties Taliban leadership faces in keeping its military wing's actions aligned with the statements given out by them. In short, there seem to be a great deal of tension within the ranks of Taliban, specifically between the ideological wing of the movement and foot soldiers. A good number of local leaders seem to

have developed economic and personal interests in continuing the fight, and hence might ignore the calls for halting attacks even temporarily. Another major factor contributing to the miscommunication between the Taliban's leadership and foot soldiers is the fact that most of the Taliban leadership is based in North Western Pakistan and Balochistan, whereas the foot soldiers are waging the insurgency in Afghanistan. However one of the principal shared interests of the Afghan Taliban is the expulsion of all the foreign forces currently stationed in Afghanistan. Although once all the foreign troops leave Afghanistan, Afghan Taliban might not be in a position to continue their rhetoric against 'foreign invaders' anymore and risk losing appeal from among the common Afghans. Because gaining support from the Afghan masses is also one of the foremost interests of Afghan Taliban. Implementation of strict Islamic social and legal codes is also one of the main objectives of Taliban movement in Afghanistan. However, there is a considerable difference of opinion among the Taliban leadership regarding how and to what extreme would Sharia be implemented? Among the leadership, some object to replicating the same sociopolitical and legal codes as of 1990's which earned Afghanistan under Taliban the status of a Pariah state. Although some strict Ulemas (Islamic scholars) in the leadership enjoy vast influence and would object to compromising on the strictness of implementation of Sharia. It is also to be taken into account that Taliban also have an interest in seeking international recognition including that of the Western powers since they wouldn't want the kind of international isolation they faced during their rule in the 1990's (Chatham House, 2014). In one of his statements in 2013, Mullah Omer said that Taliban are not looking to acquire total power in Afghanistan, which means that they are willing to share power with other Afghan stakeholders as well. However, it is difficult to access that without monopolizing power, how Taliban will be able to achieve their objectives including the implementation of Sharia: an

interests which clashes with many other Afghan stakeholders. Reducing dependency on Pakistan is also in Taliban's interest. Manipulation by Pakistan secret intelligence agency i.e., Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has led to a lot of resentment among Taliban leaders and foot soldiers alike. Hence, having feasible environment in Afghanistan, one where Taliban leaders are able to return and reduce their dependency on Pakistan is in Afghan Taliban's interest. Interestingly, some Taliban leaders have expressed a desire to hold such negotiations with the Afghan government and the US, where Pakistani government doesn't play a role (Rosenberg, 2014).

Afghan Public

Due to the diverse demographic of Afghan population, their interests vary a lot as well.

However, after decades of foreign interference, war, and violence, generally Afghan population has a shared interest in peace and stability in the country. They all want to work, earn, feed their families, and go about their everyday lives. Since 1979, more than 2 million Afghans have lost their lives in one conflict after the other so it wouldn't be wrong to assess that Afghans desire peace.

They are frustrated with the endemic corruption, injustice, violence, and abuse of power at the hands of their elite. Lack of health and educational facilities is also a major concern for ordinary Afghans. Eradication of widespread poverty is one of the main concerns of common Afghans. They would like to see a vibrant economy and their country joining the ranks of prosperous and developed nations (Waldman & Wright, 2014).

It wouldn't be wrong to say that most Afghans do want more rights and freedoms but would not be willing to have them at the cost of their centuries old customs and traditions. So, they would like the preservation of their traditional and cultural norms.

Ordinary Afghans would like their country's resources utilized for the betterment of their countrymen and society. They want trade and investments to flourish so that more employment opportunities are created to address the problem of massive unemployment and poverty. Afghans want more fundamental rights and liberties as well but some Afghans are not hesitant to see the repressive measures against women as during the Taliban regime. Afghans also want to maintain their country's sovereignty and political independence and would like to see a continuous flow of financial and logistical assistance to their country (Waldman & Wright 2014).

Chapter III: Regional and International Stakeholders

In this chapter, major interests of the most important foreign players currently involved in Afghanistan will be laid down. In order to achieve a peaceful settlement to the conflict, it is very important for all the parties involved to express and present their interests honestly.

Unfortunately, in Afghanistan most of the parties have failed to do so, which has led to increase in instability and chaos in the country and region. The key foreign players discussed in this chapter are the United States, United Kingdom and other NATO allies, China, Russia, Pakistan, India, Iran, and Central Asian States.

For India and Pakistan, Afghanistan is primarily another theatre of proxy war, where both the countries have vied for political influence over the last few decades. Hence it would be useful to present both countries' interests vis-à-vis Afghanistan under one section. Many experts have expressed deep concerns regarding the negative role both countries have played in the present conflict in Afghanistan. Although both countries have economic stakes in Afghanistan as well, so far their political interests have trumped other stakes and hence their policies are overshadowed by their respective political and security concerns. Many critics of Pakistan attribute Taliban's rise and resurgence to the overwhelming support given to them by the Pakistani government. The support for Taliban from their Pakistani backers revived after the increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan after pro-India Northern Alliance made their way to Kabul in the wake of US invasion in 2001. Hence, Pakistan's concerns regarding Indian influence in Afghanistan and its counter strategies in the shape of reviving Taliban and giving sanctuary to senior Taliban leadership played a great role in shaping the conflict.

United States

When it comes to Afghanistan, the US administration has a range of interests in the region in general and country in particular. Different departments within the US government have different opinions on what those interests actually are? Undoubtedly though, of all the stakes national security interest is the most important one. And national security is the sole issue, which is equally emphasized upon by all the US departments including the White House, Department of State, and Department of Defence (Waldman & Wright, 2014). So, it is the foremost interest for the US in Afghanistan that the country doesn't plunge back into the civil war and chaos of the 1990's. To avoid this, the US has helped building state infrastructure, functional government, and Afghan security forces. To ensure that country doesn't become a sanctuary for al-Qaeda affiliated networks, which might target the US and Western interests abroad and at home, the US put its troops on the ground in Afghanistan after driving out Taliban from Kabul in 2001. Since then US sought international assistance in the form of coalition forces to counter the threat of Taliban insurgency. The US has a major interest in ensuring that the Afghan state doesn't collapse and country doesn't descent into chaos, which might produce spillover effects across the border into neighboring nuclear-armed Pakistan (Rashid, 2012).

The Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between the Obama administration and Afghan government under President Ashraf Ghani in 2015 is a symbol of US' deep interest in keeping a limited contingent of American troops in Afghanistan even after the announced withdrawal of foreign troops from the country in 2016. The reason for this arrangement is to train and equip Afghan security forces adequately so as to meet the challenges and threats posed by Taliban and other insurgent groups. However, the recent attack and temporary capture of Afghanistan's fifth largest city of Kunduz in October 2015 by the Taliban led to Obama administration making

changes in the original policy of troops' drawdown by 2016. Taliban were generally seen to be gaining ground in Afghanistan and Afghan security forces didn't prove to be as effective as was expected of them. President Ashraf Ghani also requested his US' counterpart to slowdown the process of American troops' withdrawal and keep the US forces for a longer period of time.

Recently, IS (Islamic State) is also reported to have been making inroads in Afghanistan which was particularly concerning for the US' administration as they feared the collapse of Afghan forces against IS as was witnessed in Iraq after the withdrawal of US' forces in 2011 (Masoud, 2014).

The temporary capture of Kunduz by the Taliban in October was a great shock to Kabul and the White House. The reversal in Obama's decision regarding withdrawal of US' troops after the fall of Kunduz shows US commitment to contain the threat of Taliban insurgency.

Other than security concerns and interests in Afghanistan, the US also has a reputational interest. The US wants to ensure that there is a peaceful political and security transition once it leaves the country to the Afghans. If Taliban and related insurgent groups are seen capturing territory and perpetrating violence and spreading instability, it would undermine US' status and influence in the country as well as the region. So, the US wants to leave behind the country with its reputation and credibility intact among its allies and foes alike (Waldman & Wright, 2014).

Since Afghanistan is the world's largest opium producer i.e., it produces around 90% of the world's opium, the US has an interest in limiting the opium cultivation and eliminating it altogether if possible. For this, the US government has tried to provide Afghan farmers with alternative options for cultivation and farming. Promotion of good governance and economic and social development of the country are also some of the US' interests. The US has also run a lot of programs meant for promoting women's rights and promoting freedoms and liberties of the

Afghan masses. As a result of these program, around three million Afghan girls are in schools, who were denied the right to education previously. Although genuine efforts have been undertaken and large sums of money have been pumped to address these issues, none of them is of the foremost US' interest. The US' national security is the only major interest which US policy makers have tried to keep in mind while devising strategies in Afghanistan (Waldman & Wright, 2014).

United Kingdom and other NATO Allies

The US has a number of allies which are contributing towards bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan. Of all the allies, some NATO members particularly the UK have provided the greatest amount of assistance to the US in its counterinsurgency and country's rehabilitation efforts. The United Kingdom along with few other NATO members has contributed troops, provided diplomatic support when needed, and given huge sums in foreign aid to Afghanistan. The principal interest of the UK in Afghanistan has been to eliminate all the extremist and terrorist threats originating from Afghanistan and making sure that the transnational Islamic terrorist networks don't find safe havens in Afghanistan as well as neighboring Pakistan. Like its American counterparts, British government also doesn't want to see the chaos and war in Afghanistan producing spillover effects across the border in Pakistan, its former colony and a major commonwealth member (Waldman & Wright, 2014).

One of the foremost interests of the UK in Afghanistan has been to demonstrate its commitment and support to its long term ally i.e., the US. And certainly, demonstrating support to the US has been the major interest of almost all the NATO members currently active in Afghanistan. The UK and other NATO members might not be necessarily interested in a particular outcome in the region other than to maintain and strengthen their ties with the United States. Hence, naturally

their interest in the country would reduce as the US' forces withdraw from Afghanistan. Like the US, the UK has a reputational stake in Afghanistan as well and would want the withdrawal of all allied forces without being seen as having failed to defeat Taliban and brought some sort of stability to the country. The UK has invested heavily in the social sectors of Afghanistan as well, most importantly health, education, women's rights, and capacity building of Afghan civilians. But support to the US and minimizing terrorist threat remain the two most important interests for the UK (Waldman & Wright, 2014).

Other important US' allies in Afghanistan include Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, and Italy. All of these allies have provided troops and logistical support to the US as part of the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) coalition. Scandinavian countries like Norway, and Sweden have contributed towards development of Afghan society as well as a gesture of goodwill to Afghanistan and show support to the US. All of the US' Western allies are certainly concerned about the extremist threat particularly that of al Qaeda's ability to regroup and plan attacks directed to the West from Afghanistan. But none of these countries have major national security interests in Afghanistan (Waldman & Right, 2014).

India and Pakistan

Both India and Pakistan have range of geo-political, geo-strategic, and economic interests in Afghanistan. And although both countries have their own respective stakes in the country, it's very difficult to explain one country's interests and objectives in Afghanistan without describing other country's policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan, particularly when it comes to geostrategic interests. Pakistan's foreign policy has been and remains fixated on India. In 1954-55, Pakistan joined the US-led alliance system principally to strengthen itself against India. Pakistan's nuclear program, the source of enormous friction with the United States, has been motivated by the not

unsurprising desire to have a deterrent against India's nuclear capability. Even Islamabad's wish for a friendly regime in Afghanistan is rooted in part in the hope of gaining "strategic depth" against India. Since the breakup of Soviet Union and fall of Communist regime in Afghanistan, US-Pakistan relations have been burdened by continuing frictions over issues of nuclear proliferation and over Pakistan's handling of Islamic extremists, its interference in Afghanistan and its backing of the Afghan Taliban before and 'allegedly' even after the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 in the wake of 9/11 attacks.

There can't be a simplistic one-dimensional approach to provide a definitive assessment of Pakistani concerns and interests, as various independent actors operate on both sides of border in a particularly intertwined environment, combining both natural affinities and mutual unease, sometimes described as two countries "joined at the hip", an expression used by Afghan President Karzai in his formal banquet speeches. Hence, the dynamics of Pak-Afghan relations should not be viewed through the lens of official policies and Kabul-Islamabad exchanges. There are several overwhelming informal exchanges among a range of interests groups and people, including tribes and traders, operating in the border regions independently of the two countries. For example, since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, religious-political groups on the two sides, especially the madrassa networks in the border regions, have assumed prominence. The phenomenon of these informal interactions is massive and unique in terms of its scale, its roots in custom and tradition, and the high degree of public acceptance. It has been strengthened and sustained by the soft nature of border, stretching over difficult "ungovernable" mountain terrain, varying degree of weak institutional governance on both sides of the border and with the support of elements within Pakistani establishment with religious inclination (Khan, 2011).

There has been a perennial conflict in Pakistan between the civilian governments and military establishment to take control of foreign policy, particularly towards US, India, and Afghanistan. Pakistan's relations towards US and US' policy towards Pakistan are quite closely interlinked with the way both these countries influence Afghanistan. In the historical context, Afghanistan has been a land locked country which has always relied upon Pakistan for its imports, exports and trade via sea ports in Pakistan. To counter this overwhelming dependence on Pakistan, Afghanistan has always played an India card by asking Indian assistance. And in response India has proactively cooperated with Afghan governments in the past. This has been a serious concern for Pakistani military since Pakistani and Indian intelligence agencies have been engaged in a proxy war for a long time. RAW has intervened in Pakistani territory, helped and supported different separatist movements. Similarly Pakistani agencies have done the same in India, armed and supported different rebellions like Sikh rebellion and Kashmir's separatist movement. In 1990's, Pakistan supported Taliban regime because they happened to be staunchly anti-India. So, during Taliban's regime, India's alliance with Afghanistan was broken. With the fall of Afghan regime after US invasion in 2001, Northern Alliance was brought to the realms of powers which have always been pro-Indian. ISI and Pakistan Army in the wake of this development started supporting certain factions of Afghan Taliban like Haqqani network to alleviate Indian influence. Hence, Pakistani establishment has been blamed for double crossing the US in its war against terror as these Pakistani-backed Afghan militant groups pose a great danger to the US, NATO, India and the government in Afghanistan (Rashid, 2012).

Historically, relations between India and Afghanistan have been sound, interrupted only by Taliban takeover in 1990's. Pakistan has always voiced its concerns over country's encirclement. For Pakistan's first 24 years until 1971, these fears were related to both the eastern and western

parts of the country. A few years before that in 1966, former Foreign Minister and later Prime Minister of Pakistan Zulfikar Ali Bhutto asserted: “India can’t tolerate the existence of Pakistan. India wanted to destroy Pakistan. In the destruction of Pakistan lay India’s most sublime and finest dreams.” Geographically, India posed a major threat to East Pakistan and was believed to harbor hegemonic designs. The break-up of Pakistan through Indian intervention after the debacle of East Pakistan only confirmed these suspicions. On the western border, threat of Indian pincer movement continued, as India built its pre-partition ties by providing monetary and other assistance to Pashtun leadership of Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province (NWFP). These ties were allegedly supposed to help India accomplish its goals to break-up Pakistan by instigating the autonomy claims of various Pakistani ethnic groups, as asserted by the Pakistani establishment. So this desire to have a pro-Pakistani government in Kabul comes from the threat of India. In order to counter this encirclement of Pakistan by India, Pakistan needed an ally on its North Western border and hence Pakistan sought a pro-Pakistani government in Kabul. India’s friendly ties with Afghanistan, Afghanistan denial of accepting Pakistan’s viewpoint of Indian “divide and rule” plans for enhancing its hegemony and Afghanistan’s support of irredentist Pashtun (and later Baloch) demands were seen not just as a deviation from Islamic cause but also as extremely threatening to Pakistan’s very existence. The need for a pro-Pakistan and anti-India regime in Afghanistan was deemed crucial to the security and foreign policy of Pakistan. Pakistan, being a state built on ideology was challenged by two neighbors who tried to provoke and exploit its ethno-linguistic nationalism. Hence, the role of India in Afghanistan-Pakistan theatre is significantly of high relevance. For Pakistan, most of the regional policy amounts to a zero-sum game with India. One way of seeing Pakistan’s policy towards Afghanistan should be in the context of South Asian security complex, where Afghanistan plays a role of being a

component of Pakistan's India policy. An argument can be posed that Indo-Pakistan rivalry has seen a new proxy war theatre in Afghanistan where both countries vie for political influence and a friendly government in Kabul. India's support for Baloch and Pashtun separatist movement inside Pakistan, its links to Karzai government and Afghan warlords, suggests Pakistan that Panjshiri (Northern Alliance) rather than Pashtun dominance is prevalent in Afghanistan, which is inherently unfavorable to Pakistan. As after Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, ISI and Pakistani army have been financing and arming Pashtun Taliban during the civil war between Northern Alliance and Pashtun groups, which resulted in the alienation of Northern Alliance (Pande, 2011).

The increasing number of Indian paramilitary personnel on Afghan soil to provide security to Indian consulates and Border Roads Organization is further fueling Islamabad's anxieties. As Pakistan continues to surreptitiously establish ties with certain factions of Taliban, India is also keeping its strong links with Afghan warlords and is in pursuit of suppressing Islamic militancy as it threatens the strategic goals of India as well effects its domestic security (As Kashmiri Jihadi groups were trained and organized by ISI within Afghanistan during Taliban regime). Therefore, India coming back to Afghan stage has unleashed a sparring of terrorism charges between Islamabad and New Delhi. Islamabad has always been skeptical of any sort of Indian presence in Afghanistan, blaming that Indian intelligence agency RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) has been indulged in provoking and arming different separatist movements (in KPK, Balouchistan and Sindh) and other malicious activities (like terrorism) inside Pakistan by operating from Indian consulates in Afghanistan closer to Pakistani border. Side by side Indian ties with US also continue to flourish. Among the key pillars of relationship between Washington and New Delhi are counterterrorism and defense cooperation. Islamabad remains

embittered by US–India civil–nuclear energy deals. In September 2010 Pakistan’s foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi complained: “We (US–Pak) were traditional allies – the Indians remained in the Soviet camp. Ever since that changed, the American approach has changed. Today, America values India a lot.” (Pande, 2011)

In the past, Pakistan has allegedly employed Islamic Jihadi groups as a hedge against India and a hostile government in Afghanistan – both of which it considers as a threat to its national security apparatus. An ever-looming Pakistani fear is that of being trapped in a pincer movement with India to the East and a heavily pro-Indian Afghanistan to its West. Islamabad’s strategic depth approach is to be understood against this backdrop. Pakistan’s strategic depth in Afghanistan entails clearing its Western neighbor of any outside influence, particularly of India. Pakistan’s history is therefore pockmarked with extensive engagement and meddling in domestic Afghan affairs. Hence, this strategy of pre-empting hostile encirclement has led to Afghanistan’s internal security crisis which further triggers the resentment of Afghan government and its masses towards Pakistan. From Pakistan’s actions, it can be postulated that Pakistan’s Afghan policy is dependent upon the trend and scale of Indian cooperation with Afghanistan as well as US. The factors which prey on Pakistan’s basic insecurities are following:

- 1) Pashtunistan question (separation of North Western region of Pakistan).
- 2) Indian encirclement (increased Indian presence and influence in Afghanistan).
- 3) The forging of US-India relationship (military, nuclear and diplomatic).

All these factors pose a threat to deepen the asymmetry in Pakistan’s political influence and military capability and decrease Pakistan’s power status to a lower level on South Asia’s strategic stage and also in the Muslim world (Shaikh, 2013).

Towards the end of 1980's the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghan theatre marked the end of 4 decades long cold war between US and USSR. With the debilitating stature of Soviet Union leaving US as the sole superpower, US' interests in the region started diminishing. The intelligence agencies of both Pakistan and US, ISI and CIA respectively had co-operated for almost a decade now and carried out a successful covert operation of arming Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet and Afghan government troops. After the end of cold war, there started a diplomatic process for reconciliation between the two powers USSR and US, and a little room was left for Pakistan to benefit from its status as a frontline state against Communism. Soon the course of actions turned against Pakistan and it became the most sanctioned ally of the US in the next decade due to its aim of acquiring nuclear technology (Klux, 2001).

However, Pakistan couldn't stay away from engagement in Afghan theatre for long. The course of events in Afghanistan started to fall in Pakistan's favor. These developments again prompted Pakistan to fling itself into the Afghan theatre. One of these developments came in the form of opportunity to connect Pakistan via stable Afghanistan to newly independent resource enriched Central Asian states and vie for trade opportunities while the other development more of a served as a potential threat. Following the downfall of Communist government in Afghanistan, Iran was seen to be surreptitiously gaining much influence in Afghanistan by aligning its interest with non-Pashtun Afghan factions like Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Shia groups which gathered to form a much larger and stronger entity i.e., Northern Alliance in the wake of strong rifts between two most powerful warlords Ahmed Shah Masoud and Gulbudin Hikmetyar. These major factors were a harbinger of future course of Afghanistan, which were going to have a profound role in the developments in the regions as well as the whole world in the coming years (Shaikh, 2013).

Years of civil war and bloodshed even after the expulsion of Soviet forces had left Afghans with little hope for any stability and improvement in situation any time soon. In the mayhem, a group emerged with the name of “Taliban” and started its speedy journey towards gaining legitimate power through the collaboration of ISI. Taliban were soon to be found gaining much momentum in terms of garnering support among the masses as well as attaining arms’ muscle to counter the other contenders for power. Pakistan’s massive support for this group was met with suspicion in the US, which eventually led to the impasse between US and Pakistan. Taliban’s rise with indirect support from Pakistan was a major source of contention between Pakistani and US’ policymakers. Although US remained taciturn about Taliban’s arrival to the realms of power backed by Pakistani establishment, which itself was a green signal for ISI’s ventures in Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, ISI had chosen the right horse to bet on in the form of Taliban which against all odds came to the power in the span of two to three years, but ISI was soon disappointed with Taliban’s stubbornness towards complying with their diktats in most of the matters. Taliban’s reluctance towards acquiescing Pakistani suggestions and demands was despite the fact that Pakistan was one of the only three countries in the whole world to recognize their government (Shaikh, 2013).

US’ stance towards Taliban also changed dramatically from that of a neutral observer to an antagonist, after the severe human rights’ violations committed by Taliban regime which caused much public uproar in the international community. It became virtually impossible for Clinton to ignore these concerns. Although Taliban’s anti-Shia stance to counter Iran’s influence in the region seemed favorable to the US, and also a stable government in Afghanistan would ensure US’ access to the resourceful countries of Central Asian. But with the arrival of Osama bin

Laden in Afghanistan- who was by now declared as a #1 terrorist in UN-most wanted list, was something not to overlook. The man was running a global jihadi organization “Al-Qaeda” which was striving to wipe out US presence in the Middle Eastern region and free Palestine. Both were the motives significantly detrimental to US’ interests. Such an organization based in Afghanistan under Taliban government and planning operations to target US’ interest all across the world infuriated the US government. Adding more fuel to the fire was Taliban’s demolition of ancient Buddhist statues which were not only revered by the Buddhist world but were also considered as the emblems of human heritage. Despite pleas from International community, Taliban government carried on with its decision to demolish these Bamiyan statues, which further alienated the world. The world was furious at Taliban’s actions in every aspect but despite all this, Pakistan still continued to extend its diplomatic support to their regime and kept on viewing them as their strategic assets (Rashid, 2012).

The framework of strategic depth sets the backdrop of Pakistan’s relations with Afghanistan and defines the strategic interests that Pakistan has in Afghanistan. Strategic depth is a military term, essentially it can be defined as the ability to maneuver military assets during wartime. This is necessary to be able to perform a successful counter offensive, something that Pakistan lacks because of its lack of width between the Eastern and the Western border. So in case of an Indian invasion, the Indian army will be able to easily encroach upon the key military assets of the country, which would be detrimental for Pakistan’s defensive strategies. This is why Pakistan’s Army Chief at the time General Mirza Aslam Baig came up with the concept of gaining strategic depth in Afghanistan vis-à-vis India by shifting key assets offshore to Afghanistan.

It is this doctrine of strategic depth that raised Afghanistan’s strategic importance for Pakistan tenfold, causing the latter to strictly pursue its goal of attaining this depth at whatever

the cost may be. Pakistan has since, always employed strategic depth as its primary policy when dealing with Afghanistan. The reasoning behind such a single-minded approach is based in the fear of a situation that we consider may be too much for the state to handle. For decades now, since the late 1970's Pakistan has made use of extremist Islamic militant groups to fight proxy wars with India and keep the hostile regime in Kabul at bay. Both parties Pakistan considers to be threats to national security, a non-cooperative and pro-India Afghanistan and their archenemies since birth, India. It is in this hypothetical corner against India and Afghanistan that Pakistan seeks strategic depth to be the solution, a contingency plan if a cross border war erupts between India and Pakistan. Therefore, Pakistan's need for strategic depth needs to be considered with this hypothesis in mind, the possibility of being sandwiched between two hostile states (Haider, 2011).

Afghanistan on the other hand, has been from the very beginning non-interested in Pakistan's domestic turmoil and its hostilities towards its Eastern neighbor. For Afghanistan, India has never been the big bad wolf, but the bully you want to befriend. So that India may protect it better than the alternatives. This is another plane where both countries have had a very opposing stance regarding policy. Pakistan on the other hand has always aimed to isolate the Afghan government from India's political influence to its own end, so that economic and political independence from India would mean a more Pakistan-centric Afghan government, being religiously and culturally bound and with a history of brotherhood during times of war. The policy of strategic depth entails two objectives, one is to rid Afghanistan of Indian influence by trying to establish a friendly regime in Kabul and the other is to move Pakistan's strategic assets to Afghanistan in case India wages war so Pakistan can make use of the Afghan hinterlands and launch a successful counter attack from there (Durrani, 2011)

Afghanistan however, has an opposite view of the situation. Kabul has barely ever shown interested in Pakistan's alliance. Branding Pakistan to be an illegitimate state, unlawfully keeping their Pashtun brothers and territory to themselves, Afghanistan's only interest in Pakistan thus far has been singular i.e. to convince Pakistan of reforming the boundary of the Durand Line so as to include the Pashtun population and a large chunk of the territory to them. As far as their alliance with India is concerned, India has always been the bigger and the more powerful state, which would in times of war and economic downfall be considered a better alternative than Pakistan. India is militarily and economically way ahead of Pakistan and has shown no covert interests in the region thus far unlike Pakistan. With India investing \$1.3 billion on infrastructure projects to complete the Delaram-Zaranj highway from Kabul to Chabahar port in Iran, and inviting to help with the rehabilitation process of the Afghani administrative system in helping train their police forces, they have given more potent and tangible reason for an alliance to Afghanistan than Pakistan ever has (Shaikh, 2013).

Strategic Depth played a major role during the Soviet Invasion. Pakistan provided military and strategic help to the Afghan mujahidin with the help of CIA and provided them with large inflows of weaponry and training. Though, the blind pursuit of this policy backfired for Pakistan in several ways. These problems include the refugee crisis, the invasion of Taliban factions within Pakistan and the obvious one; we are still no farther in our road to friendship with Afghanistan than we were decades ago. One of the major problems of Pakistan's foreign policy has been that it has mostly circulated around the threat perception from its Eastern neighbor. The rules of the modern world dictate that foreign policy be conducted in lieu of economic and social advantages one can gain from attaining such a position. This has been the bane of Pakistan's

problem they have dealt with India as a problem, not as a potential market, if not an ally, for economic gains. And Afghanistan has been treated as the solution to that problem.

The US' invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and initial defeat of Taliban was followed by Bonn agreement according to which Hamid Karzai was appointed as the head of Afghan interim government. Hamid Karzai, himself a Pushtun, belonged to Populzai tribe. He has always been vivid in his criticism of Pakistan's 'dirty' role on Afghan affairs. A tribal chief and a war veteran against Soviets, he led a nationalist struggle against Soviets as opposed to under the charade of Jihad. Hence, he had always been able to circumvent the influence of ISI. Initially in early 1990's, he maintained friendly relations with Taliban to the extent that he was offered a post of an envoy to UN. But the overwhelming influence of ISI and later Osama bin Laden in Taliban's affairs, like the US also alienated him. Hamid Karzai, soon after assuming power, mustered the support of various factions of Northern Alliance, which was indeed a strategic debacle for Pakistan. Since, historically Northern Alliance has been inclined more towards India and Iran, and rather been resentful of Pakistan's support for Pashtun Taliban. Hamid Karzai, although a Pushtun himself, had attained his education in India and thus had maintained friendly ties with India (Rashid, 2008).

In the apprehension of increasing Indian influence, even after US invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan has insisted that the new Afghan government include "moderate" Taliban. Pakistan also supported various Pashtun political figures and endorsed Pashtun claims of being sidelined from the broader picture of Afghan political structure as well as the economic reconstruction schemes. Therefore U.S. was decisive not to alienate Pakistan whom President Bush considered 'the most pivotal nation'. To conciliate Pakistan's fears, U.S. didn't allow India much leverage in Afghan security-related matters. While Pakistan in its own part to deny India a foothold in Afghanistan

and to install a pliant regime in Kabul once U.S. leaves, continued seeing Taliban behind the scenes as 'strategic assets'.

Russia

Russia is also one of the important regional as well as global players which has some major interests in Afghanistan. The modern Russian Federation was formed after the breakup of Soviet Union in 1991. So, historically it has been very actively engaged in the country during the cold war. However, after the withdrawal of Soviet troops and following fall of Communist regime in Kabul a few years later, it kept limited influence in Afghanistan. During the civil war of 1990's, Russia put its weight behind non-Pashtun Northern Alliance against the Pashtun Taliban. Ironically many of the leaders of Northern Alliance were former mujahidden, who had fought against Russia's descendent state i.e., Soviet Union, during the 1980's. The rise of Taliban in Afghanistan and following formation of 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' caused serious security concerns for Russian policy makers because of the extremist Islamist ideology Taliban regime subscribed to and propagated (Trenin, 2013).

Despite the fact that Taliban's movement remained concentrated within Afghanistan, its provision of sanctuary, training camps and logistical support to transnational terrorist networks like al Qaeda, and Uzbek and Chechen militants posed a serious security threat to Central Asia and Russia's Southern regions. Also after the end of 1st Chechen war (1994-96), Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under Taliban regime became the only country to recognize Chechnya's independence from Russian Federation. Terrorist groups like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and Tajik and Kazakh extremist groups which found sanctuaries in Afghanistan during Taliban's rule raised alarms in Moscow because of their plans to overthrow governments in Central Asia: Russia's traditional sphere of influence (Kulakov, 2014).

After 9/11 attacks, Russian president became one of the first foreign leaders to call President Bush and gave him assurance of his government's full support to clamp down on extremist and terrorist networks based in Afghanistan. After the fall of Taliban regime in Kabul, although Russia didn't provide military support for counterinsurgency purposes, however Russian intelligence agencies shared intelligence information with US' secret agencies regarding terrorist networks in the region. In 2002, when US established one of the very first military bases in Uzbekistan, concerns were raised by some policymakers in Moscow. However, it didn't stop Russian government from allowing its territory to be used as a transportation hub for passing equipment for US' and NATO troops stationed in Afghanistan. Hence, it shows that security concerns of Russia vis-à-vis Afghanistan trumped the nature of its hostile relations with the US. The post withdrawal scenario in Afghanistan puts Russia in a dilemma. Although it wants the US forces to leave Afghanistan as early as possible, it would want the country to be in a stable and peaceful condition, which only the presence of US' troops can guarantee. As long as American and Western troops are stationed in Afghanistan, Russian security threats regarding the influx of extremism and terrorism in Central Asian and its Southern regions (Caucases) would remain low. A peaceful and stable Afghanistan is certainly in the interest of Russia after the withdrawal of foreign forces, however in the case if country falls back into a civil war or instability, it would not be prudent for Russia to take sides. In short, Russia would not want to get involved in the domestic or ethnic conflicts of Afghanistan. The exit of US' forces will definitely offer a greater role to Russia in Afghanistan, but it wouldn't want to indulge in the country deeply as opposed to more proactive regional players like India and Pakistan (Kulakov, 2014).

Russia also has economic stakes in Afghanistan particularly in the mining extractions and building infrastructure of a war torn country, but this interest is of secondary importance. And Russia would wait for the peace and stability to prevail in the country before it embarks upon the projects driven by its economic interests. Russian government has offered some scholarships to Afghan students as part of its agreement with the Afghan government but educational or social development of Afghanistan doesn't constitute its major interest either (Kulakov, 2014).

Drug trafficking taking place from Afghanistan through Central Asia into Russia is certainly one of the major concerns for Russians. Afghanistan currently produces 90% of the world's opium. Although the US and NATO have tried to reduce opium cultivation in Afghanistan to a certain extent but policymakers maintain that opium cultivation is the source of livelihood for millions of Afghans and in the absence of alternative lucrative options, it's impossible to stop opium production in the country. In the recent years, around 20-30% of opium related drugs produced and manufactured in Afghanistan find their way across Russia. Therefore counternarcotic measures are a primary focus for Russian strategists. Russia has become a major consumer of drugs produced in Afghanistan as one report by UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes) suggest that there are around 2 million heroin addicts in Russia, hence making it the world's largest consumer of heroin. The high consumption rate of drugs by Russians has threatened the whole fabric of the Russian society. Recently Russian government has taken some stern measure to control and reduce drug trafficking into Russia by collaborating with Central Asian governments and Afghanistan. Reportedly, Russian antinarcotics force has participated in some raids inside Afghanistan based on intelligence information (Trenin, 2014)

Despite all of the interests Russia has in Afghanistan, in the foreseeable future, it would try to have only a limited involvement in the country. This policy of limited involvement can be

attributed to Soviet-Afghan war (1979-89). The current hands-off approach adopted by Russia is a direct result of that brutal war which led to the death of more than a million Afghans and thousands of Soviet troops. Hence, Russia would resist any domestic and international efforts to drag into Afghanistan militarily or in the form of favoring certain Afghan or regional players. However, whatever the situation may arise in Afghanistan, it's in the interest of Russia to engage with the Afghan and regional players politically in order find a peaceful solution to the problems currently faced by Afghanistan (Kulakov, 2014).

China

Like Russia, China also has security and economic interests in Afghanistan. Taliban's rule during the 1990's had a deteriorating impact on China's internal security since many of its separatist groups particularly from its Muslim dominated Xingjian region were able to find safe havens in Afghanistan. Members of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), mainly Uygur Muslims from China's Far Western Xingjian province found refuge and got training from the training camps in Afghanistan. The group claimed responsibility for various attacks inside mainland China, which is a great concern for Chinese policymakers (Huasheng, 2015).

Terrorist threats to both Russia and China also became one of the leading reasons for the foundation of Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The foremost founding reason for this organization was to meet the military challenges and security threats to its member countries. Russia, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Afghanistan has currently an observer status in the organization and India and Pakistan are scheduled to be included as full members in 2016. The main reason for this platform is for the member countries to share intelligence information and cooperate militarily to address the challenge of security and terrorist

threats. Although just recently, the organization has started working on economic and financial projects as well (Waldman & Wright).

China has provided military equipment and training to build the security and counterinsurgency capabilities of Afghan security forces. It's in China's vital interest to have a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. So alongside building the state infrastructure and military capabilities of Afghan Army, it has tried to bring Afghan Taliban and government representatives on the negotiating table with the help of its long term ally i.e., Pakistan. In August 2015, it was able to bring the representatives of Afghan Taliban and other relevant stakeholders in Afghanistan in the town of Murree, Pakistan with the help of the government of Pakistan as part of the peace process. The efforts for peace and stability in Afghanistan on the part of Chinese government arise from the very fact that previously the extremist takeover of Afghanistan during the 1990's resulted in the deteriorating security condition in its restive province of Xingjiang which shares around a 60 miles long border with Afghanistan. A peaceful Afghanistan and China's friendly ties with all the Afghan and regional stakeholders would ensure the Muslim separatists in Xingjiang are isolated regionally and internationally (Huasheng, 2015).

China is trying to engage both the most proactive regional stakeholders in Afghanistan i.e., India and Pakistan. Recently, it made efforts for the inclusion of both these countries in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), through which it seeks to convince both the countries to find a peaceful solution in Afghanistan. After the withdrawal of US' troops from Afghanistan, China seeks to engage more actively economically in the country however direct military involvement in the form of sending combat units is out of question right now (Huasheng, 2015).

China has made an adequate amount of investments in Afghanistan, particularly in the area of mine extractions. Two of its major investments are in Aynak copper mines in the south of the

country and Amu Darya oil fields in the Northern Afghanistan. Considering that in the last 10 years, more than 1200 mines were discovered in Afghanistan, China naturally has huge stakes economically in the country given its stature, regional proximity, and expertise to extract. To be able to reap benefit from these mines economically, bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan is of the foremost interest. China is also interested in becoming a major contribute to build Silk Road Economic belt which will connect China to Central and South Asia, and Middle East through Afghanistan. This ambitious project once materialized would bring a lot more investment opportunities for the region in general and Afghanistan and China in particular (Huasheng, 2015).

Iran

Iran, like other regional powers also has a wide range of political, economic, as well as sociocultural interests in Afghanistan. It certainly wants to maintain cordial relations with whoever is in the government in Kabul. During the civil war of 1990's, it favored various factions of the Northern Alliance against anti-Shiite Taliban. During the government of Hamid Karzai, Iran has been giving large amounts of money in aid to Kabul in its efforts to strengthen its ties with Afghanistan and increase its influence in the country (Rashid, 2012).

After the US' invasion of Afghanistan, it has maintained its contacts with the Northern groups. However, it has also allegedly kept limited contact with the Afghan Taliban. Previously, some reports have circulated suggesting presence of training camps in Iran for the Taliban to carry out low scale attacks against the US' and Western troops in Afghanistan. It seems to be in the pursuit of classic 'enemy's enemy is my friend' policy, because on the part of Iranians this guarantees that Afghanistan doesn't become an easy playfield for Taliban's and Iran's common enemy i.e., the United States (Olcott, 2013).

Although Iran doesn't run a sectarian policy in Afghanistan, but it still doesn't want Taliban to takeover Kabul. During the siege of Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998 by the Taliban, a city which was considered as headquarter of the Northern Alliance after they had retreated and remained concentrated in that particular region of Afghanistan, Iranian embassy was attacked by the Taliban. The events that followed led to the killing of 8 Iranian diplomats and an Iranian new reporter along with hundreds of Uzbeks and Tajik militants. This particular episode caused uproar in Iran and thousands of Iranian troops were deployed at the border with Afghanistan. The Iranian military assault didn't take place due to the intervention of the United Nations, however the relations between Taliban and Iran remained hostile (Waldman & Wright, 2014).

Iran also has deep historical and cultural ties with Iran as well. One of Afghanistan's official languages is Dari, which is a dialect of Persian language (Iran's official language). Also, 12% of Afghanistan's population is Shiite, which obviously attracts sympathy of Iran towards them.

Iranian officials have been particularly concerned about the massacre of Hazaras (A Shiite ethnic group), and other Shia minorities in Afghanistan in the past. They have showed resentment towards the ongoing target killings of Shias in Afghanistan by the Taliban insurgents and Sipah-e-Sahab (A anti-Shiite militant group based in Pakistan) in Afghanistan. Particularly after the recent developments regarding IS (Islamic State) making inroads into Afghanistan, Iran would want peace and stability to prevail in Afghanistan (Fair, 2015).

Limiting Pakistan's 'negative' influence in Afghanistan is also one of Iran's policy. In pursuit of this policy, it has worked together with India. India is currently involved in a mega construction project at the Chahbar port in the Sistan-Balochistan province of Afghanistan. This project once fully materialized will give India and Iran an access to Afghanistan and other Central Asian states bypassing Pakistan. This would allow both the countries to have significantly less reliance

on Pakistan vis-à-vis Afghanistan. This project being currently undertaken by India clearly vindicates that Iran wants less Pakistani influence in the region, whom it considers closer towards its archrival Saudi Arabia (Rashid, 2012).

Iran also share a very long border with Afghanistan, because of which it is a host to more than 2 million Afghan refugees and economic migrants. Many of whom enter and live in Iran illegally. Thus, Iran has an interest in restricting the cross-border movement in order to protect its social fabric as well as limit the flow of drugs from Afghanistan. Drug trafficking from Afghanistan is also one of the major causes of concern for Iran. Because of the massive production of opium in Afghanistan, Iran currently has the highest number of opium addicts in the worlds.

Disproportionate amount of opium produce in Afghanistan ends up in Iran, because of its proximity to Afghanistan and being a relatively profitable market. So controlling the inflow of illegal immigrants and drugs is also one of the major interests of Iran in Afghanistan (Waldman & Wright, 2014).

Iran is currently running a number of scholarship programs for Afghan students. It is also funding a number of infrastructural projects in Western and Southern Afghanistan. For its investments to reap benefits in the future, it wants stability to prevail in Afghanistan. Because stability and peace in Afghanistan also address one of Iran's internal security concerns. Iran has been facing a low-level insurgency in its restive Sunni dominated Sistan-Balochistan province for decades now. Many of the insurgents from the province have been able in the past to seek refuge and get training from the camps in Afghanistan. By establishing friendly relations with all the Afghan parties to the conflict, Iran wants to ensure that its enemies are not able to find any sort of facilities in Afghanistan (Olcott, 2013).

Central Asian States

Central Asian states also have wide variety of interests in Afghanistan. All of them particularly Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan maintain deep cultural and ethnic relations with their respective ethnic groups living in Afghanistan in significant number. During the 1990's civil war, Central Asian states proactively supported the Northern Alliance against Afghan Taliban. Other than their cultural and ethnic affinity with a significant population of Afghanistan, Central Asian states have deep security concerns originating from Afghanistan as well. In the past, Islamist movements, both political and militant, focused on Central Asia found safe havens in Afghanistan. Two of the major militant organizations include Islamic Movement of Turkestan (IMT) and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which have been trying to overthrow secular regimes in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan respectively. So, the overthrow of Kabul regime by the Taliban or their increased influence in Afghanistan would mean less security for Central Asian states bordering Afghanistan. No wonder, Central Asian states notably Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan are very active members of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Krambs, 2014).

Opium production in Afghanistan and drug trafficking also pose serious challenges for the Central Asian governments. These countries have collaborated with Afghanistan and each other to make significant headway in terms of controlling and decreasing the flow of drugs to their countries from Afghanistan. Although the results of these efforts are yet to be seen.

Afghanistan also give Central Asian states a great opportunity to get access to the markets in Middle East and South Asia. The countries including Afghanistan are landlocked and rely largely on the sea ports in Iran and Pakistan for their exports and imports. Central Asia is also a region with vast mineral deposits and untapped natural resources. Without stability in Afghanistan, it

would certainly be not able to fully materialize the benefits of its resources. So, once peaceful Afghanistan will act as a very beneficial and fully operational trading hub for Central Asian states to get access to the South Asian and Middle Eastern region, which would bring humungous trade and investment opportunities for all the countries involved in the process (Jones, 2015).

India, being a consumer market of more than a billion people is particularly of great interest to Central Asian countries and vice versa. The fastest route between Central Asian countries and India is through Afghanistan and Pakistan. One of the biggest ambitious plans these countries are working on at the present is TAPI pipeline i.e., Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan India gas pipeline. This pipeline project, once fully functional would increase the energy cooperation among these countries by tenfold. Central Asian countries, being part of former Soviet Union, have sought cooperation of Russia to ensure greater stability in Afghanistan. So far these efforts haven't borne fruit since Russia has remained hesitant in playing a much bigger role in Afghanistan (Krambs, 2014).

Chapter IV: Road to Peace

The medium-long term stability in Afghanistan is essentially dependent on the reconciliation process between the Afghan government and Taliban. Although several initiatives have been undertaken in the past to begin meaningful talks for peace by different foreign and Afghan players, peace in the country still remains elusive. Since the formation of new Afghan unity government in 2014, the Afghan government under the leadership of President Ashraf Ghani, has made overtures towards the Taliban for peace talks. His predecessor former president Hamid Karzai also made several attempts through various channels to establish contacts with the Taliban leadership in order to pursue peace in Afghanistan, under his two consecutive terms. Although peace is hard to attain, the chances for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan after a successful reconciliation process aren't slim. In this section, I'll highlight the previous attempts by several actors in Afghanistan to attain peace in the country. Also, recent efforts for peace talks with the Taliban and its future prospects will be discussed as well.

Past Attempts for Reconciliation

One of the very first attempts for peace in Afghanistan was taken by the President of interim Afghan government soon after the US invasion of Afghanistan and following Bonn conference in Germany. In December 2001, Chair and President of Afghan interim government Hamid Karzai granted public amnesty to ordinary Taliban members who denounced al Qaeda and violence and accepted the writ of the new government. In 2002, the Chief Justice of Afghanistan also extended amnesty to all the common Afghan and religious leaders who had supported or

collaborated with Taliban during their regime. These offers of amnesty were given in the hopes of expressing goodwill on the part of Afghan government. However, this initiative was not able to draw significant interest from the Taliban (Kazem, 2005).

In 2004, a general amnesty program was launched for all the Taliban members, foot soldiers and leaders alike. This program was also meant to reintegrate Taliban members in the society and give them assurances against future repercussions. Fortunately, it led to more than 5000 Taliban members accepting the amnesty, giving up arms and pledging allegiance to Afghan government. However, low intensity insurgency against US' troops and Afghan security forces still continued and remained a serious concern for the Afghan government (Gall, 2005).

In February 2005, months of backchannel diplomacy with the support of Saudi Arabia bore fruit and culminated into talks between the few representatives of Afghan Taliban and Afghan government. The talks were held at Afghan embassy in Saudi Arabia. However, soon after the talks, Afghan Taliban announced that those 'representatives' are actually the members of Khidmat-ul-Furqan (Servants of the Quran), which is a breakaway faction of Taliban and doesn't represent the Taliban movement. Hence, all the hopes attached to these talks died. Over the years, several efforts have been undertaken by various actors to pursue peace and integrate Taliban members and leaders in the Afghan political process. In the wake of these efforts, many Taliban leaders and former ministers have become involved in the political process, made their way into the parliament, and been given official positions in the government. But unfortunately, such leaders have very little or no influence on the current leadership and foot soldiers. So, these initiative haven't been able to achieve major breakthroughs (Masadaykov, 2010).

As continuation of these efforts, in September 2007 President Karzai publicly urged Taliban to get involved in negotiations with the government. For the first time, Taliban leadership

responded positively to this message and showed willingness to sit on the table. However, Afghan government's approach of carrying out peace talks while simultaneously leading an ambitious counterinsurgency operation resulted in Taliban calling off talks and retracting to their principle demands: Withdrawal of foreign troops and implementation of Sharia as preconditions for talks. It is important to note here the existence of deep mistrust between the Taliban and former president Hamid Karzai. Despite being a Pashtun, Hamid Karzai was seen by the Taliban as the 'puppet of the west', with whom negotiations meant a sign of weakness (SBS News, 2009). Later in 2007, a senior Taliban leader from the Uruzgan province Mullah Abdul Salam along with his whole tribe, agreed to pledge allegiance with the government after the efforts by an Irish diplomat working for the European Union. The Afghan government welcomed this progress but ironically expelled the Irish diplomat for bypassing the Afghan government in this process. Later, Mullah Salam was made the chief of one of the districts in Helmand province, which was Taliban's stronghold at the time (Gall, 2007).

In September of 2008, with the help of government of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia's king Abdullah, peace talks between leaders of Afghan Taliban and Afghan officials were held. These talks are considered to be one of the few high level talks meant to find a political settlement to the conflict. While this round of talks didn't result in a major breakthrough, it proved to be a positive progress bringing optimism and hope for the future (Burns, 2008).

To find a peaceful solution to the conflict, an Afghan High Peace Council was formed in September 2010 by the government of Afghanistan which included Afghan officials, some former Taliban members, and representatives of all major ethnic groups in Afghanistan. This council was headed by former President of Afghanistan Burhannudin Rabbani, who presided over the country before the Taliban regime. This initiative was meant to communicate terms of

amnesty to Taliban leaders and reintegrate them politically and socially. As part of this initiative, an outreach program was launched in all the 33 provinces of Afghanistan. Before this council was launched, Afghan National Jirga (a council of tribal elders) gave a heavy mandate to President Karzai to pursue peace in Afghanistan through reaching out to Taliban. One year later, the assassination of council's leader Burhannuddin Rabbani proved to be a massive blow to this initiative. After his assassination, the council didn't make a lot of progress for reconciliation with the Taliban. Some other factors led to its failures as well. There was particularly a lot of resistance from northern groups to make peace with the Taliban which proved to be a major hurdle in reaching out to the Taliban. Also, the council didn't present a coherent reconciliation path and reintegration program for those Taliban members willing to give up arms (Ahmed, 2013).

In 2013, Qatar stepped in as a mediator with the support of the US, to bring Taliban to the negotiating table. As a result of efforts by the Qatari and American government, the Taliban were allowed to open a diplomatic office in Doha, from where they can communicate with Afghan and international dignitaries. Although deemed by many regional and global stakeholders as a positive move, this initiative was disapproved by the Afghan government under President Karzai. President Karzai expressed this move in conflict with Afghanistan's interests since it provided a degree of legitimacy to Afghan Taliban and gave them opportunity to assert themselves as an alternate Afghan government. The political office of Afghan Taliban in Doha was later made to shut down under the pressure from Afghan government (Reza, 2013).

Recent Initiatives and Future Prospects for Peace

The new Afghan government under President Ashraf Ghani has made several attempts to win the trust of Afghan Taliban and get them involved in the peace process. Since his arrival in the

office, he also reached out to the government of Pakistan to help and act as a mediator between the Taliban and Afghan government, despite the displeasure shown by his coalition partners in government.

In May 2015, an Intra-Afghan dialogue process initiated by Pugwash council (a conflict resolution think tank), was hosted by Qatar. Both Afghan government officials and Taliban members attended this dialogue process, mediated by Pugwash Council. Although Taliban forwarded their preconditions for a peaceful settlement to the conflict, there was a great degree of flexibility observed on their part. According to the statement issued by Pugwash Council after the first round of talks, representatives of Afghan Taliban showed a willingness for a political accommodation and flexibility in terms of educational rights for women. All of the participants also had a convergence on re-opening of Taliban's political office in Doha, which was closed two years ago (Edward, 2015).

After a month, the second round of talks was held in China's Xinjiang province. Here again, waves of optimism emerged regarding political will on the part of Afghan government and Taliban's willingness to be a part of peace process and political settlement. In the same month of June 2015, in unusual but nonetheless pleasant interactions, female members of Afghan parliament and women's advocacy group met members of Taliban in Oslo, Norway (Xinhua, 2015). Although the interaction was a part of a conference on conflict resolution, and the interaction can't be deemed as official, both sides agreed on the fact that more war in Afghanistan is useless and parties to the conflict must reach a peaceful political settlement. Afterwards, Taliban's media wing put up a statement on their official website showing willingness for continuation of talks for peace in Afghanistan. The statement also criticized former Afghan President Hamid Karzai as one of the major hurdles for peace talks with the

Afghan government claiming that President Karzai had undermined US' efforts for negotiations and prisoners' exchange with the Afghan Taliban. Although most analysts believe these interactions as in Oslo and Xinjiang as insignificant given the extent of violence perpetrated by the insurgent group, however its importance and contribution for a sustainable peace in the country can't be undermined (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 2015).

In July 2015, the Muree Peace Process was initiated in the hill station of Pakistan's Punjab province, with Pakistan acting as the host, and the US and China participated as the observers of the process. Several high level Afghan officials including the deputy foreign minister, members of High Peace Council, and the Afghan unity government attended the process and met with the Taliban delegation. The presence of important regional and international stakeholders like Pakistan, China, and the US gave immense credibility to this process. This process received welcoming response from the international community as well. Taliban representatives expressed conditional willingness for ceasefire given Pakistan and China ensure them of a 'just' formation of united government in Afghanistan (Kamran, 2015). Amidst the peace process, the sudden revelation of Mullah Omer's (Taliban's supreme leader) death resulted in a serious setback to the whole process and it got suspended. The following months were followed by the infightings and leadership struggle within the Taliban. Eventually, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor was elected as the leader of the Taliban (Express Tribune, 2015). The brutal attacks in Kabul in the month of September, and Taliban's temporary capture of Kunduz in early October, dimmed all the hopes for a successful peace process. President Ashraf Ghani's accusations on Pakistan for providing sanctuary to the Haqqani network and initiating an undeclared war on Afghanistan, also made matters worse between Pakistan and Afghanistan. President Ghani 'warned' Pakistan

to go after and fight the Haqqani network, thus nullifying his statement in which he asked Pakistan to act as a mediator between the Afghan Taliban and Afghan government (Gul, 2015). However, as a goodwill gesture took the first step to mend ways with Afghanistan. In the second week of December 2015, the Heart of Asia Ministerial conference was organized in Islamabad, Pakistan. President Ashraf Ghani met both the Pakistan's Army Chief General Raheel Sharif and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Also different meetings were held between the delegates of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and the US. During these meetings, delegates worked together to draw a possible framework for resuming negotiations and talks with the Taliban for a peaceful settlement. Pakistan's Prime Minister Muhammad Mian Nawaz Sharif assured President Ashraf Ghani that Pakistan has now a vested interest in the peace and stability in Afghanistan and the future of both countries is tied together. After these meetings, President Ghani showed great optimism regarding a successful round of negotiations and peaceful settlement to the Afghan conflict (Khan, 2015).

In the recent years, Pakistan also seems to have changed its course of supporting militant groups in Pakistan. The underlying reason for this new approach could possibly be the backlash it has received in its restive provinces of Khyber Paktunkwa (KPK) and Balochisttan, both of which border Afghanistan. After a horrific attack in a school in Peshawar on December 16, 2014, in which the leader of TTP (Tehrek-i-Taliban Pakistan) killed a 133 children, country political and military establishment seems to have come up with a new resolve against terrorism and extremism inside and outside the country. Pakistan's recent initiatives for brokering a deal between the Afghan Taliban and Afghan government is a great manifestation of Pakistan's revisited policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan. Hence, the future prospects for peace in Afghanistan are bright, regardless of the uncertainty and fragility of the dynamics of the region. Given Pakistan's

support and President Ghani's political will to get Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table, one can be optimistic about a peaceful future for the country. The threat of ISIS' arrival in Afghanistan has also made Taliban leaders change their policy of stubbornness and rigidity and instead opt for a peaceful solution to the conflict.

Chapter V: Conclusion

As most of the major interests of all important parties have been laid down in the paper, at this point it is very important to extrapolate the shared interests as well as the conflicting interests among the parties. It can be wisely said that prolonging of the conflict in Afghanistan is in no one's interests. Some of the individual smaller groups might be benefiting from the current instability but in the long run, prevention of civil war is a shared interest for all the parties currently involved in the country. Although Pakistan might share this interest conditionally, given that increased stability in Afghanistan would lead to greater influence of India. However, instability in Afghanistan will certainly have spillover into North Western Pakistan. Pakistan's continued support and provision of sanctuaries to Afghan Taliban might generate a backlash from Afghan government in the form of support to Pakistani Taliban and Baloch insurgents.

Hence, Pakistan will also be hesitant to see long term conflict in Afghanistan and would prefer relative stability to prevail in the country.

Making efforts to avoid disintegration of the country along ethnic lines is also a common interest for all the parties. Any changes in the geographical boundaries of the country in the aftermath of a civil or ethnic war would have adverse implications for all the regional players. Pakistan would definitely want to see its border with Afghanistan i.e., the Durand Line, recognized as the international border by Afghanistan, which Afghan government will not do in the foreseeable future. However, that isn't a major concern of any of the parties including Pakistan presently. Maintenance of an effective and strong Afghan National Army (ANA) is also a major shared

interest for all the parties since this will ensure that Afghan government is capable of facing the threats by various insurgent groups. Although Afghan Taliban might not admit this as they are currently engaged in hostilities with the ANA, but after the political settlement in Afghanistan, they would not want to disband the Army and might like to include their foot soldiers in the ranks.

Elimination of al Qaeda and all affiliated transnational terrorist networks is also a common interest for all the parties including the Afghan Taliban. Since Afghan Taliban have showed a rapprochement in seeking international legitimacy, they would not risk losing legitimacy by giving refuge to internationally recognized terrorist groups. China, India, Russia, USA, UK, and all the Central Asian states have been effected in the past because of the sanctuaries that terrorist networks have gained in Afghanistan in the past, hence all need to work together, putting aside their minor differences, to eliminate such threats. Putting an end to opium production in Afghanistan is one of the interests which most parties share, although it's a secondary concern for some parties except Russia and Iran. Afghan Taliban and some Northern groups which are able to raise their revenues through lucrative opium production will find a conflict of interest in this regard. Taliban insurgency largely has been funded by opium production in the recent years. Controlling routes of smuggling and opium trafficking gives immense authority to many warlords among the Northern groups as well so it's certainly in their interest to continue this illegitimate but highly profitable trade.

Provision of foreign aid to Afghan government for infrastructural development is also something which all the players would agree on to be continued in the future. Since Afghanistan is largely dependent on foreign aid, any changes or reduction in international community's monetary support to the country would lead to more poverty and unemployment. Also, the foreign aid to

Afghanistan is a source of rendering moral authority to some foreign players over others in the country.

Gaining political influence in Afghanistan is something which all the foreign players vie for. But this is certainly not in the interest of any of the Afghan parties to the conflict. Since it will turn the country into a theatre of proxy war. True, that some Afghan groups are able to get financial and logistical benefits from their foreign backers but in the long run it compromises their legitimacy in the country as well as abroad. Pakistan and India will continue to vie for political influence in Afghanistan in the future to counter each other's presence but this is something which other foreign players need to work on to convince both these countries to work for the betterment of Afghanistan. In this regard, Pakistan needs to be convinced about Indian intentions in Afghanistan. Only, this will lead to sincere efforts on the part of Pakistani establishment to seek peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Social and economic development of the Afghan population is also in all parties' interest although a secondary one. The motive for all foreign players to pursue the goal of social and economic welfare of Afghan society is to defeat the extremist ideology and give Afghans a better life to lead.

The presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan is an issue in which different parties have different views. Afghan Taliban certainly want all the foreign troops to leave Afghanistan. Iran also see the presence of US' troops as against its interests. Russia, although has hostile relations with the US, but understands that presence of US' troops in Afghanistan ensures a certain level of stability in the country, containing insurgent groups, and stopping any spillover of Afghan conflict to Central Asia and Russia's Southern regions in the Caucasus.

Taliban's inclusion in the political process is an issue where parties share conflicting interests. Northern groups certainly don't want to see Taliban's inclusion in the political process. But all the foreign players have learnt over a period of 15 years that Taliban is a phenomenon which can't be eliminated altogether in the foreseeable future. Hence, Northern leaders might not like it but Taliban's representation in the political process and bringing them to the negotiating table is vital in order to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan. India has also been concerned about international community's overtures towards Taliban in the recent years but understands it well that sidelining Taliban can't simply resolve the conflict. In the recent years Gulf states particularly Qatar, Pakistan, and China, have all made efforts to act as a mediator and bring Taliban to the negotiating table. These efforts haven't dramatically changed the dynamics of conflict in Afghanistan but certainly have resulted in removing the barriers for talks between Afghan government and the Taliban. Northern leaders have also begun to show interest in acquiring a seat at the table if meaningful talks are initiated with the Taliban. This is to make sure that their interests are put forth and communicated.

So far, geopolitical and security interests of all the foreign parties have trumped their economic interests. But all foreign players, particularly regional players have shared interest in exploring the trade and investment opportunities in Afghanistan particularly China and India. But before materializing vast potential of Afghanistan related to mining and minerals extractions, there is a long way to acquire peace and stability in the country. For this to happen, all parties (domestic and foreign) need to work out to make a safer and better future for the country in general and the world in particular.

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