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Beyond the TAPI Project: An Afghan Factor in India-Pakistan Diplomacy?

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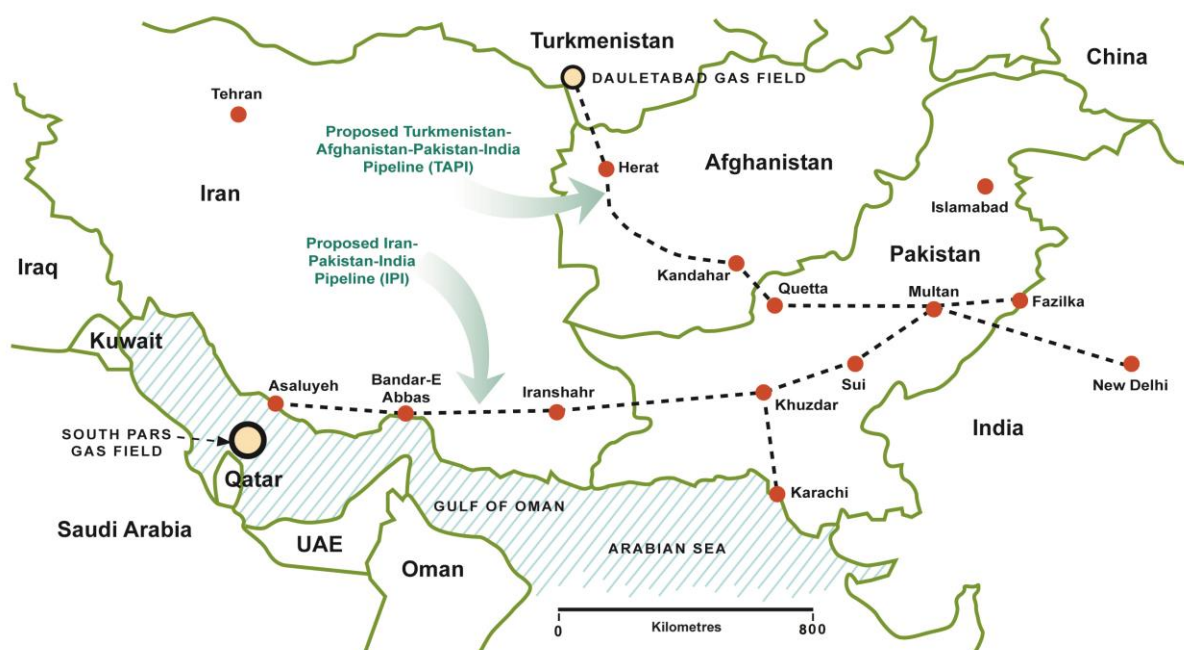
Inauguration of the TAPI Project: (Left to right) Indian Vice President Hamid Ansari, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, and Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov December 13, 2015. [Getty]

India and Pakistan are not the only external powers fighting for influence in Afghanistan, there is also competition for influence between the United States and China, and Russia, between Iran and Pakistan. The agenda of defeating the Taliban has occasionally gone on the back burner amidst the complexity of those rivalries. What has not much recognized, however, is the increasing capability of the Afghan state and its institutions to consolidate and assert its power, something that Afghanistan has not seen in its previous conflicts, mainly in the post-Soviet era. This paper aims at analyzing how the Afghan state is emerging powerful to the extent that the Taliban may not overthrow it violently. Moreover, the politics of consensus has opened new avenues of dialogue that has brought Gulbadin Hikmatyar back from militancy. Pakistan's denial of these developments often reflects in its overstating the role of India in Afghanistan, which is largely development focused.

Traders, nomads, imperialists, colonialists, and now post-colonial powers are strangely tempted by Afghanistan, not to capture or colonize Afghans themselves, rather to find a safe passage to another powerful empire and region flourished across Afghanistan's borders in China, India, Gulf region, and Central Asia. Those who passed were fortunate, those who stayed were caught in quagmires with no safe exit. The Afghan nationalism occasionally bloomed with stories of empires' defeat in humiliation who tried their luck against the Afghans. Yet, the country at the crossroads had never been able to evolve a strong, powerful, and centralized state, equal to other Islamic empires of Safavid, Ottomans, or the Fatimids. In the absence of a structured state system, the internal power struggle within various Afghan ethnic and linguistic groups aimed at creating their own alternative state institution, through violence and the militarization of their respective groups.

After so many external interventions from Alexander the Great to the British-Russian invasions, and now the US-led military operation against the Taliban, the internal dynamics of Afghanistan could never unite the Afghans for a long time against any external power. The continuity of war and crisis has then become the only way to delay an imminent withdrawal from the imperial or colonial ambitions. Now, the shifting internal dynamics is more focused between Taliban and non-Taliban, after creating many alliances in the past, though none worked so far.

Modern Afghanistan emerged independent after the end of a prolonged great game between Russia and Britain. It is neighbour to the world's most populous landmasses, China and India. It is connected with a sparsely-populated Central Asian mountainous terrain and valleys and a neighbour of the energy-rich region of the Gulf. Its complex and often contested political geography could have turned into the biggest asset, by becoming an attractive transit hub for the entire South and South East Asian trade and energy transfers. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline is just one example how the energy pipelines could have made an energy transit hub. It has instead become a ground of proxy wars since the Cold War era, to the extent that Afghanistan had lost its leverage in all neighboring regions. Post-British influence Afghanistan has come closer to the South Asian regional system, driven by the Cold War politics and failed Soviet invasion. The Soviet war has left the country extremely anti-Russian/Communist with political memories rewritten in the discourse of Jihad against the Soviet. The Mujahideen of all shades and hues still remain the basis of any legitimate political process. The post-Mujahideen generation of politicians and warlords are yet to prove their political constituencies. In 2007, Afghanistan officially joined the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), ending its prolonged strategic confusion.



By deciding to be part of the South Asian community, Afghanistan has also chosen a difficult diplomatic terrain in balancing the two arch rivals of the region, India and Pakistan. In Afghanistan's diplomatic vocabulary, "Pakistan is a twin brother and India a great friend" as famously stated by President Hamid Karzai during his visit to India in 2011 when he signed a strategic partnership with India stating, "The strategic agreement with our great friend would not affect our twin brother. Neither India nor Afghanistan intends this strategic partnership to go beyond us", Karzai stated to balance between the two countries.(1)

To know the delicate, rather an impossible balancing act that the Afghan government is to tread a difficult path to find the security convergence, we need to look into the diversity and divergence of interests between different stakeholders and the threat perception that each player has developed officially and unofficially. While the United States, India, and Iran often find convergence in their shared concerns of threat from Taliban, Pakistan has somehow managed to bring Russia and China to press for a regional approach which can help Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal. The three countries do not see the prolonged U.S. military presence supportive for peace and stability. Afghanistan government has to find a balance between these two major camps and in particular between India and Pakistan. In doing so, Afghanistan has recently joined China's overambitious Belt and Road Initiative on which Indians have made serious objections, particularly with regard to the Road's passage via Pakistan-held territory of Kashmir.

Notwithstanding using the best possible weaponry, financial, and diplomatic resources against Taliban, Afghanistan is far from peace and stability. A total victory against Taliban is now presumed as impossible to achieve. The same assumption is said to be true about Taliban, which has seen an overthrow of the Kabul based-internationally-recognized government not only impossible; but, also unpopular move. The Obama administration not only announced to withdraw the U.S. forces; but, also opened up the channels of dialogue with Taliban, a step that angered the Afghan government.(2) The Afghan government, though agreed to engage with Taliban in the later time, was so much furious on naming the Doha office as Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan(3) that then-President Karzai had briefly suspended security dialogue with the United States.(4)

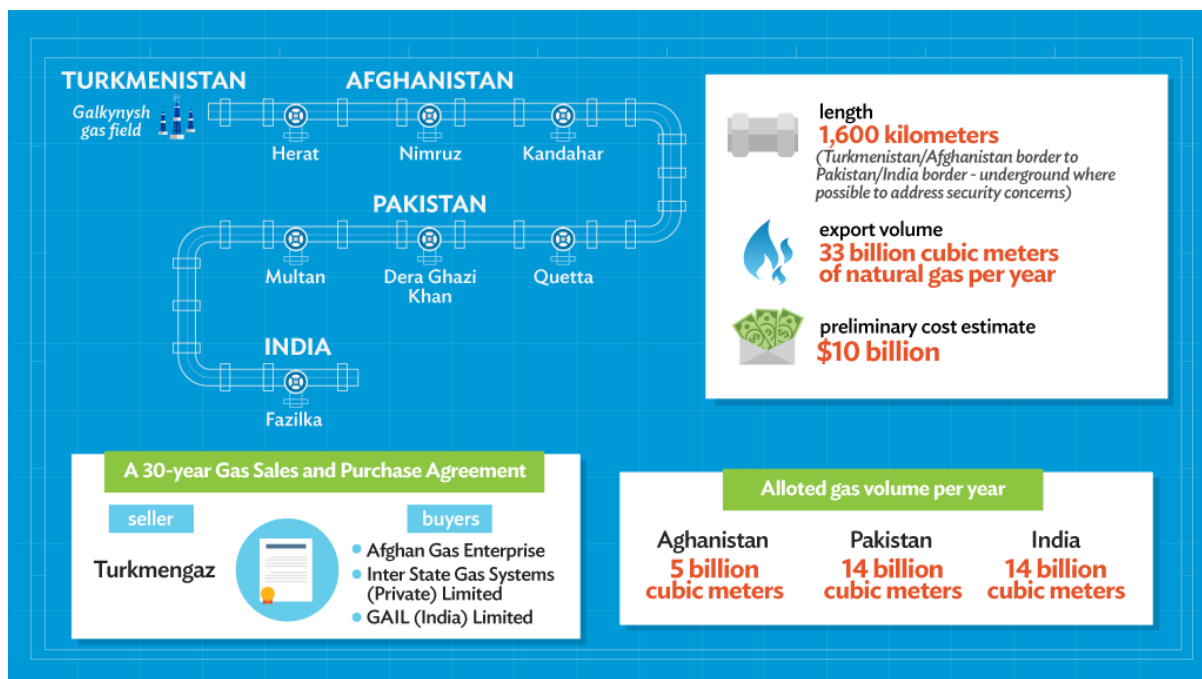
The Obama Administration's announcement of the military withdrawal by 2014, the opening of dialogue with Taliban, and the role given to Pakistan in facilitating the dialogue frustrated Afghan politicians who saw the return of Taliban a reversal of all post-war political processes. India too was worried of an unplanned and pre-mature military withdrawal, which could destabilize Afghanistan once again.(5) The data shows that the level of violence has increased significantly from 2016 onwards. In 2018, Taliban attacks

on civilian and diplomatic targets have only become more ferocious including the first attack in 2018 which claimed scores of deaths.(6)

The new Afghan strategy adopted by the Trump Administration has brought some relief as he has reversed Obama administration’s planned withdrawal, which President Trump think “would create a vacuum that terrorists, including ISIS and al Qaeda, would instantly fill, just as happened before September 11th.”(7) The Afghan government found their sentiments endorsed when President Trump accused Pakistan of “giving safe haven to agents of chaos, violence, and terror”. Interestingly, in his statement, Trump mentioned India-Pakistan rivalry confirming that terrorism in Afghanistan could escalate tension between India and Pakistan. The following chart illustrates the disparity of attacks in the last sixteen years and the numbers of forces and militants.

Year	Civilians	Security Personnel/Force	Terrorists	Total
2001	1067	590	2850	4507
2005	521	218	1000	1739
2006	349	168	599	1116
2007	164	121	492	777
2008	69	90	382	541
2009	55	78	242	375
2010	36	69	270	375
2011	34	30	119	183
2012	16	17	84	117
2013	20	61	100	181
2014	32	51	110	193
2015	20	41	113	174
2016	14	88	165	267
2017	57	83	218	358

Fatalities in Terrorist Violence 2001 – 2017 [compiled by the author]



[Asia Development Bank]

India's Afghan Strategy

When the Trump Administration seeks India to "do more" in Afghanistan, some observers interpret it as a greater military role for India to which many military enthusiasts in New Delhi are extremely skeptical. A minority of hawks in India indeed welcome the Trump Administration's "offer" for India to play a military role in Afghanistan.⁽⁸⁾ But the skeptics and the nationalist BJP led-Narendra Modi government is unequivocally candid in its position on "No troop in Afghanistan"⁽⁹⁾.

India's strategic choices in Afghanistan are carefully being shaped around its development diplomacy, which has, so far, completed hundreds of important projects, power plants, dams, roads and drinking water projects, community development projects, renewable energy, low-cost housing, flood control, micro-hydro power, sports and administrative infrastructure which have helped common Afghans to improve their day to day lives. Currently, India has also embraced a soft-power approach as it awards 1,000 scholarships every year to Afghan students to continue their education in India along with 500 scholarships for the children of the martyrs of Afghan security forces. The more crucial program, perhaps, is India's assistance in developing Afghan military capabilities as the current gift of four Mi-25 Attack helicopters to the Afghan Air Force. The India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership signed in October 2011 includes assistance "in the training, equipping, and capacity building programs for Afghan National Security Forces."⁽¹⁰⁾ By building and strengthening state institutions and expanding capacity-building programs, India may succeed in helping in the creation of a powerful and inclusive state in which all Afghans can freely participate. With this political transformation, Afghanistan will be able to play a constructive role in the South Asian family. This shift explains why India finds

the bilateral forum much convenient and reliable than relying on any other country, particularly the United States.

In the official statements, India often cites three red-lines to define its Afghan policy: a) "no good terrorism or bad terrorism", a euphemism for "no Role for Taliban" or no return for Taliban. B) "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, broad-based and inclusive process of peace and reconciliation" which many commentators believe is meant to see the Afghan government as the only legitimate authority to decide about any peace process,(11). c) the Afghan constitution must be recognized as the basis to advance any peace process.(12)

India's reluctance to engage with militant groups remain evident. On May 20, 2017, India surprised many political circles by reaching out to Gulbadin Hikmatyar, a ferocious warlord who had driven out most of his rivals from Kabul to become Prime Minister in 1993, indeed with the full support of Pakistan. After 20 years of fighting, Hikmatyar has signed a peace deal with the government and has joined the political process. In his previous role as Prime Minister of Afghanistan, Gulbadin Hikmatyar was considered as "anti-Indian" and "Pro-Pakistan" influential Pashtun figure. Former Taliban leader Mulla Abdussalam Zaeef had undertaken several unofficial visits to India, once to attend a discussion at a media group's event in which finance minister P. Chidambaram was his co-panelist.(13)

Back in 2012, Taliban issued an statement to express appreciation of India for not assuming any security role in Afghanistan on behalf of the United States, calling India as 'a significant country in the region'.(14) By meeting with Hikmatyar, India has sent a message that India has no preference for any political side in Afghanistan if they are ready to work under the constitution. The recent peace offer by the Afghan government has also received support from India, signaling a change in India's erstwhile reservations with regard to such dialogues.(15) For India, to play a Pakistan Containment strategy in Afghanistan, as often echoed by Pakistan's sensationalist media, is not a realistic strategy since such a scenario pushes Pakistan to apply either a unilateral or a non-regional approach, a prospect now favoured by China and Russia.

Pakistani Strategy

What Pakistan seeks in Afghanistan cannot be fully understood from its official statements. However, its 'dialogue diplomacy' has propped up Taliban as a legitimate political force. For years, the U.S. agenda aimed at defeating Taliban militarily and preventing their return. Currently, there have been three major dialogue processes to facilitate peaceful conclusion of Afghan-Taliban dialogue. Russia hosts a regional dialogue in Moscow which started with Pakistan-Russia-China only; and, in its third round, it has included 11 nations. The Afghan government maintains that only Afghan soil is the best place for any face-to-face talks with Taliban, indicating Kabul's dissatisfaction with the Moscow-facilitated

dialogue. The last round of the Moscow Six-Party has again failed to make any breakthrough, precisely because Afghanistan government has yet to be convinced of the format of the dialogue which exclude US military representation, indicating that the U.S. military role is not desirable, something the Afghan government cannot agree at this stage at least.(16)

China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan have held another trilateral meeting recently in which Afghanistan became part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Taliban had been called upon to join the dialogue as soon as possible, according to the joint press release that appeared on Pakistan foreign ministry's website.(17) The Taliban Doha office was opened by the United States to facilitate dialogue between Taliban and the Afghan government. The dialogue however, remains suspended. The Quadrilateral Coordination Group's meeting which includes China, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the United States has recently been resumed in Muscat, Oman.(18)

The return of Gulbadin Hikmatyar is considered a major success of Pakistan, which was not possible without a clear understanding with the Afghan government. Both President Ashraf Ghani and former President Hamid Karzai were in the forefront to welcome the deal as well as Hikmatyar personally. Pakistanis have voiced their opposition to India's growing influence in Afghanistan which many Pakistanis see with deep suspicion. But the most important concern, it seems, is the fact that today's Afghanistan is indeed different from its previous reconstructions. Kabul has secured leverage over other cities and despite rampant corruption. State institutions are improving their capability and outreach. The post-war Afghan state has shown its acceptability among most of the stakeholders. The deal between Abdullah and President Ghani was made possible because of a clear distribution of power and resources. For Taliban, it is very difficult to overthrow today's Afghan state and remove its institutions with their limited, ferocious though, military capability, supported by their external backers mainly Pakistan. Pakistan's over-reliance on Taliban to facilitate its strategic interests is proving to be a failed strategy. The sooner the better will be for Pakistan if they find rapprochement with the Afghan government and other Afghan stakeholders.

Indians have been careful for Pakistan's sensitivities in Afghanistan and stayed away from assuming any military role in Afghanistan. This approach was even unexpectedly appreciated by Taliban in 2012, after the movement had called India a "significant country" in the region. Negotiations with Taliban have, so far, proved to be a futile and distractive exercise that has partly legitimized Taliban, as a political actor, and undermined the authority of the Afghan government. However if Taliban shows some flexibility and accepts what international actors call "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, broad-based and inclusive peace process" mainly if they accept the Afghan constitution, international actors including India will find easy to engage with Taliban.

Conclusion

Afghanistan's ambassador in India, Shaida Mohammad Abdali, echoes Babur's notion that "Afghanistan is a garden of Central Asia"; and "the three countries (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India) have an unprecedented high stakes in each other's stability, ranging from the economic sphere to politics and security. Therefore, the three countries need to enter into a completely different set of relationship with each other, which determines the destiny of any of the three countries, one way or another".(19)

India and Pakistan can and should forge a competitive formula of cooperation in Afghanistan, something actively sought by many Afghan politicians. Can India and Pakistan engage in what Afghanistan is offering them, a healthy competition by allowing the TAPI project and other investment opportunities in its natural resources, infrastructure and other sectors and other energy and trade routes to and from Afghanistan? It is extremely difficult to imagine that Taliban can now capture all post-war state institutions, and change security institutions, military and most importantly, can overthrow the Kabul-based seat of power. By becoming part of China's BRI project, the Afghan government has taken China on her side to pressurize Taliban for direct dialogue. As Pakistan is coming more under U.S. pressure, Pakistan is going to pressurize Taliban to join the negotiations. The peace deal with Gulbadin Hikmatyar has put Taliban in a difficult situation and politically weak if they continue employing violence against the government.

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