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**Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan:
Does India Have a Role to Play?**

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Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan: Does India Have a Role to Play?

Introduction

The Afghan civil war, the single most important legacy of the Cold War, has withstood all efforts towards reconciliation by the international community. The recent ouster of the Rabbani government from Kabul and consequent control the capital by the Taliban has been characterized as yet another phase in the unending Afghan saga, providing no tangible evidence that it would result in conflict resolution. Even the Taliban's recent efforts to capture Mazar-i-Sharif and other non-Pashtun areas reinforces the point that there is no military solution at hand. With Ahmed Shah Masood's counter-attack taking him once again to the vicinity of Kabul, the see-saw battle will continue into the foreseeable future. In the past decade, Afghanistan has slipped from being a buffer state to a failed state to eventually a political vacuum, with no international status.¹

The Cold War ended with the Soviet Union disintegrating, but prior to that, on 16 February 1989, the last Soviet soldier returned across the Friendship Bridge at the border town of Termez, which is generally considered to have been the triggering point for the eventual collapse of the superpower.² This was followed by the disengagement of the two superpowers from Afghanistan which included the formal stoppage of military assistance. This came into effect following a bilateral agreement between the United States and Russian Federation. Nearly five years after the negative symmetry agreement came into effect, 1 January 1992, there is virtually no confidence in the international community to initiate a massive effort to resolve the conflict. Afghanistan, at the present time, is economically, militarily, and politically tattered and dangerously perched on the edge of fragmentation.

The Soviet withdrawal and the lack of U.S. interest saw regional actors—notably Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and gradually the newly independent Central Asian states, particularly Uzbekistan and Tajikistan—become actively involved in the power struggle inside Afghanistan. Apart from supporting rival factions these countries have also tried to undertake peace initiatives aimed primarily at ensuring their influence in future Afghan governments. For India, who has practically no land border with Afghanistan,³ the evolving situation after the Soviet invasion in December 1979 had numerous implications. More recently, in the post-Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) period, Indian foreign policy has been challenged by the Afghan situation.

This paper examines the impact of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on India's foreign policy specially with reference to Pakistan and the issue of regional security. It focuses on the post-PDPA period, when intra-mujahideen struggles have kept the civil war alive and comprehensively altered the security parameters in South and South West Asia. The paper will also discuss India's relevance to the Afghan situation and the initiatives it can take, either individually or in concert with other regional actors, to bring about conflict resolution in Afghanistan.

¹ Although the Taliban control Kabul and a majority of the provinces, the United Nations has not recognized the regime. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates recognized the regime in May 1997 after the Taliban offensive that ousted General Abdul Rashid Dostam. Most recently, the Taliban backed by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have been seeking a formal endorsement from the Credentials committee of the United Nations to occupy the Afghanistan seat in the UN General Assembly.

² Historians remain divided over the impact that the Afghan situation had on the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

³ The boundaries claimed by India, which includes those parts of Jammu and Kashmir occupied by Pakistan, has a thirty-mile strip along the Wakhan Corridor, directly linking India and Afghanistan.

India's Response to the Soviet Invasion

When the Soviets entered Afghanistan in December 1979, New Delhi was in a state of political ferment, with the caretaker government of Charan Singh at the helm. Without a mandate to spell out a national position because of the impending elections, the first reaction was silence. The international community, especially the West which was embroiled in a bitter struggle with the Warsaw Pact countries over Poland, reacted very strongly and immediately to the intervention. President Carter without delay announced the provisional boycott of the Moscow Olympics of 1980 as a first retaliatory measure.⁴ The U.S. response was largely conditioned by the presidential elections which pitted Carter against Ronald Reagan, a Republican with a seemingly simple agenda of pushing back the Soviets from all the gains that they had made in the Third World.

New Delhi's failure to immediately criticize the Soviet invasion disappointed western observers, some of which saw the invasion as part of a broader Soviet strategy of reaching to the warm waters ports of the Persian Gulf.⁵ The first definitive official Indian response came soon after the return of Mrs. Gandhi to power.⁶ The statement made in Parliament by the late Indian prime minister on 30 January 1980, almost a month after the invasion, sought to play both sides by trying to see reason for the intervention and yet demanding the withdrawal of Soviet troops.⁷ This might have been the closest to a factual understanding of the Afghan situation, a position borne out by subsequent revelations.⁸ But the failure to condemn the Soviets outright and to reject the initial offer by General Zia for cooperation virtually forced India into the Soviet camp on the Afghan issue. In fast changing events, Mrs. Gandhi, in an almost pathetic defense of Soviet explanations, told Parliament that "again in December last (1979), President Amin was overthrown and now President Karmal is the Head of the Government. . . . We have been told that it was Amin himself who asked for Soviet troops. . . . We have been told by the Soviet ambassador."⁹

The initial decision to accept the Soviet explanation at face value was influenced by the fact that India had become dependent on the USSR for military supplies. During the early 1960s, India's defense establishment had developed strong linkages with Soviet defense firms. In addition, against the backdrop of Soviet help during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war that led to the creation of Bangladesh, the Soviet Union was perceived as a traditional and reliable friend who played a crucial part in maintaining the regional security equilibrium in South Asia. This uncomfortable position, which sought a balance, produced a huge perceptual problem for India with the West which looked upon India as siding with the Soviets.

What tilted the scales in India, muting even further its incipient criticism of Soviet action, was the United States decision to arm Pakistan and Washington's readiness to remain fuzzy about the interpretation of the 1959 bilateral agreement between the United States and Pakistan. Although this agreement provided for mutually agreed upon actions in case Pakistan was attacked by a communist state, the military government of General Zia-ul-Haq saw this as an opportunity for getting large doses of military equipment; and the relative failure on part of Washington to appreciate the connection that India had always made between the acquisition of arms by Pakistan and the growth of tensions in the region created a divergence of views between New Delhi and Washington. Pakistan's seizing of the Afghan opportunity was commented upon by John Reagan, CIA station chief in Peshawar from June 1977 to July 1981. Reagan said that "they [Pakistan] were far ahead of us in recognizing what Afghanistan meant and anticipating what it could to mean over time. They clearly saw that this was something that would get

⁴ President Carter conditioned U.S. participation in the Moscow Olympics only if the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan.

⁵ There is sufficient evidence now to suggest that even the United States did not believe that the Soviets were actively seeking a warm water port entry in the Persian Gulf, but for propaganda purposes, this reasoning appeared logical and convincing.

⁶ On 11 January 1980 the Indian permanent representative had made a statement in the UN debate on the Afghan situation.

⁷ While New Delhi sought a careful balance, the West saw the muted and at best indirect criticism as another example of Mrs. Gandhi gravitating towards the Soviet Union. Curiously, the Soviets were disappointed with the failure of Mrs. Gandhi's government not to support the line it had taken.

⁸ For a definitive account of the events leading to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, see Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan, The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁹ Ministry of External Affairs, "India's Views on the Afghan Situation," New Delhi, October 1981, p. 7.

bigger and bigger.”¹⁰ Expectedly when President Carter’s special emissary Clark Clifford visited New Delhi in January 1980, he was unable to persuade Mrs. Gandhi to support in principle Washington’s decision to beef up Pakistani security against the threat it faced because of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. Between 1980 and 1984, New Delhi, while privately being uncomfortable with the presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan,¹¹ was forced to plug the line that it “did not believe in condemnation.”

During these four years, the perception of India as being part of the Soviet camp on Afghanistan was further bolstered by the Indian abstention on the UN resolution condemning the Soviet Union. No amount of subsequent clarifications appeared to rub away the pro-Soviet tilt on the Afghan question in western perceptions. At the same time, high profile visits by the Chairman of Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Leonid Brezhnev, and New Delhi’s decision to continue its developmental efforts inside Afghanistan further reinforced this view which was exploited by Islamabad.

In 1982, the Indo–Afghan Joint Commission was re-activated. Under various programs of the joint commission the number of Indian experts working in Afghanistan increased, a fact that Islamabad highlighted in international fora. Among the high profile projects undertaken during this period was expansion of the 250 bed children’s hospital in Kabul; building of a 300 bed hospital for gynecology and obstetrics; establishing a small industries estate on the outskirts of Kabul; and collaboration in the fields of irrigation and hydro-electricity in the Selma Hydel Power Project, near Herat, and other micro-hydel projects in Bamiyan, Samangam, and Faizabad. Indian experts in other areas like agricultural research, rural development, power, and education were also present in Afghanistan during this period. While overall economic cooperation was small compared to Soviet efforts or even the United States economic cooperation programs of the 1950s and 1960s, what allowed the perception of a Moscow–Kabul–New Delhi axis to develop was that while western countries maintained a skeleton presence in Kabul and concentrated on using non-governmental agencies to provide assistance to the estimated three-million refugees in Pakistan, New Delhi was taking steps that would reinforce the PDPA government.

The upshot of this economic assistance provided to the Karmal regime was three-fold:

- Pakistan was able to seize the initiative in impressing upon Washington its unique status with respect to Afghanistan. This played a major role in the Reagan administration overruling Indian objections to the supply of military equipment to Islamabad, the quid-pro-quo for supporting Washington’s objective of bleeding the Soviets in Afghanistan.
- The pro-Soviet tilt ended any chances for India to maintain contacts with the mujahideen groups located in Pakistan and Iran. Although India followed a liberal policy towards Afghan refugees, allowing them to stay in India and to be looked after on an informal basis by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there was a common perception among the refugees and mujahideen groups that India was siding with the Karmal regime.
- The initial efforts launched by India to play the role of honest broker under the auspices of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) were also blunted because of objections from Pakistan and Iran.

Similarly, in its relations with the Kabul regime, the tactical element of containing Pakistan on both its frontiers was continued during this period. The frequent attempts by the Kabul regime to induce ethnic exclusivism in the region failed because of the more emotive cry of “Islam in Danger.” To that extent, Indian strategic interests appeared to have been less served by taking that initial position in January 1980. Historically, however, the decision to continue to maintain links with the government in Kabul was correct and has been justified by subsequent events.¹² Given Kabul’s difficulties with Pakistan on account of it being landlocked, any Afghan government would look towards India for help vis-à-vis Pakistan. But India’s initial folly was to look beyond the region by providing tacit support to the Soviets for their Afghan move.

¹⁰ Quoted in Cordovez and Harrison, p. 57.

¹¹ During Leonid Brezhnev’s visit to India in December 1980, Mrs. Gandhi is reported to have told the Soviet leader of the growing difficulties that India was encountering in supporting the Soviet “intervention” in Afghanistan.

¹² This has been borne out by subsequent events, when the governments of President Najibullah, Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, and Burhanuddin Rabbani all encountered difficulties with Islamabad and looked to India as a counter poise.

New Delhi could have taken an equidistant position on the issue by pushing hard for a UN resolution that would have condemned all interference in Afghanistan. Instead it chose to abstain on the UN resolution.

1984–89: Efforts to Dilute the Stand

Two considerations led to a slightly diluted stand by New Delhi on Afghanistan during this period. The first consideration was the supply of \$3.2 billion in weapons from the United States to Pakistan, already underway, made irrelevant the earlier tougher stance by Mrs. Gandhi. During this period, the United States and Pakistan were negotiating another \$4.02 billion worth of military assistance. Further, after the Geneva process was initiated in 1981, there was a growing realization in New Delhi that Soviet withdrawal was an inevitability. The failure of India to be at the Geneva talks, coupled with the failure of NAM initiatives on Afghanistan, led to the marginalization of India on the Afghan peace front. When during the course of the Geneva process the Afghan government did suggest the inclusion of India in the list of guarantors, this produced a sharp reaction from the Pakistanis. This finally led to the whittling down of the list of guarantors to include the United States and USSR and put India firmly in the Afghan–USSR camp.

The second consideration was to diplomatically take advantage of Pakistan's Afghan involvement by suggesting that India and Pakistan could jointly work to defuse the situation in Afghanistan. Although during Mrs. Gandhi's term, between February 1980 and mid-1982, these suggestions were mooted, albeit in a low key manner, a highly publicized effort was made in 1988 when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi invited General Zia-ul-Haq to India to discuss the Afghan situation.¹³ The Pakistani leader demurred, citing other reasons for not responding to the invitation. This was followed by a visit of Najibullah to India in April 1988 which Pakistan reacted to very strongly describing it as "unfortunate." Another Indian attempt to involve itself in the Afghan situation came in June 1998 when a special envoy from New Delhi visited Moscow to impress upon the Soviet leadership that India had vital interests in Afghanistan as well. This brief and belated attempt occurred when it became certain that Moscow was getting ready to extricate itself from the Afghan morass, even if it meant unilateral withdrawal.

This in turn saw a more open Indian role, even if it meant slighting Najibullah. It also meant that New Delhi was forced to dilute its strident defense of the Soviet "intervention." The stress now appeared to be on trying to label the Afghan invasion as part of a series of invasions undertaken in the past by colonial and hegemonistic powers which were all equally condemnable. Greater Indian involvement in the Afghan situation, which seemed to have reached a critical point by 1988, saw a sterner reaction from Pakistan. Then minister of state for foreign affairs Mr. Zain Noorani, commenting on the Indian attitude, pointed out that "India has no role to play in Afghanistan."¹⁴

1989–1992

As long as Najibullah was able to withstand pressure from the mujahideen after the Soviets withdrew in February 1989, New Delhi's connection with Kabul continued to remain strong. Rajiv Gandhi's meeting in New York with the Afghan leader in June 1988, at which the Indian leader expressed the hope that the Afghan government would be able to "meet the mujahideen onslaught," allowed Islamabad to make further political capital. After quelling the initial mujahideen attacks in Jalalabad, Gardez, and Kandahar, the regime in Kabul appeared stronger, better organized, and battle hardened to take on the mujahideen, who continued to remain disunited and poorly equipped to fight a conventional battle with the Afghan army. To that extent Rajiv Gandhi's words of encouragement were reflecting the ground realities, but in terms of perception it further damaged India's position in the long run.

With diminishing international interest in the region, old theories of being aligned to one superpower were given a decent burial. But here again, New Delhi, which always looked attractive to any government in Kabul to counter-balance Pakistani dominance, refused to develop strategic links with the new Afghan

¹³ There have been suggestions, specially in the Pakistani media, that the Gandhi offer was designed to reinforce the Big Brother image of India.

¹⁴ Mohammed Ahsen Chaudhari, "Pakistan's Foreign Policy: A Quarterly Survey," *Pakistan Horizon*, XLI, No 3, July 1988: 15.

actors in the power game namely the mujahideen. India continued to provide moral and material support to Najibullah,¹⁵ supplying Indian foodgrains to the country to bring down prices that escalated after supplies from the USSR were stopped. This drift in approach saw India reject hard-line suggestions emanating from Indian analysts that the present opportunity could be used to expose Islamabad on two-fronts by siding with the Kabul government and thus relieve the pressure on Jammu and Kashmir which had been applied by the Pakistan government during this period. Similarly suggestions made by other analysts that linkages should be made with the mujahideen based in Iran and inside Afghanistan were also ignored. This proved costly after the collapse of the Najibullah government; the transitional government of Mojaddedi contained no group that espoused New Delhi's interest.

From 1992 Onward

In the period after Najibullah was overthrown the first interim President of Afghanistan, Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, started to develop warmer ties with India. Not because he was "cultivated," but because of the tactical immaturity of the Pakistan government in seeking to move rapidly towards making the transitional government agree to recognize the Durand Line¹⁶ as the official border between the two countries. This forced Mojaddedi, like his predecessors, to look towards India to counter balance Islamabad.

While the Mojaddedi government lasted a short term, as per the mandate of the Peshawar Accords, nevertheless, Mojaddedi's¹⁷ cultural and religious roots in India made him pay a visit to the country. Similarly, under Burhanuddin Rabbani the strategic dimension of using India to keep Islamabad off-center in Afghanistan was used only after Islamabad's hard-liners exerted enormous pressure on the Rabbani government to accept the Durand Line. To that extent, one major implication obtained from the current scenario is that given the traditional hostility between Pakistan and Afghanistan over the Durand Line as well as the Pashtunistan issue, any government in Kabul would be looking for discreet relations with India at the very least.

India as a Factor in Pakistan's Afghan Policy

The India factor has been crucial to Pakistan's strategy in Afghanistan. Using Gulbuddin Hikmatyar was one method of restraining Indian influence in Kabul, specially after the Rabbani government came to power. The Pakistani press had been alleging that India has been giving military assistance to Masood. They also claimed that old links between India's Research and Intelligence Wing (RAW) and Afghanistan's intelligence agency (KHAD), which was replaced by the Raiasate-Armaniyat-e-Milli (RAM) were revived during the Rabbani term. Similarly, it was argued that the primary logic for reopening the Indian mission in Kabul was to ensure that military cooperation between the two sides would be on a continuous basis. Not so long ago, Hikmatyar and the Pakistan government claimed that twenty-five Indian personnel, including seven engineers, four pilots, and fourteen technicians, had helped the Afghan forces. Hikmatyar had also alleged that seven Indian aircraft were operating from Bagram air base against his positions.¹⁸ Some Pakistani analysts claimed that India had gifted Ahmed Shah Masood two MiG-21 aircraft. The Indian and Kabul governments however have denied such involvement, and even Hikmatyar, after joining Rabbani's government, went on to refute any Indian involvement. On the other hand, New Delhi blamed Islamabad for its involvement in the Afghan power struggle. In a statement issued by the official spokesman of the Ministry of External Affairs on 12 October 1995, the Indian government noted that "the assault on Kabul (by the Taliban) marks a dangerous escalation in Pakistan's

¹⁵ This aid has continued until the very present. In May 1995, when the Indian government re-opened its Embassy in Kabul, it handed over medicines to the children's hospital.

¹⁶ In 1893 the Pushtun tribal region was partitioned by the Durand Line (delineating the Afghan border with British India, from Iran in the west to China in the east). After the end of the third Anglo-Afghan war in 1919, the Afghan government signed a treaty with Great Britain in 1921 recognizing the Durand Line and re-affirming Afghan independence.

¹⁷ Mojaddedi is an Islamic scholar and head of the Naqshbandi Sufi order in Afghanistan which has links with the Sufi orders in India.

¹⁸ *Muslim*, 5 May 1995.

direct and continued interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. The forces which are attacking Kabul have been raised, trained, and led by Pakistani intelligence agencies.”¹⁹

At another level, Islamabad has sought to develop a thesis for a Russo–Indian–Iranian “game plan” for Afghanistan, which seeks to bring Masood and Abdul Malik back into a non-Pashtun link up, with a faction led by Akbari of the Hizb-i-Wahdat assisting it. According to Pakistani press reports, this alliance is based on the factor of convergence of interests of the three countries which seeks to undercut Islamabad’s attempt to create linkages with Central Asia.²⁰ There have been a number of articles in the Pakistani press over the past few years which have sought to bring in the India factor whenever Islamabad’s policies have gone awry.

India’s Policy Towards The Mujaheideen

During the period of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, New Delhi tended to maintain very weak links with the mujaheideen groups located in Pakistan, Iran, and inside Afghanistan. The difficulty of making contacts with groups based in Pakistan was obvious given the difficulties that were present in Indo–Pakistan relations as well as Islamabad’s conscious attempt to keep India away from the resistance movement. Nevertheless, most mujaheideen groups had representative offices in other parts of the world. But no attempt was made to establish contact with these groups, which in turn, only reinforced the perception that India was siding with the Kabul government. This policy of aloofness was also applied to groups based in Iran. There is some evidence of Indian contacts with some groups located inside Afghanistan, but these do not seem to have made any major impact. India did not use such contacts, which obviously preferred being inside Afghanistan because of their distrust of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) which ran the Afghan war effort and was accused of favoring a few groups.

A shift in this policy of aloofness came after the fall of Najibullah in April 1992. Not only did New Delhi seek to create links with the factions that took power in Kabul, but also sought to use the good offices of high ranking officials of the former regime who had switched sides and were part of virtually all mujaheideen groups. Earlier contacts made with smaller ethnic groups, most notably those belonging to the Uzbeks and Ismailis in northern Afghanistan and the Hizb-i-Wahdat in the central Afghanistan near Bamiyan, provided a small foothold. But this was clearly not enough to provide New Delhi with a countervailing influence vis-à-vis Pakistan. It was Islamabad’s over-zealousness in placing a government of its choosing in Kabul that has forced mujaheideen groupings, which after 1992 lost their ideological moorings to look towards India, Uzbekistan, Iran, and Tajikistan for support.

The result today is that while India does not appear to have any influence with the Taliban; there is a growing measure of interaction with the Jamiat-i-Islami, the Uzbeks, and a faction of the Hizb-i-Wahdat belonging to Karim Khalili.²¹ But this again is not independent of Pakistan, which has been blamed by most factions for the situation that Afghanistan finds itself in after the fall of Najibullah. These groups, which are presently opposed to Islamabad, look towards India to display their anti-Pakistani feelings. This charge, however, is hotly denied by Islamabad. It believes that New Delhi’s policy in Afghanistan has been opportunistic and one that sought to take advantage of the situation to build bridges with the (now deposed) Rabbani government to create an anti-Pakistan axis. Former Pakistan Foreign Minister Sardar Aseff Ali said in an interview that, “because there was an opportunity of a vacuum and because we were pulling our chestnuts out of the fire, the Indians and Russians found an opportunity for a come back. So air bridges were built between Russia, India, and Kabul.”²² In the same interview, Aseff Ali claimed that Islamabad maintained good relations with Ismail Khan (former governor) of Herat (now in the custody of

¹⁹ This statement was triggered by persistent Taliban efforts to enter Kabul.

²⁰ *Frontier Post*, 1 June 1995.

²¹ At a recent seminar on Afghanistan in Teheran (27–31 July 1996) organized by the Institute for Politics and International Studies (IPIS), attended by the author, there were representatives from all groups barring the Taliban. The impression the author received from interactions with representatives of the different factions was that there was better understanding of India’s position, which was directly correlated to the difficulties that these groups were having with Pakistan. Survival and the consequent power struggles have diluted memories about India’s earlier role.

²² *The News*, 22 June 1996.

the Taliban), the Taliban, Abdul Rashid Dostam (now ousted from Mazar-i-Sharif), and smaller parties led by Younis Khalis, Nabi Mohammadi, and Pir Gaillani. The former two have now joined the Taliban for talks in broad basing the Pashtun control over south and south east Afghanistan.

But it is clear that India's relative position in Afghanistan, which in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Najibullah regime was weak, has improved considerably, largely because of strategic considerations, with mujahideen groups seeking to improve their own bargaining positions with Islamabad by playing the India card.

Relations With Afghan Groups After the Capture of Kabul

The first formal acknowledgment of India's involvement in Afghan affairs after the fall of President Najibullah came when the Taliban leadership accused India, Iran, and Russia of working together, in league with the deposed Rabbani regime, to oppose the Taliban's move into the north. While the Taliban's attempt to highlight India as part of the new axis was done with the aim of expressing its support to Pakistan, there was another angle to the Taliban leadership's repetition of charges against India. Soon after the Taliban ousted Rabbani from Kabul, the Iranians held a conference in Teheran in late October 1996 at which New Delhi was invited as a regional participant. India's presence at this meeting and subsequently at the United Nations, moot in New York in November, seemed to have irked Islamabad which from the very beginning had been insistent that New Delhi had no role to play in Afghanistan. For the Taliban, India's refusal to recognize its government was proof of New Delhi involvement with the Rabbani regime. A recent high profile visit by an Indian official to Uzbek General Dostam's headquarters in Mazar-i-Sharif is indicative of the more assertive role that New Delhi intends to play in Afghanistan. In the traditional zero sum game between India and Pakistan, a slight change of strategy was effected after I.K. Gujral took over as External Affairs Minister.

In what is propounded as the Gujral Doctrine, an important element is to ensure that India is not baited by Pakistan on any issue. Nowhere is this more evident than in Afghanistan, where Islamabad's support to the Taliban has caused it to be isolated from the other countries in the region. Taking advantage of Islamabad's isolation, India has sought to develop better political ties with these countries by focusing on a common security perception about Afghanistan.

But perhaps the most comprehensive position taken by India insofar as Afghanistan is concerned can be found in Gujral's *suo moto* statement in Parliament on 27 November 1996. He outlined India's approach to the Afghan situation, which inter-alia included: support to Afghanistan's territorial integrity, unity, and independence; a call for cessation of foreign interference in Afghanistan; stressing that there is no military solution to the crisis; d) support to the UN secretary general's efforts; and the demilitarization of Kabul and cessation of arms supply to Afghanistan.

The Afghan Situation and India's Security

Instability in Afghanistan in the past two decades has produced a new set of challenges to India's security interests. The most obvious implications arises from the extension of the arc of instability to newer areas. The easy availability of sophisticated arms and a growing number of mercenaries available for destabilization purposes has seen the incidence of crime and covert destabilization take on monstrous proportions. In Jammu and Kashmir there has been in the past few years a marked increase in the number of Afghan war veterans from different parts of the world. These veterans, who have become mercenaries, have now joined several Kashmiri militant outfits. According to Indian government officials, the induction of the "Afghans," many of whom have settled in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), is because local Kashmiri youth have become disillusioned with the insurgency. In order to lift the sagging morale of these groups, Afghans have been inducted into the Valley and other areas of Jammu and Kashmir.

The second consequence of the Afghan situation has been the spread of the Kalashnikov culture and drug addiction (which has afflicted Pakistani society) into India. Today sophisticated weapons are available in the country for a price and not before long, if the situation is unchecked, India could find itself enveloped in the same mire that Pakistan finds itself. According to press reports, the cost of the

dreaded AK-47 is Rs 300,000 and recent arrests of smugglers have led to the recovery of weapons such as light machine guns, rocket propelled grenades, plastic bombs, rocket launchers, anti-tank grenades, and pistols.²³ Cross-border links between arms smugglers and drug dealers in India and Pakistan exist and constitutes a serious threat to law and order in the country. Narcotics officials in India estimate that the narcotics trade on India's west coast alone is between Rs 15,000 to 20,000 crores. Like Pakistan, where large drug hauls have become common place, a similar situation is emerging in India. In western India, along the Indo-Pak border, 2300 kilograms of opium were seized. Along the coast line stretching from Makran in Pakistan to Kutch, Porbandhar, and Daman in India, drugs are being exported in small boats for eventual sale in Western Europe and America.

The third implication for India arising from the Afghan situation is the question of people-to-people contact. India's cultural diplomacy has not done as well in other countries as it has in Afghanistan. Even the strict observance of the Islamic code in the Taliban controlled areas have not dulled the appetite of the Afghan for Indian things. Indian currency continues to be freely exchanged, Indian film and instrumental music is widely heard (until it was proscribed by the Taliban), and most importantly the ordinary Afghan views India with much greater sympathy than he does Pakistan. For the people of Kabul, the presence of a functioning Indian hospital during and after the Soviet intervention was a forceful reminder of people-to-people ties. These ties present a historic opportunity for India to improve its economic presence in Afghanistan whenever peace returns to the country.

The fourth implication that flows from the earlier one is that Afghanistan will always be a battleground for Pakistan in negating Indian influence. The quest for strategic depth as well as to deny India an entrepot into Central Asia via Afghanistan will make the Indo-Pak rivalry for influence in Afghanistan of paramount importance. But the logic of being uneasy neighbors because of the Pashtunistan problem and the landlocked character of the country was thought to have ensured Kabul's neutrality, at the very least, in terms of Indo-Pak hostility. But with the opening up the Central Asian Republics, any regime in Kabul now has greater options to get around the Pakistan embargo.

Fifth, the mujahideen have become a permanent feature of the Afghan political landscape. If they were looked upon as backward elements in Islamic society, these groups viewed India solely from the Islamic prism. In the post-Najib era, there has been better understanding of each other, in terms of strategic utility, and, except for perhaps Hikmatyar and the Taliban, relations with most mujahideen groups have come into the open.

Can India Undertake Conflict Resolution Measures?

If the civil war looks to be an inalienable characteristic of Afghanistan for the immediate future, there is every reason for India to launch some kind of conflict resolution initiative. While an independent initiative is ruled out because of the non-acceptability of New Delhi to Pakistan and the Taliban, there is hope for creating a regional mechanism to resolve the crisis. Afghanistan is no longer part of a superpower rivalry. The Russians are keen to ensure that Afghanistan remains neutral and to that extent can be expected to support any proposal that offers this hope.²⁴ For the United States, Afghanistan remains important because of its location on the edge of the Central Asian Republics (CAR), as well as the potential for the civil war to spread into the CAR. In recent months, the Clinton administration has shown increased attention to the civil war in Afghanistan. In October and November 1995 Robin Raphel, the outgoing U.S. assistant secretary of state for South Asian Affairs, visited the country and followed up with another trip in April 1996. A month earlier, U.S. Senator Hank Brown made a trip to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Raphel is

²³ R.K. Misra, "Is India becoming an arms bazaar?," *The Pioneer on Sunday*, 3 March 1996.

²⁴ There have, however, been suggestions in the Pakistani media that Russia is trying to recover its lost influence in the country. These reports also indicate that Russia is trying to preserve its influence in the northern areas of the countries and has been leaning on Dostam, the Uzbek chief, to align with the Rabbani government. But the initial reaction from Moscow to the capture of Kabul by the Taliban—as expressed in assessments offered to Indian sources—was confusion, with widely divergent responses. Even after the Alma Aty summit meeting the Russians have underlined their purely defensive interests to their Indian counterparts as well as their wish that the Taliban not spread their influence in Central Asia. There have also been occasional Russian warnings about the Taliban's human rights record and their often brutal methods used.

reported to have met with leaders of all major factions, especially the Taliban, Tajik, and Uzbek leadership. The ousted Uzbek chief Dostam, who apparently had been parleying closely with the United States, made several highly publicized trips to the United States before a Washington meeting which took place between 25 and 27 June 1996.

Washington has also been highlighting the economic potential of the region, and United Oil of California (UNOCAL), which is seeking to build a gas pipeline through Afghanistan, initially supported the Taliban's capture of Kabul in the hope that they would be able to emerge as the sole power in Afghanistan and provide stability in the country. In mid-1997, U.S. deputy secretary of state Strobe Talbot in an address at Johns Hopkins University underlined Washington's strategic concerns in the region. Talbot's address also sought to underscore the return of peace to Afghanistan as an essential prerequisite to proceed with economic development of the region. But the United States remains ambiguous about the nature of its role in a settlement of the Afghan problem. Officially, it continues backing the efforts of Norbert Holl, the UN representative, but is unwilling to invest diplomatic and political weight in the UN effort. At another level economic imperatives, including exploiting oil and natural gas potential that involve giant U.S. companies like UNOCAL, Chevron, and others, are making Washington look at other options. These include allowing a clear victor to emerge in the conflict irrespective of its political and religious ideology and supporting regional efforts spearheaded by Turkey and Uzbekistan. The closest that such a policy has come to achieving success was when the Taliban ousted Dostam from Mazar-i-Sharif. The UNOCAL chief had welcomed the Taliban advance. But failure to hold Mazar-i-Sharif and Masood's recent advance appears to have wiped out any immediate hopes of the Taliban defeating Tajik and Uzbek forces. This leaves Washington with the option of supporting a regional initiative that does not involve Iran.

While the Chinese have retracted from the conflict, they nevertheless remain concerned at the effects of the civil war on their western Xinjiang province and would be favorable to any regional or UN proposal capable of achieving a quick solution.

The fact that the United States, the Russian Federation, and China appear positive towards multilateral conflict resolution efforts provides the greatest hope for a regional conflict resolution mechanism. Although the United States remains largely suspicious of Iranian motives in Afghanistan, broader economic considerations in Central Asia should allow it to let Teheran be involved in these efforts. What gives the regional conflict resolution mechanism the best chance to succeed is despite strong endorsement of UN efforts, there has been no coherent approach which has the backing of all countries. Similarly, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) effort has become more of a contest between the Saudis and Iranians, leaving the door wide open for a concerted regional initiative.

In such a situation where regional actors are busy trying to evolve conflict resolution mechanisms while wanting to retain their influence in Kabul at a future date, the initiative must come from countries that do not seek overweening influence in Kabul. It is here that India could turn the potential liability of not being in league with any group to an advantage and play a crucial role in bridging the perceptual gaps. By closely aligning with Teheran in these peace efforts, India could act as a bridge to ensure that recent efforts launched by the United States and the CAR do not undercut Iranian efforts. The Indian effort should not be to out maneuver Pakistan which would also be a key player in the efforts. But the efforts that New Delhi could make in Afghanistan should be directed towards creating appropriate conditions inside the country so that the political process, as evolved by the Afghans themselves, could be resumed.

The stimulus needs to be provided by a non-party to the conflict. The time is appropriate for New Delhi to convene at the highest possible levels, as countries in the region develop a common minimum program of action with respect to Afghanistan. This could be followed by these regional countries, representing Central Asia, Iran, Pakistan, and India, using their influence to widen the meeting by involving all the major *mujahideen* factions.

Once a common ground has been created within the region, including all the regional states as well as most of the groups inside Afghanistan, an outreach program to include the United States, the Russian Federation, and China could be undertaken to initiate a three-phase program of confidence building

measures, economic recovery, and disarmament that would eventually lead to conditions that would allow the Afghans to decide on their political future.

Towards this end New Delhi, in collaboration with Iran and the CAR on the one hand and the United States on the other, should seek in the first phase to achieve commitments from the neighboring countries to:

- maintain the territorial unity, neutrality, and independence of Afghanistan;
- pledge non-interference in the internal affairs of the country;
- ban the supply of arms to all groups within the country;
- refuse sanctuary to armed groups in their respective countries and seek pledges from the mujahideen groups not to change existing boundaries;
- pledge to use their influence among the mujahideen groups to effect a stand-still agreement to be followed by a cease fire;
- monitor the cease fire by a regional peace keeping force.

In the second phase, once a cease fire has been effected, there must be a commitment by the regional parties and the international community for rapid economic reconstruction of the war ravaged country.

Towards this end, the participating countries could:

- collaborate in the de-mining process, which has become costly, time consuming, and the biggest killer of innocent people. According to the survey conducted under the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan (UNOCHA), 530 kilometers have been mined in the country. Until 1995, only 80.1 kilometers had been cleared. It is expected that mine clearance will continue until the twenty-first century. But the presence of the Mine Clearance Program (MCP)²⁵ in twenty-four of the twenty-nine provinces of the country has meant that there is ready acceptance of genuine humanitarian efforts.
- restore infrastructure like electricity, roads, drinking water, health, hygiene, and schools in all parts of the country, irrespective of which mujahideen group controls the area;
- develop Afghanistan's agriculture, which would automatically lead to a reduction in poppy cultivation. The regional parties, in collaboration with international bodies, could take joint action to interdict drug exports;
- create an Afghanistan Fund with international donations for developmental projects that would allow refugees from Iran, Pakistan, and the CAR to return to gainful employment;
- create multilateral observer teams drawn from the countries in the region to oversee the projects undertaken.

The third phase, which would be initiated after sufficient confidence has been instilled among the mujahideen groups as well as the ordinary Afghans, should include:

- the process of disarmament under international supervision, which would include withdrawal of heavy weaponry from all sides;
- creation of regional police forces which over a period of time could be integrated into a national force;
- undertaking of a national census.

This three-step process will undoubtedly keep many sensitive issues like law and order, the judicial system, and governance in the hands of different mujahideen groups, but a depoliticized plan would need to make substantial headway before these thorny issues are settled by the different groups across the table.

The fourth phase would envisage a gradual withdrawal of the regional conflict resolution group from the process of political formation in the country. It is here that the regional countries could use their good offices to make the mujahideen groups take steps towards creating political institutions that would respect the wishes of all groups and sectarian denominations.

²⁵ It is the largest program in the world for de-mining.

The task is daunting, but the opportunity created by a growing awareness can be utilized by countries like India to create bridges with other regional parties to develop mechanisms to end the bloody civil war that has claimed over a million lives.