Recent strategic pact between India and Afghanistan has predictably provoked strong reaction from Islamabad. Other countries with a stake in the region have also raised their eyebrows in surprise though most of them refrained from issuing any statement. The disquiet is understandable - India is not generally known for groundbreaking diplomatic initiative or depth of strategic vision. So far, at least apparently, New Delhi has been content playing the role of a capacity-builder in Afghanistan, having pumped in more than $2 billion for various reconstruction projects. How was it that India became the first country for Karzai’s government to sign a comprehensive security alliance? There is a need to look at the Indo-Afghan strategic pact from a broader geo-political as well as economic perspective.

New Security Framework

Ten years after 9/11, US-led allied forces have achieved limited success in uprooting Taliban or Islamic militancy from Afghanistan and adjoining region. But the lesson for the wider world is that Afghanistan cannot be left alone. Economic pressure on the other hand, has compelled Washington to announce withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan by 2014. Of late it is becoming more apparent that 2014 is going to be more of a transition, and to borrow the phrase of NATO Secretary General, transition is no departure (Anders Fogh Rasmussen, after NATO Defence Ministers meeting in Brussels, 6th October). It seems more likely than ever that the USA/NATO would maintain a proper base in Afghanistan, would actively aid and guide the new Afghan Army and would be in a position to scale up its presence at a short notice for any exigency. There are now definite indications that the Karzai government is poised to sign a similar strategic agreement with the US/NATO. This treaty is likely to provide the security framework for engagement of the US/NATO troops in post-2014 Afghanistan. The stated purpose of the treaty is likely to be capacity-building but it would be logical to expect a substantial presence from Washington, particularly in view of recent tension with Pakistan and general geo-political importance of the region.

Any long-term military presence of the USA in Afghanistan would be critical not only for the so-called war against terror and a possible need to intervene in Pakistan (should there be a danger in terms of its nuke warheads falling in wrong hands) but also against a “rogue” Iran and in terms of the new Great Game in Central Asia. Both China and Russia have their own visions and frameworks in terms of engaging the resource-rich Central Asian Republics. Vladimir Putin, likely to be back as President soon, would try hard to push his vision of ‘Eurasian Union’ and the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Moscow and Beijing would also be geared up for better channelization of oil and gas from Central Asia. So it is obvious that none of
these countries are going to like this development. The only regional power seems to be happy with this arrangement is India. There is no surprise that both the strategic alliances are framed in similar language (of capacity building, training support, infrastructure development etc). There are also some talks of a possible Anti-Ballistic Missile cooperation between India and NATO. All these show a remarkable similarity in terms of overall strategic vision – though the respective roles for New Delhi and Washington in this framework are obviously going to be vastly different.

**New Silk Road**

The economic framework of cooperation in the region under the leadership of USA has been conceptualized in the New Silk Road initiative. Hillary Clinton chaired a meeting of foreign ministers of Silk Road countries in on September 22 in New York. Since then the New Silk Road has been the flavour of the season. Secretary of State has recently travelled extensively through Central Asia hard selling her ideas. USA unveiled its vision of regional economic integration through this New Silk Road initiative a few days back in the Istanbul Conference. This Conference on the future of Afghanistan, stressed on this vision, where Kabul should be at the crossroad of global commerce rather than global terrorism. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon would be addressing another similar international conference later this month in Kazakh capital Almaty.

Trade has a great power to transcend all barriers. Even though present political boundaries are there for just a century or so the exchange of goods and ideas on the Silk Road had been there for millennia. Yet there is hardly any region in the globe more complicated than this at present. At stake are mineral and hydrocarbon resources of Central Asia (and Afghanistan). There are very few exit points and every major power has a different vision about regional economic cooperation. Russia already has a network of gas pipelines from Central Asian Republics. China also has pipelines running from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. In 2009, in a major development, China advanced $25 billion long term credit line to Russia for Russian Eastern Siberia-Pacific pipeline. Chinese version of the new Silk Road is Karakoram Highway (that is the southern route of the traditional Silk Road, through PoK) on one hand and Af-Pak corridor terminating at Gwadar port in Pakistan, being built with the Chinese help. Pakistan would also like to stop with this version of the new Silk Road.

Washington visualizes something far grander in scope. It already has military bases and increasing hydrocarbon interest in Central Asian republics. They want access to the mineral wealth of the region and linked the economic exploitation of natural resources in the region with long term stability in Afghanistan and Central Asia. USA would also like to have additional land entry routes into Afghanistan through Central Asia, even though they are at present far costlier than the Pakistan route. But recent tensions with Pakistan and continuous attacks on US convoys in Pakistan have prompted them to look for alternative routes.
Indian Angle

In this entire venture, India is positioned to play the role of an important junior partner. In the security sphere India is brought in to provide critical training support to the nascent Afghan army. Already individual officers are being trained in small batches in different Indian military training academies. Now a comprehensive plan is being prepared to scale up and regularise training modules. Afghan soldiers and officers are also going to be trained in specialised disciplines like jungle warfare, anti-insurgency and high-altitude warfare etc. There is a substantial presence of non-Pashtuns in the Afghan Army, with a number of them being drawn from the erstwhile militia of Ahmad Shah Masood. Since the days of their fight against the Taliban, India has been engaging them. But the general agreement seems to be against sending any Indian team to Afghanistan. This seems prudent, particularly in the light of two devastating attacks on the Indian Embassy in Kabul. In one of these attacks, the Security Attaché of the Embassy Brigadier Ravi Dutt Mehta, apparently the prime target of the suicide bomber, was killed. This support in terms of training, logistics and probably small arms etc in future would help the Americans, primarily in terms of expenditure control.

Economic opportunity-wise India’s biggest handicap is lack of direct road connectivity with land-locked Afghanistan and Central Asia. Winning bids are likely to be announced soon for Hajigak iron ore project. Hajigak in Bamyan province is believed to contain one of the richest iron ore deposits in the world. Two Indian bidders – state run NMDC and a consortium led by Navaratna PSU SAIL are the top contenders for the project. Similarly it is also expected that China would win the lucrative Amu Darya oil field contract.

There are reports in the media (quoting a leaked memo of the External Ministry addressed to the Rail Ministry) but so far not confirmed by External Affairs Ministry that India has ambitious plans to build a 600 kilometre long rail link from Zaranj on Afghan-Iran border to Hajigak. This would be linked further south of Zaranj with Iranian rail lines up to Chabahar port (just 72 kilometre south of Gwadar), being built with considerable help from New Delhi. If this railway project is indeed taken up, then this would be the most dangerous railway project taken up anywhere in the world since the Second World War. India has already constructed a 215 kilometre long highway from Zaranj to Delaram repelling repeated terrorist attacks during construction. This road has quickly become the lifeline of the region and has also helped ISAF in terms of moving men and material in the region. This clearly highlights unusual depth of strategic vision shown by India in Afghanistan and clash of competing visions for future development between China-Pakistan and USA-India.

What is at stake for India – It makes sense for a country to be a junior partner in an alliance only if the junior partner is able to further its own interest through such a partnership. India has twin objectives of extending New Delhi’s clout in the region (in the process penetrating into what Islamabad reckons as its backyard) and playing a
pivotal role in economic exploitation of mineral and hydrocarbon resources of the region. Indian strategy is aimed at leveraging recent proximity with the US along with traditional friendships in the region. New Delhi has close partnerships with non-Pashtun tribes, particularly around Mazar-e Sharif (famous Balkh city on the original Silk Road); Central Asian Republics (including a military medical base in Tajikistan, close to Afghan border) and Iran. Pakistan alleges, this is nothing but an Indian strategy to encircle Islamabad – for the time being that does sound a bit far-fetched though India today seems strategically better poised in the region compared to Pakistan. But it would be wrong to believe that Washington can afford to junk Islamabad and solely depend on India here. Washington has to balance both India and Pakistan for successful implementation of its own strategy. That is one of the reasons that the Obama administration is keen to see more bonhomie between New Delhi and Islamabad. It would also be wrong for Indian policymakers to put too much trust in American strategic planning in the long term.

The economic angle gels well with the overall strategic vision. After Zaranj-Delaram road this rail line – if it could be built at all – will certainly bring economic revolution and hopefully, stability along with it. A pipeline through this area is still ruled out but iron ore and other mineral resources could easily flow through this road-rail-(Chabahar) port link.

If India wants to be counted as a serious emerging power then New Delhi must show that it has enough holding power to play a dominant role in South Asia. Nothing could give a better opportunity than this for India to improve its image as a regional power. So far, even in the face of serious material threat, India has shown admirable staying power in Afghanistan. The opening gambit in this new and elevated level of engagement will pay off only when this gritty strategy is successfully implemented over the next few years.

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