

**INDIA-IRAN RELATIONS**  
**WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO AFGHANISTAN UNDER TALIBAN**

*Dissertation Submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the award of the degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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## DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation entitled “**INDIA-IRAN RELATIONS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO AFGHANISTAN UNDER TALIBAN**” submitted by me for the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY** of Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. The dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this university or any other university.

  
L. CHAITANYA KISHORE REDDY

New Delhi

Date: 25.7.2005

*DEDICATED TO  
MY  
DEAREST PARENTS*

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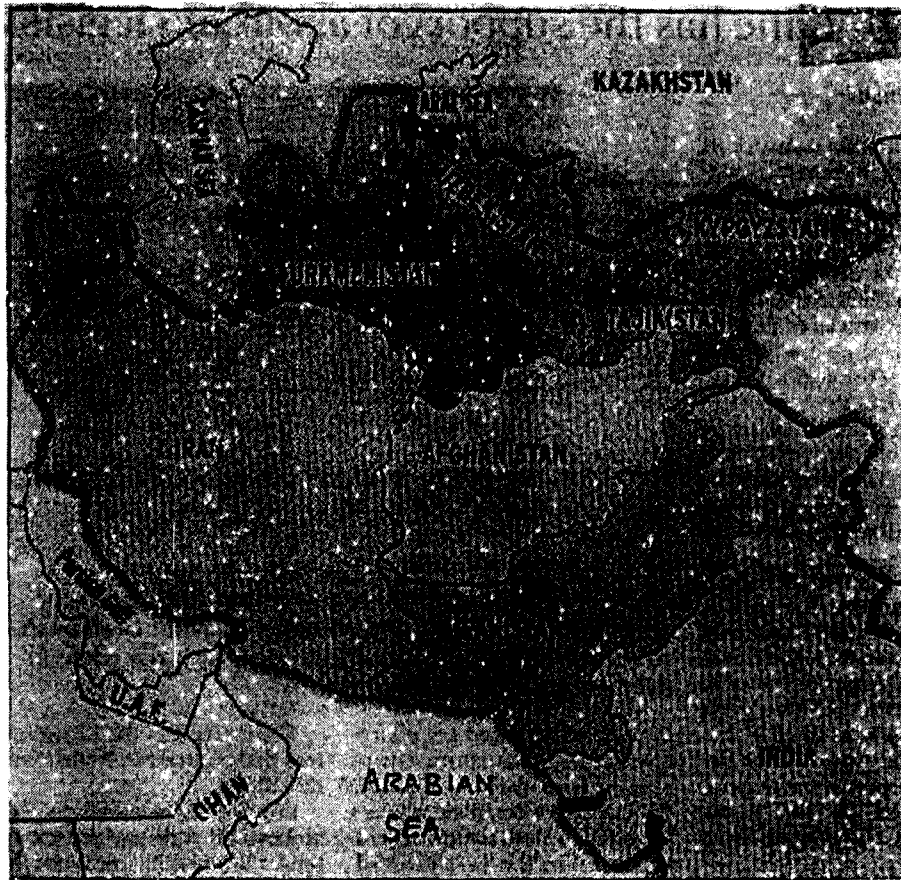
*I am thankful to the staff of the JNU and IDSA libraries for lending their valuable support and allowing me to use the library facilities. My special thanks to the staff of the newspaper section on the seventh floor of the JNU central library for providing me with old newspaper information which was of great help for my work.*

*I hope to fulfill the aspirations of my dearest parents who have moulded me into my present form.*

*L. Chaitanya Kishore Reddy*

MAP I

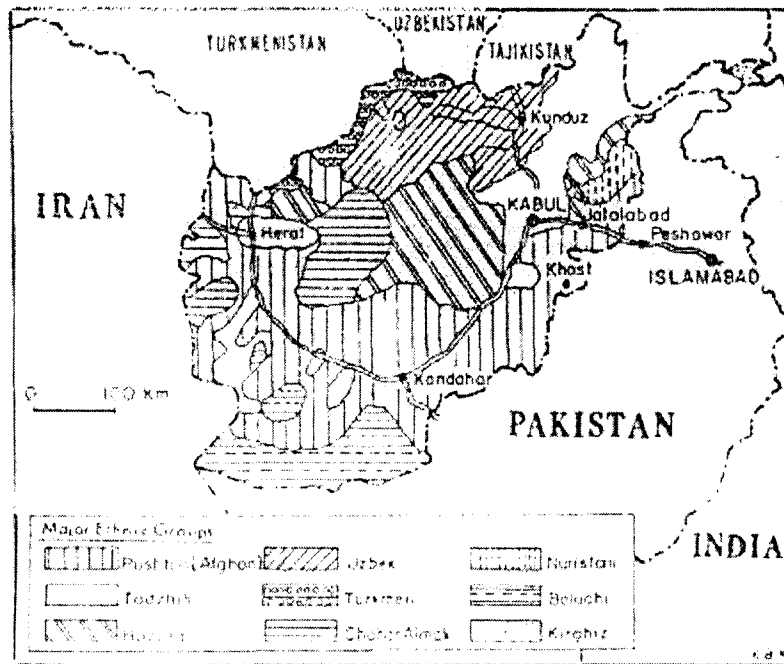
GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF AFGHANISTAN



Source: *The Hindu* (New Delhi), 11 July 2005

MAP II

ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION IN AFGHANISTAN

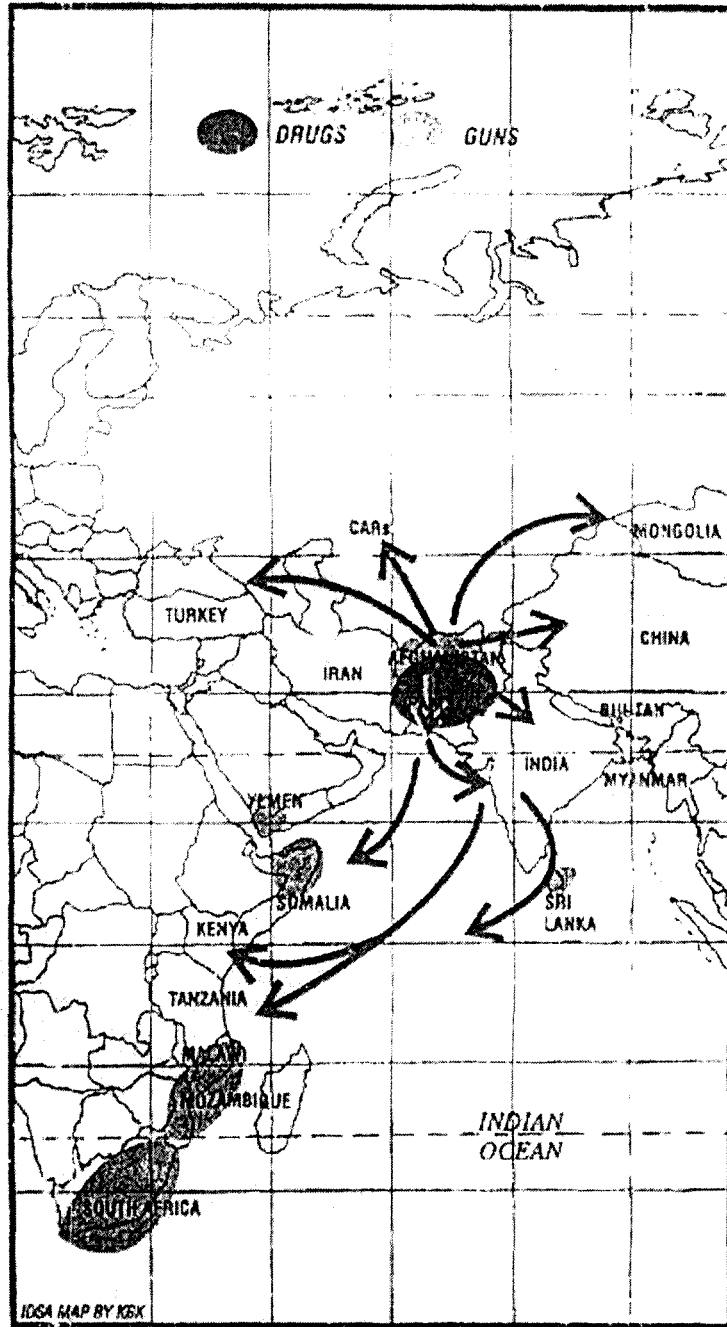


Source: Sreedhar, ed., *Taliban and the Afghan Turmoil: The Role of USA, Pakistan, Iran and China* (New Delhi 1997), p. 22



MAP III

FLOW OF WEAPONS AND DRUGS FROM AFGHANISTAN



Source: Sreedhar, Mahendra Ved, *Afghan Turmoil: Changing Equations*, (New Delhi, 1998), p.152.

MAP IV

IDENTIFIED TRAINING CAMPS FOR ISLAMIC RADICALS IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN



Source: Sreedhar, "Taliban's Afghanistan: Looking Into Future An Indian Perspective", *Perceptions* (Istanbul), vol.5, no.4, December 2000-February 2001, p.33.

## INTRODUCTION

Relations between states are motivated by shared political, economic, cultural and strategic interests. They are normally subject to fluctuations as relations between two individuals. They are not static nor do they run in straight lines, for there are curves and bends caused by the constituent elements of foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Indo-Iranian Relations are no exceptions to the above logic.

India and Iran share a profound, rich and protracted association. It is a historical saga that binds the people of the two countries. Whatever may be the original home of the Aryans, the two countries are inhabited by people who are predominantly Aryans. The Persian language belongs to the Sanskrit family and the imprint of the Aryan culture on Iran is pronounced. During the medieval period, the process of conversion of Iran to Islam continued in India, but here it did not proceed beyond the urban conglomerations, although it forcefully combined with the process of acculturation. This gave rise to what we call a composite culture in India.

In the saga of history, India and Iran participated in a joint historical process, comprising many cross-currents of demography and empires. It came to share a civilisational perspective. This guided the nationalist resurgence in the two countries. If the two countries did not act as a single unit in the modern times, the reason resides in the European scramble for colonies rather than in any indigenous urge for segmentation of the cultural zone.<sup>2</sup>

The nationalist upsurge in Iran from Mosadeqh all the way to Ayatollah Khomeini was supported by India. It is a noteworthy fact that the Government of India had

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<sup>1</sup> K. R. Singh, "Indo-Iranian Relations in The Nineties: Defining Parameters and Framework", in Girijesh Panth, P. C. Jain, A.K. Pasha, eds., *Contemporary Iran and Emerging Indo-Iranian Relations* (New Delhi, 1998), p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> Zaheer M. Qureshi, "Indo-Iranian Relations: Partnership Rooted in History", *Times of India*, (New Delhi), 23 July 1993.

established contacts with Imam Khomeini in Paris quite sometime before the Iranian Revolution actually took place. There was a great deal of exchange of goods and services between India and Iran. As a middle-range industrial country, India offered relevant technical know-how, both manual and material, which Iran required. Again, as a repository of technical, skilled and unskilled manpower, India provided personnel as engineers, teachers, doctors, technicians and labourers whenever Iran sought them.

Iran being one of those countries with rich oil deposits was one of the main suppliers of oil to India. The range of items traded was extensive. To protect their Sovereignty and safeguard their national interests and play their due role in the post-Cold War period in shaping international order it became absolutely essential for both the countries to cooperate to sustain their interests.

The **objectives** of the present study included:

1. To focus on the spectacular rise of the Taliban to prominence and the convergence of Indo-Iranian interests with respect to issues of concern for both sides.
2. To study the permanent variables and changes in the policy formulations regarding Afghanistan under Taliban.
3. To focus on the overlapping interests in India and Iran in the post Cold War global geo-political order.

## **HYPOTHESES:**

The following were the hypotheses of the study undertaken:

1. Transnational security threats have created powerful incentives for bilateral and region based cooperation in the post-Cold War period.
2. Mutual security threats perceptions made Afghanistan under Taliban the focal point of India-Iran cooperation.
3. Domestic political contingency in the case of India and the economic compulsions of Iran propelled them towards reconciliation with the Taliban regime during the late nineties.

## **METHODOLOGY:**

The methodology followed during the course of the study included analytical methodology, with a comparative analysis of the available facts and data. The material required was procured from primary sources like the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India; Annual Reports; and, some Iranian sources along with some secondary sources pertinent to the study, including books and articles published in various journals news papers. Finally, as per the requirements, Internet was also used as both primary and secondary source.

## **CHAPTERISATION:**

### **1. Introduction:**

In this chapter the focus is on the history of the India-Iran Relations in accordance with the changing times and the shifting configurations. A special thrust is on the post Cold War global order and the subsequent shift in the relations of the above countries with an analysis of the factors responsible for the shift. A brief account of the Geopolitical significance of Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban to prominence in the mid-nineties is also included.

### **2. Chapter-I: Iran-Afghanistan Relations:**

This chapter includes a detailed analysis of Iranian relations with Afghanistan before the takeover by the Taliban, with a prime focus on the period between Soviet intervention and the Taliban take over, Iranian interests in a stable Afghanistan like safe trade with Central Asian Republics, its threat perceptions regarding drug trafficking, harsh treatment of Shia Minorities, U.S. – Saudi –Pakistan alliance to influence policy making in Afghanistan for alternate trade routes without Iran and the hostile exchanges between Iran and the Taliban during the period.

### **3. Chapter-II: India-Afghanistan Relations:**

This Chapter includes an analysis of traditional ties between India and Afghanistan with a greater focus on the relations during the Post-Soviet intervention period and the period after the Soviet withdrawal till the rise of the Taliban.

### **4. Chapter-III: India-Iran Cooperation:**

This Chapter includes a detailed analysis of cooperation between the two countries in the light of mutual threat perceptions and interests. A detailed analysis of Indian threat perceptions is included here. An attempt has been made to look into the permanent variables and changes regarding the above issue and the factors responsible for the same.

**5. Conclusion:** A summary of the findings of the study are included.

## India – Iran Relations: An Overview

Both India and Iran, heirs to great civilisations, have mercantile traditions and form part of the broad, sweeping maritime and overland Eurasian commercial corridor. They are neither strangers to each other nor have they traditionally been mortal enemies.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, India and Iran are linked culturally. The historical records reveal lengthy periods of extensive Indo-Iranian contacts in the political and economic spheres as well. The advent of the Europeans in search of colonies and the consolidation of the British rule in India, resulted in sharp curtailment of India-Iran interaction.<sup>4</sup> The relations were again resumed after India's independence.

Formal diplomatic relations were established on 15 March 1950. During this phase there were fluctuations as well as stabilisations but the flourish that should have marked the age-old relations remained elusive. Nehru's endorsement of Nasser as the Arab leader and his tilt towards the Soviet Union was not well received by Shah of Iran. Iran's attempt to cultivate Pakistan and its alliance with the West did not go down well in New Delhi.<sup>5</sup> During the 1960's limitations of Iranian economic relation's with Pakistan were exposed with India proving to be a bigger market. Around the same time questions were raised about India's unqualified support to the Arab's as Arab's disappointed India during 1962 Sino-Indian war and 1965 war with Pakistan.<sup>6</sup>

By the 1970's India and Iran emerged as important powers within their respective regions. In spite of, Indian and Iranian interests, the former towards the Arab's and the latter towards Pakistan, it was tacitly agreed that neither side should allow these to come in the way of their developmental interests.<sup>7</sup> Visits of leading statesmen from both the sides established the economic bonds and promoted political understanding.

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<sup>3</sup> John Calabrese, "Indo-Iranian Relations in Transition", *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, (Villanova), vol.25, no.5, Summer 2002, p.61.

<sup>4</sup> Prithvi Ram Mudiam, *India and The Middle East* (London, 1994), p.147.

<sup>5</sup> A.H.H. Abidi, "Indo-Iran Relations 1947 – 1979", *Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, (Tehran), vol.7, no.4, Winter 1996, p.879.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p.880.

<sup>7</sup> Farah Naaz, "Indo-Iranian Relations 1947 – 2000", *Strategic Analysis*, (New Delhi), vol.24, no.10, January 2001, p.1917.

There was also close similarity of views on major international issues such as disarmament, the West Asian problem and the maintenance of the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace. Till 1979, the relations were more of meticulous balancing, primarily shaped by external factors.

### **Iranian Revolution and Onwards:**

The fall of Shah of Iran in February 1979 and the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini to the status of supreme religious leader was seen as a positive development in India. Speaking on the Iranian revolution the then Indian Foreign Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, told the Lok Sabha that the developments in Iran were “positive” and described Khomeini as the “father figure of the Iranian revolution”.<sup>8</sup> India viewed the revolution in Iran as a reflection of Iran’s quest for identity and national self-assertion and a desire to charter an independent course without outside big power influence.<sup>9</sup>

These developments did affect the momentum at this stage and resulted in minimal interaction between the two sides. Though the overall relations were described as smooth, Iran’s pre occupation with Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war, the new regime’s penchant to take up Islamic cause, its stand on the Kashmir issue and Indian Muslims did produce some strains.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless India shrewdly managed the state of affairs during the war and ensured that it maintained its good relations with both Iran and Iraq. At the same time while welcoming Islamic Republic of Iran’s adherence to Non-alignment and Non Aligned Movement India, made it clear that it was keen to strengthen relations with Iran as much as with other countries within the non-aligned and panchsheel framework and that the relationship could not be exclusive.<sup>11</sup>

During this period India moved closer to the United States of America and Iran with the aim of exporting its revolution under Khomeini and in its quest for Islamic World

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<sup>8</sup> *Annual Report, 1979-1980*, Ministry of External Affairs, External Publicity Division, Government of India, New Delhi, 1980.

<sup>9</sup> Mudiam, n.3, p.149.

<sup>10</sup> Naaz, n.6, p.1918.

<sup>11</sup> A.H.H. Abidi, “Iranian Perspective on Relations with India”, *International Studies*, (New Delhi), vol.32, no.3, July-September, 1995, pp. 317-8.



order moved away from the U.S.A. In spite of these differences the relations between the two sides during this period were by and large cordial with economics assuming a major determinate role. With the demise of Khomeini in June 1989 the emotional considerations of religion and faith were pushed to a back seat. The rise of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to the Presidency in August 1989 gave liberal forces an upper hand in the decision making process.<sup>12</sup>

### **Relations During The 1990's:**

The end of Cold War with the disintegration of Soviet Union resulted in the emergence of new world order at the global level. With the United States of America emerging as the sole dominant power at the global level there was a marked change in the foreign policies of states in general. The notion of National Security derived from a state centric approach that focussed on a state's will and capacity to deter or fend off an attack has now become less significant in the light of transnational security threats, which have exposed the limitations of national power and national strategies.<sup>13</sup> This called for a greater cooperation among the sovereign states. Issue specific tactical alignments by middle rank and aspiring regional powers have become popular.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore transnational nature of the new security threats have created powerful incentives for bilateral and region based cooperation.

Consequent emergence of "American Guardianship" in the West Asian region and the mutual security threat perceptions brought India and Iran closer. Both sides shared some correspondence in their threat perception and pursuit of security and sought a certain degree of autonomy in the conduct of their international relations to further their respective national interests.<sup>15</sup> The challenge now was of balancing relationships and separating issues and finding ways so that friendly or hostile relationships they have with other countries do not constrain or damage relations with each other and

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<sup>12</sup> Jajati Patnaik, "Indo-Iranian Relations in Riyaz Punjabi", A.K. Pasha, eds., *India and the Islamic World* (New Delhi, 1998).pp.90-91.

<sup>13</sup> Barry Buzan, Ole weaver and Jaap de Wildge, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (London, 1998), pp.13-14.

<sup>14</sup> Calabrese, n.2, p.72.

<sup>15</sup> Farah Naaz, "Indo-Iranian Relations: Vital Factors in the 1990's, *Strategic Analysis* , vol.25. no.2, May 2001, p.229.

that issues over which they differ do not preclude or impede progress in areas which they have chosen to cooperate.

The leitmotif of India's foreign policy was to structure a regional order based on harmony and a willingness to strive for peace and readiness to converge on basic issues related to peaceful co-existence.<sup>16</sup> The overriding priorities were to prevent any threat to India's unity and territorial integrity and ensuring geo-political security by creating a durable environment of stability and peace in the region that would be conducive to the economic well being of the people. To restore internationally the centrality and criticality of development in the evolution of political and economic policies all over the world.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand Iran under Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani had to tune its foreign policy towards India in response to the following factors. Firstly, with loneliness looming large with western attempts to isolate Iran, and the alliance with Pakistan yielding no dividends, a virtually isolated Iran viewed India as a major regional power in South Asia, which can rescue it from its predicament. Secondly though Iran was espousing the cause of Muslims all over the world in the post revolutionary phase, it has been relegated to the background in the wake of Gulf War in 1991. Therefore, Iran in order to redeem its hold in the region aspired to increase its links with India<sup>18</sup>.

Thirdly, Iran's penchant for influence in the newly emerging Central Asian Republics did not match its high rhetorical ideals. These countries were interested in India's technological expertise to establish new infrastructure, which improved India's credentials in the Central Asian Region. By acting as a transit trade route between India and Central Asian Republics, Iran wanted to accentuate its pre-eminence in the region.<sup>19</sup> Fourthly, security compulsions of Iran forced it to tie up with India. Finally,

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<sup>16</sup> V.P. Dutt, *India's Foreign Policy in a Changing World* (New Delhi, 1999), p.22.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, pp.22-23.

<sup>18</sup> Patanaik, n.11, pp.91-92.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*.

the ailing economic conditions of Iran compelled it to change its foreign policy to keep in tune with international trends in favour of greater economic liberalisation.

By mid nineties it was clear that relations between India and Iran were not only driven by India's interest in Iranian oil and energy supplies and Iranian interest in Indian technological expertise and consumer durables but also by mutual security interests. The prevailing atmosphere both at their respective regional levels and global level propelled India and Iran on to a common path of mutual cooperation to secure their territorial integrity and further national interests. Both the countries started exploring avenues for greater cooperation on the issues where their respective interests converged. At the same time both the countries meticulously calibrated their policies leaving little or no room for friction on those issues where they had divergent interests.

#### **Issues of Convergence:**

##### **Energy:**

Iran holds the second largest gas reserves in the world and is a large reservoir of oil. It is therefore keen to find markets. India, which has emerged as one of the world's largest consumer and importer of petroleum products was best positioned to be a attractively stable market for Iranian natural largesse. With India looking for long-term partnerships to ensure its energy security, energy cooperation became top priority between India and Iran.<sup>20</sup>

India and Iran had three options for transporting gas from Iran to India. The first and the cheapest was to build an overland pipeline from Abousaliyeh facilities in Iran to Gujarat coast in India via Pakistan through the deserts of Baluchistan. Though Iran was interested in this project it could not materialise owing to Indian threat perceptions regarding the passing of the pipeline through Pakistan. Second is the shallow water pipeline running along the continental-shelf of Pakistan and India. This

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<sup>20</sup> Accessed from Columbia International Affairs online at <http://www.ciao.net.org> on 10 October 2004.

required delineation permission from Pakistan as per the requirements of the Law of the Seas.

The third and the most expensive and unprecedented option was to lay pipelines on the sea bed from the straits of Hormuz to the Arabian Sea coast in India. In addition to the three there was a fourth option which was functional- transporting the Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) in tankers. Though the option was safer but the expenses involved were huge.

### **Afghanistan:**

The rise of Taliban in Afghanistan in the mid 1990's has drawn India and Iran closer in their assessment of the new threats to regional security. Both the countries were of the opinion that the growth of the fundamentalist Taliban was a threat to the entire region. Iran was worried about Taliban's role in drug trafficking and its harsh treatment of the Shia's. The Taliban offensive in Afghanistan has also generated legitimate apprehensions in Iran as it could have affected Iranian interests in Central Asia. Iran has also accused Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the US of raising this armed purist Sunni Islamic force to contain Iran.

India, too, has made no secret of the Pakistan-Taliban sponsorship of militancy in Kashmir and treatment of Hindu minorities in Afghanistan. Neither India nor Iran recognised the administration of the Taliban militia which occupied Kabul in September 1996 and ousted the government of the then President Burhanuddin Rabbani. New Delhi and Tehran viewed containing Taliban as fundamental to their national security interests and backed the moderate forces represented by the Government-in-exile of President Rabbani.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ben Sheppard, "India and Pakistan military and security relations with the Middle East", in Hannah Carter and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds., *The Middle East Relations with Asia and Russia* (London, 2004), p.123.

### **Central Asia:**

Iran's concern towards the region has been for security reasons as well as for economic interaction. Iran wanted a stable northern neighbourhood where disintegration of Soviet Union into independent republics resulted in strife. This was always a security threat to Iran. Also Iran was in a position to provide necessary infrastructure support in promoting their external trade.<sup>22</sup> The Central Asian region has been a captive market for Indian products. India was equipped to play an important role in developing the technical infrastructure of these countries. Iran was considered to be India's best gateway to Central Asia. Thus with Iran giving precedence to economics over fundamentalist ideology in its relations with these new republics, the scope for mutual cooperation has been enlarged.

To consolidate this new cooperation with the Central Asian Republics, Iran in collaboration with India had built a railway line through northern Iran connecting its port at Bandar Abbas. A tripartite treaty was signed by the Foreign Ministers, I.K.Gujral, Ali Akbar Velayati and Borish Sheikh Muradov of India, Iran and Turkmenistan respectively at the end of the Indo-Iranian joint commission meeting in Tehran in February 1997.<sup>23</sup> The treaty provided access for Indian goods to the Central Asian Republics through Iran, opening a strategic gateway to Central Asia for Indian trade through Iran.

### **Business:**

Both the countries have actively pursued South-South economic cooperation at the multilateral and bilateral levels. Emphasis shifted to developing sector specific bilateral partnerships.<sup>24</sup> Iran recognised India's importance as a supplier of low cost technological inputs. India appreciated Iranian attempt at wooing the European Union powers as a riposte to the United States. Iran requested for India's support to join the World Trade Organisation, for membership to G-77 and similar organisations.<sup>25</sup> Both

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<sup>22</sup> Naaz, n.6, p.1920.

<sup>23</sup> *The Hindu*, (Madras), 24 February 1997.

<sup>24</sup> Calabrese, n.2, p.65.

<sup>25</sup> Naaz, n.14, p.234.

India and Iran agreed to substantially increase cooperation in a number of areas including surface transport, shipping, railway system and setting up new power plants.

### **Issues of Divergence:**

#### **Kashmir:**

Kashmir has been the main point of friction between India and Iran as Iran supported Pakistan both within the United Nations and outside. Since the early 1990's with changing geo-political realities there has been a substantial dilution of Iran's stand on Kashmir from recognising self determination of Kashmiri Muslims to expressing full support to the territorial integrity of India and peaceful resolution of the Kashmir issue through bilateral negotiations between India and Pakistan.<sup>26</sup> During the UN Human Rights commission meeting in Geneva in February-March 1994, Iran played a crucial role in persuading Pakistan to withdraw the resolution the latter had tabled on Kashmir. This was an act that showed that Iran's stand was responsive to India's concerns.<sup>27</sup>

It was clear by then that Iran was becoming more pragmatic and less offensive on the Kashmir issue. President Rafsanjani's endorsement of India's secular credentials during his visit substantiated Iranian stand.

#### **Babri Masjid:**

The destruction of Babri Masjid in India did affect the relations but, temporarily. Though Iran reacted very harshly to the destruction of the Babri Masjid with assurances from higher levels in India regarding its secular character and role of Muslims in its national mainstream and decision-making process, resulted in restraint.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> A.K.Pasha, "Indo-Iranian Relations: the Kashmir Issue", in A.K. Pasha, ed., *India Iran and The GCC States: Political Strategy and Foreign Policy* (New Delhi, 2000) p. 271.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p.272.

<sup>28</sup> *Indian Express*, (New Delhi), April 16, 1993.

**U.S. Factor:**

Post revolutionary Iran moved away from the American influence. After the end of Gulf War, Iran found itself isolated because of the western pressures propelled by the U.S. On the other hand India not only moved closer to the U.S. but also India was identified by the Clinton administration as a strategic partner with a secular democracy and professional army in a strategically important location.

But Indian and Iranian Governments were determined to deepen their cooperation over the long term and to insulate their relations, to the extent possible from their respective relations with the United States. When the Iran Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) was passed by the U.S. congress, India responded, “we are aware of the United States perception about Iran, but we do not consider that our good relationship with Iran should stand in the way of our good relationship with the United States”.<sup>29</sup> This view has not changed.

**Pakistan Factor:**

As far as India-Iran relations were concerned Pakistan factored on three issues:

- a) Kashmir - with respect to this India in the 1990's looked to Iran to counter the Pakistani version of events and to erode support for Pakistan among Muslim countries.
- b) Afghanistan – on this India and Iran have found a common ground.
- c) Energy Security – Progress in developing a gas pipeline from Iran to India via Pakistan was hampered by the geo political rivalry in South Asia.<sup>30</sup> Both the sides were committed for a negotiated settlement in this regard.

Apart from these issues there was another important issue, which is also the central focus of this work that was “Afghanistan under Taliban”. Before exploring the details of this issue one needs to understand the geo political significance of Afghanistan, the

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<sup>29</sup> Calabrese, n.2, p.77.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, p.78.

Taliban phenomenon its rise to prominence and its implications strategic as well as security for the countries in the neighbourhood.

### **Geo Political Significance of Afghanistan:**

Historians have rightly described Afghanistan as a unique country because of its geographical location, being at the crossroads of Asia. It is situated at the meeting point of four ecological and cultural areas-the West Asia, Central Asian Republics, Xinjiang province of China and the Indian sub-continent. What makes Afghanistan geo-politically significant is that historically the great powers have converged here. It has provided and continuous to provide access to avenues leading to Iran, Central Asia, China and India. What happens in Afghanistan, therefore, could easily spill over to some of these countries.<sup>31</sup> Way back in 1904 eminent Political Scientist, Sir Alfred Mac Kinder, noted that whoever controls the region extending from the eastern Himalayas to western Hindukush Mountains will rule the world.

Long before the current developments in Afghanistan, beginning with the Saur Revolution of 1978, the Soviet intervention, and the withdrawal of Soviet troops after one decade and the prolonged civil war, Afghanistan has been the focus of attention of the great powers, the Czarist Russia and Great Britain during the nineteenth century and of the United States, Pakistan and Iran after 1947.<sup>32</sup> Great Britain which controlled this part from 1850-1947 remained the pre-dominant power in the world politics during that period.

The boundaries of the country were established in the nineteenth century by an agreement between the two imperialist powers- Great Britain and Czarist Russia. It was bound on the west by Iran, on the south by Baluchistan, on the north by Russia, on the east by the north-west frontier province of British India and China to the east of Wakhan corridor. Being a landlocked country, Afghanistan has no outlet to any

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<sup>31</sup> Uma Singh, "The Afghanistan's Crisis and its Impact on South Asia", *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, (New Delhi ), vol.1, no.2, July-September 1997, p.64.

<sup>32</sup> V.D. Chopra, "Geopolitical Significance of Afghanistan", in V.D. Chopra, ed., *Afghanistan and Asian Stability* (New Delhi, 1998), pp.28-31.



ocean and the nearest sea- the Arabian Sea is three hundred miles to the south. When communication was over land, Afghanistan enjoyed the superiority of trade and cultural exchanges. The country occupied a momentous position at the crossroads of the shortest routes among India, Central Asia, Iran and China.<sup>33</sup>

The military conquerors who marched to India passed through the Khyber and Bolan passes in Afghanistan. But it was isolated and left outside the main stream of civilisation when the sea-route to India was discovered. During the nineteenth century after British imperialism established its domination on India, both economically and militarily, it had the ambition to further expand northward. On the other hand, the Russian Empire was pushing southward through Central Asia. Since Afghanistan was on the crossroads of Asia, it was but natural that these two imperial powers wanted to have direct or indirect control over Afghanistan<sup>34</sup>.

In the post-second world war period, American political interest in this region enormously increased. Oil wealth of Arab countries became a focal point of Washington's policy. Afghanistan had to adjust itself to this reality. In the post-War period, the countries with which Afghanistan interacted most were the Soviet Union, United States, Pakistan and India, though Indo-Afghan relations were on a low-key. Therefore, Afghanistan continued to exist as a buffer state until the end of the cold war.

#### **Post-Cold War:**

After the disintegration of Soviet Union, the constituent land-locked countries' geo-strategic importance was further increased because the world power centres have shifted to Asia. The most important factor, which has brought about this change, was that the centre of gravity of world power shifted steadily, though surely, from Europe to the Asia-Pacific. Nations or state systems like U.S.A., China, Russia, ASEAN and India that were likely to emerge as major players in the world in the beginning of the

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, p.24. Also refer to Map I for Afghanistan's geographical location.

<sup>34</sup> Chopra, n.31, p.25.

twenty first century were from this region. The geographical location of Afghanistan became a key factor in the geo-political strategies of these nations or state systems.

Apart from this, in geopolitical terms, India, Central Asian republics and Iran have deep interest and stake in the stability of Afghanistan particularly in terms of security and territorial integrity. The break up of Afghanistan owing to its internal strife amongst its diverse ethnic groups had the potential to provoke ethnic struggles in neighbouring Pakistan, Iran and the western borders of China. Even India may not remain untouched by such a cycle beginning in Afghanistan. At the same time, one must be aware of the fact that the location of Afghanistan is such that it would always depend on its neighbours to reach the world.<sup>35</sup>

Afghanistan has travelled a long way from the days of a buffer and separator state. Not just in the nineteenth century, but until the end of the Cold War, it played the role of a buffer which probably was in the interest of the world powers as well. However, the opening up of Russia's Asian landmass, and the changes brought by the long civil war, demanded a new role. It was expected to play a positive role, in bringing energy rich central Asia in contact with the outside world. This changed status of Afghanistan from buffer to link is bound to have positive effect on Afghan's self-assessment and the surrounding environment.<sup>36</sup>

Afghanistan needs others to need her, as much as others need her. This fact must be taken into account by those who are interested, not just in Afghanistan, but also in the whole region of Central Asia. Realistically speaking, the significance of Afghanistan is not so great that any policy-maker in a state outside the immediate region would be able to give it a priority status; for the United States and Western Europe, Eastern Europe, West Asia and South Asia carry more importance. But whatever place Afghanistan occupies in the list of priorities, in any foreign ministry, policy towards

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<sup>35</sup> Ijaz Khan, "Afghanistan: A Geopolitical Study", *Central Asian Survey*, (Oxfordshire), vol.17, no.3, September 1998, pp.499-500.

<sup>36</sup> Singh, n.30, pp.65-66.

Afghanistan must be determined in its relation to Central Asia and must be dealt with directly without any regional intermediary.<sup>37</sup>

Turmoil in Afghanistan has raised serious geo-strategic implications not only to the region but also to the world. Civil war in Afghanistan and ensuing instability there of late has given free hand to world power and regional powers, to influence the internal conflict to derive such a situation where their strategic interests can be protected. Thus, Afghanistan has become the greatest pawn in the international power game with often conflicting ambitions of the regional powers. The geo-strategic location of Afghanistan instead of providing the country with any strategic benefits has become a source of instability and civil war.

#### **The Taliban Phenomenon:**

When the pro-Soviet government of Najibullah was finally displaced by the mujahideen, the Afghan masses expected a return of normalcy in the country and Afghan refugees in Pakistan also began returning to their homes. However, the infighting of Mujahideen groups did not take long to start, and soon most of these groups turned to open banditry. It was in that scenario that Mullah Omar and his Taliban took up arms to eliminate the bandits and bring peace to the country under Islamic laws, which are professed by the overwhelming majority of Afghans. The response of the Afghan people, deprived of peace, normalcy and personal security for over two decades, was quite naturally enthusiastic<sup>38</sup>.

The Taliban, who were first noticed in September 1994, mainly comprises of "ideologues, guerrilla commanders, tribal chieftains, free-booting war lords and even former communists".<sup>39</sup> The predominant majority of Taliban is Pushtun; and out of these, the majority belongs to the teachers-cum-commanders and students of the

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<sup>37</sup> Khan, n.34, p.501.

<sup>38</sup> Ahsanur Rahman Khan, "Taliban As An Element Of The Evolving Geo-Politics: Realities, Potential And Possibilities", *Regional Studies* (Islamabad), vol.19, no.1, Winter 2001, p.103.

<sup>39</sup> William Maley, "Introduction: Interpreting the Taliban", in William Maley, ed., *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban* (London, 1998), p.15.

Deobandi deeni madaris located in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This provides for the most important aspect of the ethno-religious unity among the vast majority in this group known as Taliban. The somewhat secular Pushtuns who have joined Taliban in large numbers also gravitated towards them at least due to ethnicity. The other elements, including former communists, being small in proportion have therefore negligible leverage for creating any internal dissension in the Taliban group.<sup>40</sup>

The predominantly Pashtun Taliban emerged in late 1994 as a messianic movement made up of *taliban* (literally students) from Islamic *madrasas* (seminaries) who were living as refugees in Pakistan. Initially they were described as an unknown group of religious students who could upset the traditional balance of power in southern Afghanistan. They vowed to bring peace to Afghanistan, establish law and order, disarm the population, and impose *sharia* (Islamic law).<sup>41</sup> Welcomed by a war-weary Pushtun population, the Taliban were at first remarkably successful and popular. Until they captured Kabul in 1996, they expressed no desire to rule the country. But ever since then, abetted by the Pakistani and Saudi backers and inspired by ideological mentors such as Osama bin Laden, the Taliban have committed themselves to conquering the entire country and more.

The capture of Kabul by the Taliban, the Islamic militants trained in the madrassas of Pakistan and southern Afghanistan, in the early hours of 27 September 1996, had posted yet another milestone in contemporary world history. It has had analysts in countries far and near wondering whether towards the end of the millennium, a country can be held under the strict laws that, as interpreted by its new rulers, can eliminate cinema and music from the society, force men to grow beards and debar women from education and employment.

The nature of the Taliban- who they are and what they represent- has been difficult for outsiders to understand because of the excessive secrecy that surrounds their

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<sup>40</sup> Rahman Khan, n.37, p.104.

<sup>41</sup> William Maley, "Dynamics of Regime Transition in Afghanistan", *Central Asian Survey*, (Oxfordshire), vol.16, no2, June 1997, pp.171-2.

leaders and political structure. The Taliban do not issue policy statement nor hold regular press conferences. There is no Taliban manifesto. Because of the ban on photography and television, Afghans do not even know what their new leaders look like. The one-eyed Taliban religious leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, does not meet with non-Muslims and so remains a mystery.<sup>42</sup>

Emerging at a critical juncture in a country fractured by war-lords, the Taliban began as reformers, following a well-worn tradition in Muslim history based upon the familiar notions of jihad-holy war against infidels. Jihad, however, does not sanction the killing of fellow Muslims on the basis of ethnicity or sect. Yet the Taliban has used it to do just that.<sup>43</sup>

The Taliban's anomalous interpretation of Islam emerged from an extreme and pervert interpretation of Deobandism,<sup>44</sup> preached by Pakistani mullahs (clerics) in Afghan refugee camps. The Deobandis sought to harmonise classical Islamist texts with current realities- an aim the Taliban has ignored. The Taliban may have debased Deobandi traditions- but in doing so they have promoted a new, radical model for Islamist revolution. Unlike their predecessors, the Taliban have little knowledge of Islamic and Afghan history, of sharia or the Koran. Their exposure to the radical Islamic debate round the world is minimal; indeed, they are so rigid in their beliefs that they admit no discussion<sup>45</sup>.

With the Taliban take-over of Kabul and prolonged instability in Afghanistan, both the south and southwest Asian region, have been threatened with instability. Taliban, which is largely a creation of Pakistan and its military success are clearly attributed to

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<sup>42</sup> Ahmed Rashid, "The Taliban: Exporting Terrorism", *Foreign Affairs*, (New York), vol.78, no.6, November-December 1999, p.24.

<sup>43</sup> Rashid, n.41, p.26.

<sup>44</sup> Deobandism, as a branch of Sunni Islam, arose in British India as a reform movement that aimed to regenerate Muslim society as it struggled to live within the confines of a colonised state.

<sup>45</sup> Maley, n.38, p.14.

the generous help it has been receiving from Pakistan mainly in the form of weapons and experienced military guidance in battle.<sup>46</sup>

As per the United Nations (U.N.) Drug Control Program Reports, Afghanistan under the Taliban was producing three times more opium than the rest of the world put together during 1998-99. Ninety- six percent of it is cultivated in Taliban controlled areas, making the Taliban the largest heroin producer in the world. The drug dealers operate the only banking system in the country offering credit to farmers in advance for poppy cultivation. This narcotics-based criminalized economy has weakened states throughout the region.<sup>47</sup> Drug trafficking became a source of great concern across the continents in general and for Afghanistan's neighbours in particular. It had a debilitating effect on the economies in countries like Iran where the number of drug addicts were on the rise.

### **Summary:**

In this chapter a detailed note of the objectives hypotheses of the study, outline of the chapters and the content in each of them including the methodology followed for the study have been included. Along with these inclusions an overview of India-Iran relations is given.

Formal diplomatic relations between India and Iran were established on 15 March 1950. Till the Iranian Revolution the relations were more of meticulous balancing, primarily shaped by external factors. Though there were strains in the subsequent decade overall relations were described as smooth. Restrained sustenance was evident during this period. The end of Cold War with the disintegration of soviet Union resulted in the emergence of new world order at the global level. Consequent emergence of "American guardianship" in the West Asian region and the mutual security threat perceptions brought India and Iran closer. The challenge that they

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<sup>46</sup> Singh, n.30, p.65.

<sup>47</sup> Rashid, n.40, p.33.

faced was of balancing relationships and separating issues and finding ways to ensure that friendly or hostile relationships they had with third countries did not constrain or damage relations with each other.

The issues of divergence like Kashmir, Babri Masjid, the US factor, Pakistani factor were carefully dealt with giving precedence to issues of convergence like Energy related matters, Central Asia, Business and Afghanistan which is the central focus of this work. Analysis of geo-political significance of Afghanistan which instead of giving any benefits created strife within Afghanistan and frequent external interference and of the Taliban phenomenon: its rise to prominence, composition, ideology, mode of operation and their role in Afghanistan have also been included along with the challenges that they had thrown at the region.

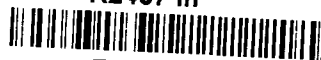
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## CHAPTER – I

### IRAN – AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS

#### INTRODUCTION:

Iran and Afghanistan have shared historical and cultural links with each other for centuries. Both have the distinction of never having been under the colonial rule. At the same time one can witness a great amount of inconsistency in the relations between these two countries owing to their respective national interests and growing Iranian ambitions. For Iran, Afghanistan's territorial integrity has always remained a primary consideration owing to its strategic location at the Asian crossroads. Iran consistently believed that if Afghanistan's territorial integrity is disturbed it will open a Pandora's Box in the existing nation-state structure of South-West Asia.<sup>1</sup>

Developments in neighbouring Afghanistan always had an important bearing on Iran's strategic perspective mainly for the following reasons. Foremost is the long shared border. Over the centuries Iran-Afghan relations have seen many ups and downs. Iranian's with a sense of their long history, refuse to forget how in the year 1722 the Afghans conquered Isfahan and brought down the Safavid dynasty and the Afghans refuse to forget how successive rulers in Tehran from early years of the twentieth century, tried to dominate their country by cleverly exploiting the country's ethnic problems.<sup>2</sup> This mistrust and mutual apprehension notwithstanding, border trade between the two runs into millions of dollars and has remained a constant factor between the two.

Secondly, in the post-Second World War period, Iran has looked upon both Afghanistan and Pakistan as two troubled spots affecting its security concerns. From

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<sup>1</sup> Sreedhar and Mahendra Ved, *Afghan Turmoil : Changing Equations*, (New Delhi, 1998), p.77.

<sup>2</sup> William Griffith, "Iran's Policy in the Pahalavi Era", in George Lenczowsky, ed., *Iran under the Pahalavi's* (Stanford, 1978) pp.365-87.



time to time the Baluchis agitated for an independent Greater Baluchistan.<sup>3</sup> The Shah of Iran had put down the agitation with an iron hand, the last being in the early 1970's. The policy of post- Islamic Revolution Iran has been benevolence with firmness. After the revolution and for sometime during Iran's war with Iraq, Baluch activity for independence resurfaced, but never went too far. Ayatollah Khomeini's non-equivocation about maintaining Iran's territorial integrity quickly quelled the rebellion and Tehran's authority was restored.

Similarly, movements like Greater Afghanistan and Greater Pakhtunistan have made Iranian's anxious from time to time. Iran is also aware that Pakistani soil was frequently used for anti-Iran activities. One instance was the use of the Iraqi consulate in Karachi for the supply of arms for the insurgent groups in Iraq in the 1970's.<sup>4</sup>

Thirdly, in formulating its foreign policy, Iran had to consider the former Soviet Union and Afghanistan which were its immediate neighbours. Any wrong move on its part after Soviet intervention in Afghanistan could have sucked the country, already in the throes of trauma, into the Afghan turmoil. As the events unfolded in Afghanistan, and Afghan refugees got transformed into mujahideen to fight the Red Army, Iran is reported to have bought some military hardware from the Soviet Union to fight its war with Iraq. At the same time on ideological terms, the Iranian Revolution which made no distinction between Shia and Sunni, extended total support to the Afghan mujahideen. This dichotomy in Iranian policy was understandable because Iran was engaged in a war with Iraq and desperately needed military hardware; and if Iran failed to support the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet army, it would have been seen to be against all the values the Islamic Revolution in Iran stood for.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Griffith, n.2, pp.365-87.

<sup>4</sup> ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Zalmay Khalilzad, "Iranian Policy towards Afghanistan since the Revolution", in David Menashri ed., *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World* (London, 1990), pp.235-41.

Fourthly, the Afghanistan-Iran-Pakistan tri-junction, often described as the Golden Crescent, has over the years become important narcotics producing area. In the 1960's and 1970's, Tehran used to be an important drug trafficking centre for exporting to Europe and North America. There was a limited success in the Iranian monarchy's attempts to curb this trade. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the strong measures by the Iranian authorities, including death sentence for narcotic smugglers, the importance of the Tehran route for narcotics trade went down considerably.<sup>6</sup> Against this backdrop the relations between these two contiguous countries can be examined.

Afghanistan pursued the policy of non-alignment after the Second World War and kept away from the rivalries of the super powers. But Iran joined the Baghdad pact, later known as Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO). Iran and Pakistan, both bordering neighbours of Afghanistan, had joined the US-sponsored CENTO, bringing the Cold War at the doorsteps of Afghanistan. Still the Afghan Government pursued the policy of non-alignment.<sup>7</sup> The relations between these countries remained somewhat friendly significantly determined by Pakistani factor. At times when Afghanistan's relations with Pakistan were strained and the latter denied transit facilities for Afghan trade, Iran offered such facilities.

During the rule of the Shah, Iran used its good offices to help resolve the outstanding issues between Pakistan and Afghanistan under King Zahir Shah. Iran also laid stress on fostering increased cooperation among the three countries. The overthrow of the monarchy in Afghanistan by Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan in July 1974 did affect the cordiality. But within a few months, keeping in view their geo-political compulsions the two governments normalised their ties and then proceeded to forge close bonds of economic cooperation. Apart from offers to

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<sup>6</sup> Sreedhar, Rakesh Sinha, Nilesh Bhagat, O.N.Mehrotra, Mahendra Ved, *Taliban and The Afghan Turmoil: The Role of USA, Pakistan, Iran, and China* (New Delhi, 1997), p.90.

<sup>7</sup> Mohammad Amin Wakman, *Afghanistan At The Crossroads*, (New Delhi, 1985), p.45.

finance various developmental initiatives an agreement for transit facilities for Afghanistan through Iran had also been reached.<sup>8</sup>

The Shah of Iran has also spoken warmly of his countries relations with Afghanistan when the later was in a state of Cold War with Pakistan regarding border skirmishes and secessionist movement. The Shah emphasised that “our first duty as a friend is to offer Afghanistan all our possibilities of transiting and reaching the sea, or without even crossing the seas, going through Iran and Turkey to Europe by railway, or to the sea in our southern ports. We are doing this gladly. We are also ready to study with our Afghan friends every sound project they have, and eventually help them accomplish those projects or any joint ventures”.<sup>9</sup> Daud the President of Afghanistan took the Iranian gesture positively and invited Shah of Iran to mediate between Afghanistan and Pakistan as he was seen as a friend by both the countries.<sup>10</sup>

#### **Islamic Revolution and After:**

The cordiality in the relations that existed during the Shah regime henceforth started evaporating. The Islamic Revolution in Shia dominated Iran was seen with suspicion by the Sunni dominated and Soviet controlled regime in Afghanistan. The view in Afghanistan was that the present reactionary religious leaders of Iran, in view of fanaticism and pessimism, are desperately trying to sow discord towards realisation of lofty objectives of great Saur Revolution, solidarity of toiling people of Afghanistan and thus achieve their ominous aim of exporting the revolution.<sup>11</sup>

The allegations and counter allegations by Ayatollah Khomeini’s Islamic regime and the Moscow-dominated Government of President Noor Mohammad Taragi indicated a significant rift between traditional allies. While the Kabul regime contended that Iran had sent soldiers across the frontier accused the Khomeini

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<sup>8</sup> *Kabul Times* (Kabul), 21 June 1976.

<sup>9</sup> *Times of India*, (New Delhi), 27 September 1974.

<sup>10</sup> *Times of India*, 18 November 1974.

<sup>11</sup> *Kabul Times*, 19 March 1979.

regime for trying to incite and instigate Shia Muslims against the people's "revolutionary regime", Tehran radio reported major clashes in Herat, the western gateway of Afghanistan, near the Iranian frontier. Also some two thousand supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini stormed the embassy of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA, hereafter) in Iran and while shouting slogans against the regime in Afghanistan, forcefully brought down the flag of the embassy. As a reaction, Iran's counsel General in Herat was declared as *Persona non grata* by the government of DRA and was expelled.<sup>12</sup>

President Taraqi was quoted as saying that the "Iranian fanatics" interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs have been "vigorously repulsed". He further stated that "there are some countries around us that we cannot call them neighbours, because neighbour is a respected name". But the ones situated to the East and West of us such as fanatics of Iran and reactionaries of Pakistan are unfortunately interfering unduly, in our internal affairs. Whatever the fanatic leaders of Iran are doing is not only against the sacred religion of Islam but also against humanity, peace and good neighbourliness.<sup>13</sup> The above statements sum up the hostile state of relations that existed after the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

### **Post-Soviet Intervention Period:**

Soviet backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan under Babrak Karmal came to power after the Soviet armed intrusion of December 1979. The new Afghan President asserted that "we sincerely want close relations of friendship and Islamic brotherhood with Iranian Islamic Republic". Karmal assured Khomeini that his government would not allow Afghanistan to be used as a base for attacks on Iran, and was quoted as saying, "we expect the Iranian side to assume a similar stand", and also explained to Khomeini that the Soviet Union was only providing "disinterested material and moral assistance" to Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> The message from the Afghan President stressed Islamic brotherhood and represented a total about turn

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<sup>12</sup> *Kabul Times*, 24 March 1979.

<sup>13</sup> *Kabul Times*, 10 April 1979 and 12 May 1979.

<sup>14</sup> *The Patriot*, (New Delhi), 14 January 1980.

from the policies of President Hafizullah Amin, who consistently accused Iran of helping the rebels.

At this stage parallels were drawn regarding both the revolution's which took heavy toll of life but fought the common enemy the US imperialism : Iran's Shah was a puppet of US imperialist designs and worked closely with CIA massacring thousands of Iranian patriots. While in Afghanistan, the patriots fought fascist dictator Amin who was also directed by CIA.<sup>15</sup>

### **Implications for Iran and Iranian Initiatives:**

A consequence of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was that Iran experienced an influx of Afghan refugees, over a million of them. Iran was engaged in a war with Iraq from September 1980, the whole economy was geared to meet the war time needs, and also these refugees were not allowed to pursue any gainful economic activity. Therefore the refugees from Afghanistan proved to be a strain on the economy. In addition up to mid-1980's, the Islamic Revolutionary leadership was also engaged in thwarting the plans of counter-revolutionaries to destabilise the regime.<sup>16</sup>

During the early stages after the Revolution, the more moderate leaders like, Ayatollah Kazem Shari'atmadari, Mehdi Bazargan and Sadeq Qotbzade were more vocal in their support to the Afghan opposition. This was replaced by hardliners phase marked by the domination of leaders like Ayatollah Hussain Ali Montazeri and Mehdi Hashemi. Their approach was to set up groups of "followers of Imam's line" among the Shias rather than supporting the existing Shia or Sunni group. The objective of their support was to maximise Iranian interest than to only support resistance groups like the moderate leaders. During this period, the Revolutionary Guards started a programme for training and arming the Shia groups subscribing to

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<sup>15</sup> *Kabul Times*, 9 March 1980.

<sup>16</sup> Khalilzad, n.5, pp. 238-9.

Iranian position.<sup>17</sup> After the execution of Hashemi, the Foreign Ministry of Iran controlled the Afghan policy and diversified Iran's relations with Afghan resistance groups that included the Sunni groups also. However, material help largely went to Shia groups of Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup>

During this period Iran followed the policy of political neutrality to the extent of safeguarding its strategic interest. However, Tehran supported the mujahideen financially though it was extremely meager in comparison to the Saudi and the US money and material support. The groups based in Iran could not exert much influence because of the constraints of finance and firepower. Iran's influence was also restricted since their support was limited to the Shia militia, mostly the Hazaras. This factor curtailed Iran's power to influence significantly the events in Afghanistan to its advantage. There were eight Afghan Shia groups operating from Iran. Due to economic problem Iran could not fund them sufficiently, as a result of which they were unable to play any central role in the Afghan conflict.

Within its limitations Iran also took initiatives to settle the unrest in its neighbourhood. The first of its kind being the initiative for regional talks to resolve the Afghan crisis in 1980. The discussions were to focus on withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan and the respect and guarantee of territorial integrity and neutrality, non-interference from outside and the right of the Afghans to decide what kind of Government they want. This roused considerable interest and a measure of skepticism in the third world diplomatic circles. It was seen as an Iranian leadership's need to gain international credibility following continuous instability, upheavals and internal friction in the post-Shah period.<sup>19</sup>

Iran at this stage wanted to keep the Soviet representatives out of the deliberations. This was evident from the failure of a proposed tripartite meeting on Afghanistan in

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<sup>17</sup> Khalilzad, n.5, p.239.

<sup>18</sup> Smruti S. Pattanaik, "Iran and Afghanistan: Conflict of Strategic Interest and Perception", in K. Warikoo, ed., *The Afghanistan Crisis: Issues and Perspectives*, (New Delhi, 2002), p.425.

<sup>19</sup> *Hindustan Times*, (New Delhi), 28 March 1980.

the presence of a UN representative because of Iran's refusal to talk to the Soviet supported Babrak Karmal regime. A statement issued by Iran said: "we will never discuss the fate of the Afghan people with Soviet representatives in Kabul", and demanded the expulsion of the puppet regime in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> Calling for negotiations between various countries concerned to resolve the crisis, the Iranian Foreign Minister said that the basic concept was that territorial integrity of Afghanistan should be preserved and guaranteed by its neighbours, including the Soviet Union, Pakistan and China and all foreign troops should withdraw from Afghanistan.

India's insistence on withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan was acceptable to Iran according to Iranian Foreign Minister Sadiq Ghotbsadeh. He said India as a major country in the region could help realise this basic concept of territorial integrity of Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup>

Iran which was prepared to work with other important powers of the region to establish a peaceful neighbourhood with, respect to its sovereignty and territorial integrity, could not adopt a consistent stance. The plans for creating an Iranian type regime in Afghan territory, the meeting of counter-revolutionaries in a Tehran hotel which could not have taken place without the sanction of the Iranian authorities during April-May 1986, running of several camps in the border areas to train Afghan counter-revolutionaries mainly the Shia minorities of Afghanistan, involvement of Iranian emissaries and spies in a clandestine manner to conduct hostile propaganda and for recruiting people to train against the Afghan regime showed growing Iranian interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup>

### **Post-Soviet Withdrawal:**

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan brought new realities to the region. Moreover, changes in Soviet Union coincided with the death of Ayatollah Khomeini

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<sup>20</sup> *Times of India*, 2 February, 1981.

<sup>21</sup> *Tribune*, (Chandigarh), 28 February 1980.

<sup>22</sup> *The Patriot*, 5 May 1986.

interests. "Iran considered the Kabul regime as the only force now capable of resisting a Sunni Pashtun takeover of Afghanistan. Iran rearmed Wahadat and by the time Kabul fell to mujahideen in 1992, Wahadat controlled not only the Hazarajat but a significant part of Western Kabul".<sup>26</sup> By this time Iran also had realised that if it were not going to broaden its criteria of supporting various Afghan factions it would not be in a position to have a substantial say in the Afghan affairs.

Initially Iran's attempt to gain more influence on Sunni groups was perceived with suspicion because these groups thought that Iran's desire to acquire US made weapons from them had changed Iran's stance in supporting them. Yunus Khalis an Afghan resistance leader turned down Iranian initiative to visit Tehran. His organization is believed to have lost some of its equipment to Iran.<sup>27</sup> Iran attempted to use Iranian-Persian identity as an instrument of foreign policy. In this context Iran supported the nationalist and Islamist Persian speaking groups.<sup>28</sup> Its support to all Persian speaking ethnic groups also included the Tajiks. The single plank policy was to resist the emergence of Pashtun Sunni Muslims as the main player in Afghanistan who were supported by Saudi Arabia.

The Najibullah Government was brought down by Northern Alliance<sup>29</sup> which had close relations with Iran. The close relations shared between Iran and Northern Alliance became an anathema for US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. This was reflected in the subsequent developments that saw the rise of Taliban. Burhanuddin Rabbani succeeded Sibghatollah Mojadidi in 1992 as the President as a result of the Peshawar agreement.<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to note here, that though Rabbani belonged

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<sup>26</sup> Ahmad Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and Great Power Game in Central Asia* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2000), p.199.

<sup>27</sup> Khaliizad, n.5, p.240.

<sup>28</sup> Barnett E. Rubin, "Afghanistan Under Taliban", *Current History*, (Philadelphia), February 1999, p.86.

<sup>29</sup> Northern Alliance led by Jamiat-i-Islami's Burhanuddin Rabbani included Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Masood, Uzbek General Abdul Rashid Dostum, Ismaili Shiite commander Jaffer Naderi and the Hizb-e-Wahadat led by Abdul Ali Mazari. Subsequently anti-Pashtun members of Najibullah's Watan party and the armed forces joined the alliance.

<sup>30</sup> Amin Saikal, "The Rabbani Government, 1992-1996", in William Maley, ed., *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban* (London, 1998), p.32-33.



to Sunni sect, Iran's support to him emanated from the view that any group supported by Pakistan is detrimental to its interest since Pakistan shares close relations with both the US and Saudi Arabia. Iran perceived that if any group supported by Pakistan assumed power, both US and Saudi Arabia would also wield considerable control in Afghanistan which would be detrimental to Iran's interest.

In 1993, for the first time Iran began to give substantial military aid to President Rabbani in Kabul and the Uzbek warlord General Rashid Dosturn and urged all ethnic groups to join Rabbani.<sup>31</sup> This policy posture indicated that Iran was in favour of a broad based government which was the most acceptable criteria. Iran at this stage believed that no government would sustain power for a very long time in Kabul if it is not broad based. This is because in the post-Soviet withdrawal Afghanistan various ethno-linguistic groups emerged as strong contenders for power and each group was not only heavily armed but also has been in control of various parts of Afghanistan with strong extra regional support.<sup>32</sup>

Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister during his visit to Kabul in July 1992 said that Iran would take every opportunity to help the Afghan people, as it had helped the mujahideen during their war against the former Soviet-backed government. Iran he said do not believe in discrimination and that all the factions are considered as Muslims and the Afghans should settle their differences by themselves and that Iran did not back any particular Afghan party.<sup>33</sup> These statements by a visiting dignitary were contradictory to what Iran was practically pursuing in Afghanistan to safeguard its interest. That Iran was supporting the Northern Alliance and backing the Shia factions with training and logistic support was no secret.

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Peshawar agreement of 24 April 1992 was essentially designed to provide a framework for an interim government, to be implemented in two stages. The first was to dispatch to Kabul the leader of a small Pashtun mujahideen group. Sibghatollah Mojadidi, as a compromise choice, to head a two-month transitional government. The second was to enable a longer term interim government headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani, the leader of Jamiat-i-Islami's. (As given in Saikal's article).

<sup>31</sup> Rashid, n.26, p.201.

<sup>32</sup> Pattanaik, n.18, p.433. Also refer to Map II for ethnic distribution in Afghanistan.

<sup>33</sup> *Bangkok Post*, (Bangkok), 29 July 1992.

However such support was not devoid of any challenges. Iran's relations with the Northern Alliance suffered a setback during 1993-1994 when Ahmad Shah Masood openly criticised Iran for its interference in the Afghan affairs and attacked Hazaras over the question of controlling the western part of Kabul. The Hazaras part of Wahadat refused to give up the area under their control finally leading to the fracture of the alliance. However, this led to the emergence of a new alliance between Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami and Hizb-e-Wahadat and other groups that led to the formation of 'Council of Solidarity' alliance.

It was believed that Masood's criticism of Iran was directed at gaining support from the West. He could not succeed much in his effort because of growing polarisation between various Afghan factions which changed loyalty to suit the interest of their patron. Another instance of changing loyalty was after Dostum distanced himself from Iran, Saudi Arabia provided financial support to Dostum. Saudi Arabia also cultivated relations with Masood and Rabbani and during 1993-1994. Saudi Arabia provided \$150 million in aid to the Rabbani-Masood Government to prevent them from cultivating Iran and at the same time preventing Dostum from getting closer to nurture any relations with Iran.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Rise of Taliban and Iranian Perceptions:**

When the Taliban captured four provinces in the southwest Afghanistan in late 1994, they did not generate much controversy among the regional powers. Even though Pakistan quickly established good relations with the Taliban, Iran did not oppose the movement during the first few months of its rise. Iran has watched the emergence of Taliban with caution. For a brief period in 1995 the Wahadat, which is supported by Iran, was encouraged to make an understanding with the Taliban. According to the understanding the Wahadat would be disarmed to take up buffer

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<sup>34</sup> Anwar-ul-Haq Ahady, "Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Conflict in Afghanistan", in William Maley ed., *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban*, (London, 1998), p.125.

position between the Taliban militia and Masood forces. This agreement did not work because some Shia groups refused to disarm.<sup>35</sup>

The Taliban's conflict with Iran began in March 1995 when the Taliban defeated Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami and Mazari's Hizb-e-Wahadat forces-both allies of Iran-in the southern and western outskirts of Kabul, murdered Mazari on the charges of betrayal and threatened to capture Kabul from Rabbani and Masood.<sup>36</sup> This act of the Taliban took place after Masood's forces defeated both Taliban and Wahadat on 19 March 1995 capturing Charasyab and Rishkor. It was at this juncture, when the Taliban movement emerged as a serious contender for national power, that Iran began to see the Taliban as an anti-Shia and anti-Iran force.

Consequently, Iran decided to cooperate with Rabbani and Masood against the rising Taliban. This was a welcome respite for Rabbani and Masood because, in spite of their efforts to align themselves with America, the US was not forthcoming. Iran took a public stand against the Taliban and came forward to provide financial and military support to their opponents. Thus, despite the fact that during 1993 and 1994, Masood had accused Iran for interfering in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, after March 1995, Iran developed very close relations with Kabul. This change of relations between Tehran and Kabul added coherence to Tehran's position in western Afghanistan where Tehran was supporting Ismail Khan's rule in Herat.<sup>37</sup>

In September 1995, the Taliban captured Herat This caused great anger to both the Northern Alliance and Iran as both the governments accused Pakistan of military intervention in support of the Taliban. Tehran attached special importance to Herat and considered the presence of a hostile force there a security threat. Thus, Tehran reacted strongly to events leading to the capture of Herat by the Taliban and, reportedly, sent a one thousand-strong force to help Ismail Khan's forces against the

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<sup>35</sup> Pattanaik, n.18, p.428.

<sup>36</sup> Ahady, n.34, p.126.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

Taliban.<sup>38</sup> With the loss of Herat and increasing hostility between Iran and the Taliban, Iran developed an elaborate theory regarding the rise and objectives of the Taliban.

### **Iranian Threat Perceptions:**

After the Taliban's success in taking Herat, Iran commented that the Taliban had been 'conceived by America, funded by Saudi Arabia, and logistically supported by Pakistan, effectively saying that the emergence of Taliban was a US, Saudi and Pakistani plot to crush the Shia in Afghanistan in order to contain Iran.<sup>39</sup> Iran saw in it US policy of containment and Saudi Arabia's intentions to project itself as the protector of Islamic interests by bypassing Iran and Pakistan's interest in providing safe trade routes from Central Asia. This called for greater adjustments in Iranian foreign policy to safeguard its own interests. Iran realised that to achieve its strategic end it has to mend its relations with Russia, increase its cooperation with India and diversify its relations with other non-Muslim countries of the region like Georgia, Ukraine and Armenia. This collaboration was necessitated by the growing American interest in the region.

Close collaboration between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in the Afghan conflict along with the United States brought conflict of interest between Iran and Pakistan. Pakistan saw in it a bright possibility of installing a pro-Pakistani regime in Kabul and to pursue its objectives in Central Asia and also to increase its leverage vis-à-vis other countries in the region.

Saudi Arabia had its own agenda to pursue in Afghanistan vis-à-vis Iran. Initially Saudi interest was not only to defend Islam from communism but also to export Sunni Wahabi Islam to Afghanistan, to ensure that their main regional and Shiite

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<sup>38</sup> *Al-Hayat*, (London), 15 September 1995, pp.1,6 as cited in Ahady's article.

<sup>39</sup> Ben Sheppard, "India and Pakistan's military and security relations with the Middle East", in Hannah Carter and Anoushiravan Ehteshami eds., *The Middle East's Relations with Asia and Russia*, (London, 2004), p.125.

rival, Iran is denied the opportunity to make any sectarian or political gains.<sup>40</sup> After the Taliban made headway by capturing non-Pashtun western province of Herat on the Iranian border in, Saudi Arabia started financing them as an anti-Iran force which would serve its strategic objectives.

The US saw it as a force which would wrap up the infighting in Afghanistan and contain Iran and provide ideological leverage against anti-US political forces of Islam in the region and provide Washington access to the Central Asian resources.<sup>41</sup> The visits of US Assistant Secretary of state for South and South West Asia during 1995-1996, were suggestive of American initial fondness for the Taliban.<sup>42</sup>

Iran shares nine hundred kilometers long border with Afghanistan. Drug production and trafficking that sustains Afghanistan's war ravaged economy also affects Iran. With three million heroin addicts drug trafficking was a major concern for Iran. Despite massive Iranian efforts, international drug traffickers based in Pakistan and Afghanistan still prefer the short Iranian route for shipping drugs to the west. Iran spends \$400 million annually to fight drug traffickers.<sup>43</sup> A number of drug dealers and Iranian police officers were killed in narcotics-related battles. This has emerged as a serious challenge to Iran's effort to fight drug abuse. In 1996, the total area under poppy cultivation in Afghanistan was estimated at 37,950 hectares which grew by three percent to 39,150 hectares in 1997 under Taliban.<sup>44</sup> Smuggling of food stuffs from Iran to Afghanistan became another cause of concern.

Iran became apprehensive about the Taliban's Sunni Islamic ideology, which it was thought would promote destabilisation in Iran. The Taliban have secretly backed Iranian groups who were anti-regime. Taliban has provided sanctuary to Ahl-e-Sunnah Wal Jamaat which recruited Iranian Sunni militants from Khorasan and

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<sup>40</sup> Amin Saikal, "Afghanistan's Ethnic Conflict", *Survival*, (London), vol.40, no.2, 1998, p.117.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*, p.119.

<sup>42</sup> *FBIS* Transcribed Text accessed from Agency France Press at <http://www.afp-direct.com/abonnes>. Accessed on 14 October 2004.

<sup>43</sup> Hooman Peimani, *Iran and the United States: the Rise of West Asian Regional Grouping* (Westport, 1999), p.70. Also refer to Map III indicating flow of drugs and small weapons from Afghanistan.

<sup>44</sup> Rashid, n.26. pp.147-8.

Sistan provinces. The aim of these groups was to overthrow the existing regime in Iran and establish Taliban style Sunni regime. The group received support and weapons from the Taliban and it was believed that Pakistan also sponsored them.<sup>45</sup> Another worrisome aspect to Tehran was that the leaders of main Iranian opposition group, the Iraqi backed Mujahideen-i-Khalq made frequent trips to Kandahar in pursuit of an operational base. Though the Taliban did not comply, it definitely had the capability to exploit Iranian vulnerability.

Also the Taliban's treatment of the Shia minorities in Afghanistan raised eyebrows in Iran and resulted in domestic pressure to protect the Shia minorities in Afghanistan. The Taliban's treatment of women had sent wrong signals to Tehran which could have resulted in turmoil within the Iranian society. Also the Taliban's consolidation of power in Afghanistan would have closed any opportunity for the early return of the Afghan refugees in Iran who were proving to be a great strain on Iranian economy.

Another major threat Iran saw was with respect to the Central Asia and the pipeline politics. Iran attached great cultural, political and economic importance to Central Asia. Iran-Persia was culturally a significant influence in Central Asia before the Russian conquest of the region. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent states in Central Asia have revived Iran's ambition for the renewal of its political and cultural influence in these countries.

Furthermore, Iran believed that given the development of its transportation facilities, it could serve as the link connecting Central Asia to the outside world and thereby play a significant role in the trade between Central Asian Republics and the outside world. The fact that these Central Asian Republics are rich in the hydrocarbons and natural gas resources and are looking for safer and viable transit facilities enhanced their significance. This very fact made them vulnerable to extra-

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<sup>45</sup> Rashid, n.26, p.205.

regional interferences. Tehran also believed that its relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus states can help defeat the US policy of containing Iran.<sup>46</sup>

The Pakistan route through Afghanistan is the shortest route.<sup>47</sup> Due to conflict in Afghanistan, the prospect of this route being functional remained doubtful. Achieving stability in Afghanistan has become difficult because the contending interests which will benefit from the pipeline deal, both producer of oil and gas, supplier and the consuming countries, wanted a regime in Afghanistan favourable to them which in turn would ensure uninterrupted supply. Iran's location as the only state on both the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea increased Iran's strategic and international importance and its leverage over US sanctions.<sup>48</sup> Moreover routes through Iran were attractive in terms of the existing infrastructure.

While Iran was eager to provide an outlet to the Central Asian countries, Pakistan emerged as an alternate route. Pakistan through Afghanistan to the Central Asian Republics was supported by the US and Saudi Arabia. Both these countries did not want the Iranian route to emerge as the only route for oil and gas supply because of their perceived threat from Iran. Also it was perceived that by guaranteeing security for the pipeline route, the Taliban would weaken the leverage that Iran had gained.

Above all the consolidation of the Taliban power in Afghanistan would have been projected as an alternate model to the Shia brand of Islamic Revolution in Iran which could have further checked the Iranian influence vis-à-vis the other Islamic countries. The Iranian Revolution had placed Shia Islam on a higher pedestal than the Wahabi Sunnism of Saudi Arabia. To neutralise the rise of Shi'ism,

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<sup>46</sup> John Calabrese, *Revolutionary Horizons: Regional Foreign Policy in Post-Khomeini Iran* (New York, 1994), pp.78-85.

<sup>47</sup> Ajay d. Behera, "The Battle for Kabul: Interplay of Geopolitics of Cold War Logic", *Strategic Analysis* (New Delhi), vol.12, nos. 11-12, January-February 1997, p.1373.

For example Dushanbe, capital of Tajikistan is located by road some 3200 kms. From Bandar Abbas in Iran, 3400 kms from Odessa in the Black Sea and some 9500 kms. From Vladivostok in the Pacific in this regard the Pakistani ports in the south are an attractive proposition. In comparison Karachi in the Arabian Sea is around 2720 kms from Dushanbe and 2000 kms from Ashkabad the capital of Turkmenistan.

<sup>48</sup> Rubin, n.28, p.87.

developments in Iran's eastern neighbourhood, provided a golden opportunity for Saudi Arabia.<sup>49</sup>

The developments in Afghanistan since 1995 strengthened these Iranian threat perceptions. The Taliban's capture of Kabul in September 1996, followed by their aggressive postures all around to capture the rest of the area, necessitated some quick rethinking by Iran. The priorities that emerged were:

How to contain the Taliban?

How to keep Afghanistan's territorial integrity and form a broad based government?

How to prevent the international community from recognising the Taliban Government?<sup>50</sup>

#### **Iranian Policy Initiatives:**

In accordance with the required measures to meet the challenges posed by the Taliban militia, the Iranian policy towards the Taliban regime in Afghanistan revolved around four factors:

- a) Confining the Taliban to southern Afghanistan, to the territory under their occupation, and if possible smother them.
- b) Nurturing and supporting an alternative leadership to take up the reins of power as and when the Taliban are forced to vacate Kabul.
- c) Involving the immediate neighbours of Afghanistan-especially the Central Asian Republics, Russia, China and India to ensure the success of the strategy of containment of the Taliban.
- d) Evolving a broad based government as early as possible as the ultimate solution to the Afghan crisis.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Sreedhar, Mahendra Ved, *Afghan Buzkashi: Power Games and Gamesmen*, vol.1, (New Delhi, 2000), p.175.

<sup>50</sup> Sreedhar, n.49, p.175.

<sup>51</sup> Sreedhar, n.1, p.81.



**Conclusion:**

Developments in Afghanistan always had decisive impact on Iran which shares nine hundred kilometers border with Afghanistan. During the monarchical regimes both Iran and Afghanistan shared cordial relations in spite of their alliances; Afghanistan with NAM and Iran with US manufactured military alliances like CENTO. Revolution in Iran and Soviet intervention in Afghanistan changed the tone of the relations which were defined by Iranian interests. Owing to Afghanistan's strategic location Iran desired a peaceful and friendly neighbourhood catering to Iranian interests.

Khomeini's ambition to export Iranian revolution sent negative signals to Soviet supported Sunni dominated regime in Kabul. With Cold War culminating in its neighbourhood Iran demanded Soviet withdrawal and supported the mujahideen groups especially the Shia factions. During this period the Iranian foreign policy was determined by the moderates. But these moderates were later replaced by hardliners who were in favour of supporting Shia factions in Afghanistan and maximising Iranian interests.

Iran which was involved in a war with Iraq during this time also purchased arms from Soviet Union, exposing its double standards and selfish interests. Iran which took initiatives for preserving Afghanistan's territorial integrity and independence supported UN efforts. To this extent its interests converged with that of India. But Iran refused to deal with the Soviet Union on any matters related to Afghanistan during this period.

Post-Soviet withdrawal period gave enough space to Iran to play the role of a facilitator and Iran grabbed the opportunity. Iranian dialogue initiative in 1989 for peaceful transfer of power saw Iranian preparedness to communicate with the Soviet Union, to which it was opposed earlier, along with Shia factions and Pakistan based Sunni groups to increase its credibility and influence. Iran also played a crucial role in bringing all the eight Shia factions under one Hizb-e-Wahadat party which

remained its main stay in Afghan affairs. Though, Iran advocated an alliance of all the factions within Afghanistan its continued support to the Shia groups to prevent the domination of Sunni groups supported by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, prevented an early resolution of the conflict.

The continued unrest resulted in the rise of a purist Sunni Islamic movement the Taliban. Initially Iran was not opposed to the Taliban. It was only after the capture of Herat from its allies that Iran started opposing Taliban. Iran did not recognise the Taliban Government and continued supporting its ally, the Northern Alliance led by Rabbani. Iran also gave military assistance to the Northern Alliance to check the rise of Taliban which had thrown many challenges to the Iranian leadership.

The rise of purist Sunni movement was seen as a destabilising force and its consolidation an alternate model of Revolution in the Islamic world. Iran considered it as a product of Saudi-Pakistan-US alliance to contain Iran. Iran was also concerned about the harsh treatment of the Shia minorities in Afghanistan, the refugees and drug trafficking which had debilitating effect on its economy. Above all it was the Central Asian factor which caused great concern in Iran.

Iran became pre-occupied with the containment of the Taliban at this stage. Its policy initiatives also focused on pragmatic solution to the conflict with a broad based government with due respect to the territorial integrity of Afghanistan and strict opposition to external interference. This was a moral stance from a country which tried to influence the internal affairs of Afghanistan by cultivating anti-regime groups through financial and military assistance, to safeguard and maximise its interests. Thus, Iranian relations with Afghanistan were purely interest driven and were punctuated with contradictions.

## CHAPTER - II

### INDIA – AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS

#### **Introduction:**

Akin to the general logic of bilateral relations, the relations between India and Afghanistan are also motivated and shaped by shared political, economic, cultural and strategic interests. Historical evidence showing that Chandra Gupta Maurya extended his empire upto Hindukush at the beginning of third century B.C.E. proves that both the countries have a long shared history, as Afghanistan was part of ancient India. History has always proved that any power ruling the Indian sub-continent automatically gets drawn into the politics of Afghanistan and the present-day Iran. Chandra Gupta Maurya in ancient India, Mughal Emperor Akbar in the medieval era and the British during the modern period were all subjected to this basic territorial pull of geo-politics.

But, the belief that India and Afghanistan have always had friendly relations is not borne out by history. True, India and Afghanistan had a very long interaction from third century B.C.E. But they were not friendly. The reality was that Afghanistan was the base from which repeated intrusions and invasions took place into India, either because of the economic and political ambitions of the Afghan kings or because of the misguided invitations from assorted Indian princes who wanted to overthrow the given Muslim regime in Delhi at given points of time.<sup>1</sup>

It is only after British rule consolidated itself in the second half of the nineteenth century that Indo-Afghan relationship at the popular level acquired common interests. So the friendship was not traditional. One must make a clear distinction between the cultural, social, and political closeness of the people of the subcontinent and the

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<sup>1</sup>J.N. Dixit, "India and Afghanistan: A Policy of Friendship", *The Times of India* (New Delhi), 18 April 2005.

nature of the power structure of Afghanistan in talking about India's relations with Afghanistan. A distinction must also be made between the early twentieth century phenomenon of the close relationship between the leaders of Pashtuns of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the leaders of Indian national movement and relations with Afghanistan as such.<sup>2</sup>

Jawaharlal Nehru the first Prime Minister of independent India realised the geo-political significance of Afghanistan and had given considerable importance to relations with Afghanistan. In one of his early speeches on foreign policy in the Constituent Assembly in March 1949, he mentioned Afghanistan along with Pakistan, Nepal, Burma, Sri Lanka, China and Tibet as the areas around which India's foreign policy would revolve. Nehru was of the firm view that India's security frontier lies along the river Oxus, not the Khyber Pass and hence he took initiative in enrolling Afghanistan as a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

India recognised Afghanistan as a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement. Both the countries worked closely on the diplomatic front. Kabul sided with New Delhi on the Kashmir issue. Large trading populations of Afghans of Indian origin and Pathans inhabiting India provided a constant channel for interaction. 'Kabuliwallah' remained the principal source of dry fruits for Indians. Many Afghan officers were trained in Indian defence establishments.<sup>3</sup>

India's relations with Afghanistan during the Zahir Shah period and in the subsequent tenure of President Sardar Mohammed Daud Khan were generally positive and friendly. It must however be remembered that Zahir Shah, despite some convergence of views on the future of Pashtuns of NWFP, was not supportive of India during its conflicts with Pakistan in 1947-48, 1965 and 1971. He equivocated on the Kashmir

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<sup>2</sup> *Times of India*, 18 April, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Mahendra Ved, "Indo-Afghan relations", in, Sreedhar, ed., *Taliban And the Afghan Turmoil: The Role of USA, Pakistan, Iran and China* (New Delhi, 1997), p.125.

issue.<sup>4</sup> The Islamic link with Pakistan transcended what should have been Afghanistan's strategic interest in having a positive equation with India.

Relations during Daud's period were better. India had commenced an extensive programme of technological, economic and social cooperation with Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the fact remains that the location of Afghanistan at the crossroads between Iran, Central Asia, the Arabian Sea and India has given its mountain passes a strategic significance for centuries.

### **Conditions Leading to Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan:**

During the period from 1963-1973 Afghanistan under King Zahir Shah had witnessed political volatility with as many as five Prime Ministers during this period giving rise to wide ranging dissension, which ultimately snow balled into a coup in 1973. Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan, primarily with the support of urban and semi-urban political groups overthrew King Zahir Shah in a comparatively bloodless coup on 17 July 1973 and declared Afghanistan a Republic the following day naming himself the founder, President and Prime Minister of the Republic of Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

The army and the middle class expected Daud to restructure the Afghan polity. Daud however failed to deliver. He failed to manage the economy well; he was not inclined to assert Afghan nationalism and nationalistic position vis-à-vis Afghanistan's immediate neighbours and important powers interested in Afghanistan on the lines on which his revolutionary supporters desired.<sup>7</sup>

From the middle of 1976 onwards the alienation between Daud and those who had supported him to come to power was more or less complete. This ultimately resulted in the army-led coup in 1978.<sup>8</sup> Daud and the members of his family were killed in the

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<sup>4</sup> J.N.Dixit, *An Afghan Diary: Zahir Shah to Taliban*, (New Delhi, 2000), p.19.

<sup>5</sup> Dixit, n.4, p.19.

<sup>6</sup> Mohammad Amin Wakman, *Afghanistan At The Crossroad*, (New Delhi, 1985), p.92.

<sup>7</sup> Jagat S.Mehta, *The March of Folly in Afghanistan, 1978-2001* (New Delhi, 2002), p.17-18.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Rogers *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Analysis and Chronology* (WestPort, 1992), p.17.

basement of the Royal Palace in Kabul. The rule of Afghanistan's royal family of the Durrani descent came to an end in 1978 with Noor Mohammad Taraji and the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan coming to power.<sup>9</sup> The Taraji regime, which came to power, had left-of-centre ideological orientations.

This regime decided to launch radical programmes of literacy, women's education, modernisation of the economy and improving infrastructural facilities of transport and communications. The Taraji regime also moved to create institutions of governance with due representation from various tribal and ethnic groups which constituted the Afghan nation. The domination of Pashtun in Afghanistan was questioned and sought to be modified. The role of the orthodox clergy was also challenged under the new scheme of things.<sup>10</sup> The Royal family, the Muslim clergy and the old elite stood excluded from the new arrangements. It gave these elements an opportunity to argue that the Taraji regime supported by the Soviet Union<sup>11</sup> was challenging the traditional Afghan national identity and, more importantly, was hurting the religious feelings and the collective Islamic faith of the people of Afghanistan.

Taraji fell victim to internal factionalism of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and was murdered by Hafizullah Amin in the middle of 1978.<sup>12</sup> Amin was indiscriminately violent against those who opposed him within the ruling party. He opened contacts with the Americans and Pakistanis to neutralise the heavy Soviet presence in the post-Daud Afghanistan. He generated some alarm and resentment in the Soviet Union and, more importantly, he antagonised the officer-cadre of the Afghan army closely linked with the Soviet military and political establishment at that time.

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<sup>9</sup> This was also known as the PDPA rule or the Saur Revolution.

<sup>10</sup> Dixit, n.4, p.15.

<sup>11</sup> The fact that the Afghan army was considerably dependent on soviet supplies and the large number of its cadres who were trained in the Soviet Union conducted a coup against Daud, suggests that the coup had the Soviet backing. Once Taraji took over Soviet advisers started working in different departments of the Afghan government.

<sup>12</sup> Rogers, n.8, p.18.

Amin was poised to break away from Soviet linkages, which was not acceptable to the Soviet Union. Soviet Union therefore decided to take radical and unorthodox action to safeguard its perceived interests in Afghanistan and to support those segments of the PDPA, which were pro-Soviet. The Soviet armed intrusion into Afghanistan commenced on December 27 1979.<sup>13</sup> A Soviet backed PDPA regime led by Babrak Karmal was put in position. The new government under Karmal had large numbers of advisers from the Soviet Union in every Government department. A large Soviet military force moved into Afghanistan and took direct responsibility for the defence and security of the country. The administration, the economy and the intelligence apparatus of the new Afghan government were not just influenced but dominated and run by Soviet personnel. The Soviet Union and its Communist Party dominated both the government as well as the working of the PDPA.<sup>14</sup>

### **Indian Response:**

India coped with changes of regime after Daud's overthrow as best as it could. India had itself gone through the turmoil of emergency and the consequent electoral defeat of Indira Gandhi. Morarji Desai was in power when Daud was overthrown. Successor Prime Minister Charan Singh's Government was in power when Amin was overthrown and the Soviet military action in Afghanistan took place.

India adopted the classical and formally correct stand that it will deal with whichever government is in effective power in Afghanistan and that India's commitment and involvement is with the people of Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> The Soviet military intervention caused India to face a very complex and unenviable predicament. A super power had intervened militarily in a non-aligned country and put up its nominee as the President of Afghanistan. The legal claim of Soviet Union was that it had sent military assistance to Afghanistan "on the invitation of the Afghan leadership".<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Wakman, n.6, pp.22-23.

<sup>14</sup> Dixit, n.4, p.18.

<sup>15</sup> A.G. Noorani, *India The Superpowers and The Neighbours: Essays in Foreign Policy*, (New Delhi, 1995), p.109.

<sup>16</sup> V.D.Chopra, "India's Stand On Afghanistan Crisis", in V.D.Chopra, ed., *Afghanistan and Asian Stability* (New Delhi , 1998), p.213.

Prime Minister Charan Singh told the Soviet Ambassador in New Delhi, that the Soviet military intervention was unacceptable particularly since the intervention had taken place against a close neighbour of India and a non-aligned country. He urged that Soviet troops should withdraw from Afghanistan as early as possible. Accordingly the Government of India issued a statement generally regretting the soviet intervention in Afghanistan and asking for the withdrawal of Russian troops. India's permanent representative to the United Nations Brajesh Mishra was instructed to inform all other UN delegations and the UN secretariat about the policy response of Prime Minister Charan Singh, which he did in the first half of January 1980.<sup>17</sup>

Indira Gandhi won the general elections and assumed power in the third week of January 1980. While she was also opposed to the Soviet military intervention, mindful of India's security and political relationship with the Soviet Union, she temporised. Without being critical of the Soviet Union publicly she supported the Afghan revolutionary leadership and urged them to appreciate the need for Soviet withdrawal over a period of time.<sup>18</sup>

India's stand on the situation concerning Afghanistan was guided by the following principles:

- 1) Opposition to all forms of external interference or intervention in the domestic affairs of the countries of the region.
- 2) Opposition to the extension of the quarrels of other countries and the induction of Cold War tensions into the region.
- 3) Respect for the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and the non-aligned status of the countries of the region, and

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<sup>17</sup> Mehta, n.7, p.23.

<sup>18</sup> S.D.Muni, "India's Afghan Policy: Emerging from the Cold", in, K.Warikoo, ed., *The Afghan Crisis: Issues and Perspectives*, (New Delhi, 2002), p.334.



- 4) Preference for a negotiated political solution of problems through dialogue among the parties concerned.<sup>19</sup>

India's approach towards Afghan crisis as it developed in 1979-80 was shaped in accordance with the aforesaid guiding principles. The approach can be summarised as follows:

- 1) India's primary interest was to ensure the continuity in relations between the peoples of the two countries.
- 2) India firmly believed that this process could be sustained only if India supported trends and policies in Afghanistan, which would make the Afghan people prosperous and the Afghan polity stable. This called for modernisation of Afghanistan.
- 3) India had no desire to interfere in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, and would deal with whichever government was de facto in power. While India generally supported the declared objectives of the Afghan revolution, it was opposed to violence and also to Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan.
- 4) While India did not oppose the Soviet move publicly, or indulge in diplomatic polemics of anti-Soviet nature, it did convey its serious reservations about the implications of Soviet military intrusion into Afghanistan, emphasising that in the long run this could be counterproductive. Indira Gandhi said this to Andrei Gromyko the Soviet Foreign Minister in Delhi in January 1980. The then Minister of External Affairs Narasimha Rao conveyed this to Leonid Brezhnev the Soviet President, in Moscow in 1980.<sup>20</sup>
- 5) India was quite clear in its stand that an Afghanistan dominated by Islamic extremist forces and by the USA would not be in India's political or geo-strategic interests at that time. This was one of the reasons why India did not oppose the Soviet action publicly.

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<sup>19</sup> *Annual Report, 1981-1982*, Ministry of External Affairs, External Publicity Division, Government of India (New Delhi), 1982.

<sup>20</sup> *Indian Express*, (New Delhi), 15 June 1985

- 6) India was also clear that while it would not participate in any manner in the conflict attendant upon the evolving events in Afghanistan, it would continue bilateral cooperation with that country in the social, economic, power and health sectors.<sup>21</sup>

India's foreign policy also faced the dilemma of reconciling contradictory considerations. A massive soviet military presence close to India in Afghanistan was not a strategic development welcome to India. The Soviet presence would naturally attract an American and Chinese response, creating tensions on Indian borders. At the same time India could not be categorically critical of the Soviet Union because of India's dependence on Soviet Union for major defence supplies and a significant portion of oil supplies and technologies.

India also rightly perceived the prospect of an increase in extremist Islamic forces affecting the region in response to Soviet military presence. Military interference in a non-aligned country had to be questioned but at the same time India had to respond to the American sponsored resistance to the Afghan revolution, which had its own motivation without having anything to do with the welfare of the people. A major problem enmeshed with complexities. The Afghan crisis posed the biggest challenge to Indian diplomacy since independence, since it contained all the ingredients to big power rivalries, regional animosities and internal turmoil that can plunge the whole area into a major conflagration.

This dilemma of India's foreign policy also manifested itself in Government of India's stand at the UN. The permanent representative to the UN was expected to temporise and to argue that the Soviet military intervention was a result of external subversion of the Afghan revolution. This policy stance of India was the option of a measured tight rope walking which India adopted, an option which India exercised in the full knowledge that it would be subject to criticism both domestically and in the international community.

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<sup>21</sup> Dixit, n.4, pp.22-23.

Because of the adverse regional and internal security consequences India could not endorse any anti-Soviet front regarding Afghanistan. India even avoided voting for a UN Resolution that asked for soviet withdrawal as it was moved by anti-Soviet front led by the US.<sup>22</sup> Again in November 1986 India abstained from a UN Resolution on Afghanistan on the same lines.

In spite of this opposition India remained supportive of the UN efforts aimed at restoring peace and stability in Afghanistan and showed preference for a policy of restraint and moderation in Afghanistan that could help in the emergence of a “practical and durable political solution. India’s dilemma was that while it disapproved of the Soviet intervention and wanted it to withdraw from Afghanistan, it was aware of the fact that any hasty withdrawal would facilitate the dominance of such external and internal forces in Afghanistan that were inimical to India’s security interests. That is why India’s formal position on Afghanistan always included the rejection of “all forms of outside interference” and opposition to any other country’s “interference and intervention” in Afghanistan. It underlined the importance of a “comprehensive approach” that could seek withdrawal of the soviet forces while ensuring that no other country interfered in Afghan affairs.<sup>23</sup>

During this period both India and Afghanistan expressed concern over the American variety of resistance to the Soviet military occupation by pumping highly sophisticated weapons into the region in general and Pakistan in particular and thereby deteriorating the security environment in the South Asian and Indian Ocean region. They agreed that all possible efforts should be made to prevent the arms race and militarisation of the region. India’s concern over Afghanistan and the region as a whole was inextricably linked with its own security interests. India was particularly concerned at the introduction of sophisticated weaponry into the region which could

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<sup>22</sup> *Indian Express*, 7 December 1983.

<sup>23</sup> *The Hindu*, (Madras), 27 December 1987.

fuel an arms race and could result in diversion of scarce economic resources of the countries of the region away from development.<sup>24</sup>

In its attempts to reconcile the conflicting claims on its security and regional interests, India could not play a meaningful role in the settlement of the Afghan issue. It was seen as closely identified with Soviet Union and the pro-Soviet Kabul regime. This distanced it from the dominant international anti-Soviet front that was more interested in pushing the Soviets out rather than ensuring a stable and politically independent Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup>

Pakistan, a principal member of the anti-Soviet alliance was extremely active in keeping India out of any important process of negotiations involving Afghanistan. India was also handicapped by the fact that it did not have direct border with Afghanistan, as the areas of Kashmir that shared a common border with Afghanistan are under the illegal possession of Pakistan. The formula that was generally worked out for selecting countries to participate in the negotiations for resolving the Afghan question was based on "major powers and neighbours."<sup>26</sup>

### **Najibullah Period and Post-Soviet Afghanistan:**

The earlier periods have seen a meticulous balance of relationship with both Afghanistan and Soviet Union from the Indian side. The Najib period though, seen as a transitory puppet arrangement by the West, gave India an ample opportunity to assert its foreign policy objectives by directly interacting with the Afghan side at higher levels. Najibullah's Government which succeeded Babrak Karmal's Government also adopted a friendly posture towards India as it saw an important role for New Delhi in the crucial phase of diplomatic activity after the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from the Afghan territory.

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<sup>24</sup> *The Patriot*, (New Delhi), 7 November 1986.

<sup>25</sup> Muni, n.18, p.337.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

President Najibullah during his transitory halt at New Delhi enroute Vietnam and Cambodia met Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and reviewed the latest developments which were expected to lead to a political solution of the Afghan problem. Najibullah during the course of his visit became the only President to have visited India after Mohammed Daud in 1978.<sup>27</sup> Najibullah suggested frequent consultations with India on the evolving situation in his country, in the context of the current search for a political settlement. The plea for continuous contacts during the crucial phase of the diplomatic activity implied recognition of the role New Delhi could play.

Following this visit wide range of policy criticism surfaced in the diplomatic circles. The criticism levelled was that, by aligning itself with Najibullah's regime New Delhi was committing the same mistake that it did at the time of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, since Najibullah and his regime were associated in the eyes of most Afghans with the Soviet forces, which have been in occupation of their country since 1979. That they have a very small base even that is being eroded because of infighting between the two communist factions- Khalq and Parcham.<sup>28</sup>

A short while later in April 1988, many diplomatic eyebrows arched up when the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi announced in the Lok Sabha that he had invited Najibullah for important talks. This was seen as a global anti-Pakistani diplomatic offensive by India. The Indian Prime Minister decided that Pakistan's active encouragement to the Sikh militants of which he was convinced, made it necessary for India to renew its traditional friendship with Afghanistan especially after the pull out of Soviet troops.

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<sup>27</sup> *Times of India*, 25 December 1987.

<sup>28</sup> Khalq and Parcham are the two political groups which ultimately emerged to become people's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. They had their origins in journalistic political activity. Noor Mohammad Taraqi, who emerged as the first president of post-Daud revolutionary Afghanistan in 1978, was the founder editor of the magazine called Khalq. He and his followers represented the left of centre Pashtun middle class. Babrak Karmal was the founder of the newspaper called Parcham, which was also socialist/communist in its ideology but in addition it represented non-Pashtun ethnic interests in Afghan politics, such as those of Tajiks, the Hazaras, Uzbeks, etc.

The departure of Soviet troops restored Afghanistan to its pre-1979 status, when its relations with India were friendly. A renewal of that friendship after the Soviet retreat would have demanded a joint assessment of the entire strategic, political, and economic situation within and around Afghanistan. Only in the light of that assessment India could have determined what it could have done with its limited resources for the security and development of an independent non-aligned Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup> By inviting Najibullah the point India made was that it could not be denied a role in the future of Afghanistan whatever may be Pakistan's inclinations.

The said visit took place at a most critical juncture in the history of Afghanistan and the region itself. It provided an opportunity to the two governments to have an exchange of ideas and analyse the situation in the context of the signing of the Geneva accords<sup>30</sup> and the impending withdrawal of Soviet troops. Both the countries desired peace and stability in the region were averse to foreign intervention and were keen to cooperate in the furtherance of these objectives. India and Afghanistan expressed confidence over the future non-aligned status of the strife-torn country in the wake of the Geneva accords and stressed that the "non-interference" clause of the agreements need to be observed by all the countries concerned.

In his banquet speech Najibullah said that Afghanistan will remain "a Non-Aligned and neutral Islamic country" due to its traditions and geographical location in its "high national interests", and that his visit was of "historic" significance, which would greatly contribute to all spheres of Indo-Afghan cooperation.<sup>31</sup> The Afghan President expressed his gratitude to India for its effective support during a crucial period both as political backing in international arena and in the form of economic, technical and cultural assistance. The visit was an event of immense importance for the entire South Asian region, if not for the World. New Delhi was not deterred by the

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<sup>29</sup> *Hindustan Times*, (New Delhi), 28 April, 1988.

<sup>30</sup> The UN sponsored proximity talks on Afghanistan initiated in late 1986 eventually led to Geneva accords signed by the two super powers along with the Afghan regime and Pakistan in 1988. Under these accords, the Soviet military forces completed their withdrawal from Afghanistan by February 1988.

<sup>31</sup> *Indian Express* 5 May 1988.

widespread speculation in the western media about the exceedingly short longevity of the Najibullah regime in Kabul. On the contrary the Indian Government appeared to have been persuaded that the regime in Kabul will survive if the accord signed in Geneva under UN auspices is not openly and cynically violated by Pakistan and the US.

The above initiative was genuinely Indian intended to protect India's interests and to promote whatever little chance there is of avoiding, or at least minimising, further bloodshed in Afghanistan which has been ravaged beyond description ever since the Soviet intervention. India preferred a government that avoids ideological rigidities. But this in any case was a pre-requisite for national reconciliation and India's preference thus coincided with Afghanistan's own needs. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi has said, if a Muslim fundamentalist regime came to power in Afghanistan it would 'really upset' India and destabilise the region. We already have a fundamentalist regime in Iran and a second one coming in will destabilise the region and will affect us. We ourselves feel that Najibullah is far preferable for the region to the sort of fanatic fundamentalists who are the alternative he added.<sup>32</sup>

One major concern for New Delhi at this stage was Pakistan under General Zia-ul-Haq. The concern was that it may lose the diplomatic advantage that it has enjoyed over the years if General Zia succeeds in his all-out effort to ensure a take over in Kabul by the section of the Afghan mujahideen which enjoys his favour.<sup>33</sup> General Zia was playing for high stakes. Had his protégés come out on top; he would not only have thwarted India but, might also have gained leverage vis-à-vis both super powers. Washington would have appreciated influence in Kabul and would have been grateful to General Zia had he arranged this. Moscow would have regarded it as a valuable service if he could have prevailed upon his Afghan friends to maintain correct relations with their northern neighbour.

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<sup>32</sup> *Hindustan Times*, 12 June 1988.

<sup>33</sup> *Deccan Herald*, (Bangalore), 30 June 1988.

In Delhi's calculation it appeared that if the Kabul regime can withstand the first rush of mujahideen wrath in the immediate wake of the Soviet pullout, and if its programme of national reconciliation picks up gradual momentum, its survival would be more ensured from 1989 onwards. The significant factor was that New Delhi was determined to do whatever lies within the reach of its diplomatic resources to make the Kabul regime's survival more possible than it may otherwise happen to be. New Delhi's diplomatic clout was not insignificant in the world of late 1980's. What India tried to do was nothing more than protecting its own geo-political interests. A friendly Afghanistan had always been a foreign policy priority for India, especially in view of India's unfriendly relations with Pakistan.<sup>34</sup>

India perhaps, was the only country in the world apart of course from the Soviet Union ready to help President Najibullah of Afghanistan as he faced the most difficult battle of his life and future of his country. India's stand was a principled support to a friend at a time when the latter was widely believed to be beyond help.<sup>35</sup> The Indian Government under Rajiv Gandhi had extended support to Najibullah and had invited him to India when the latter was going through a dire crisis. At that time the Indian Prime Minister was criticised and condemned at his immaturity and naiveté at siding with a hopeless regime. Najibullah's sustaining power and the maturity with which he handled the reconciliation process in his country has vindicated Rajiv Gandhi's judgement.

The post-Soviet Afghanistan posed a much bigger challenge to India's policy. Three factors impinged strongly on India's policy in this respect; the internal conflict and confusion in Afghanistan, frequent changes of government in India and the implications of the end of the Cold War.<sup>36</sup> Within Afghanistan the main issue was stability of the government in the light of increasing rift between the Najibullah regime and the mujahideen groups and the conflict within the mujahideen factions.

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<sup>34</sup> *News Time*, (Hyderabad), 16 May 1988.

<sup>35</sup> *The Telegraph*, (Calcutta), 2 April 1989.

<sup>36</sup> Muni. n.18, p.338.



In 1989 there was a change of guard in India. National Front Government under Vishwanath Pratap Singh came to power in New Delhi. This government preferred to remain neutral in Afghanistan's internal conflicts, while being willing and prepared for helping Kabul in the process of mutual reconciliation among the conflicting groups.<sup>37</sup>

In February 1990 the visiting Afghan Foreign Minister Abdul Wakil in his meeting with the Indian Minister for External Affairs I.K.Gujral, sought close interaction with India to foil terrorists operating in India and Afghanistan as well as their Pakistani patrons. Wakil assured Kabul's total support to measures taken by New Delhi to maintain India's territorial unity and integrity. He said preserving India's unity and integrity was necessary because of strong geo-political reasons.<sup>38</sup> Afghanistan also extended full support to India on Kashmir issue and has unequivocally condemned Islamabad's interference in the affairs of that state as well as its efforts to internationalise the issue.

In his discussion Wakil also condemned the activities of certain Afghan nationals in India, who have been described as "unemployed mujahideen's", for carrying out anti-India activities at the behest of the Pakistani Inter Service Intelligence (ISI). He said that Afghans were grateful to India for its firm support to their endeavour to shape their own destiny by repulsing foreign interference, mainly from the US and Pakistan.<sup>39</sup> He urged New Delhi to play an active role in finding a solution to the Afghan problem under the aegis of the UN. It was observed that foreign backed fundamentalist and subversive forces, which are trying to destabilise respective governments and also bring about secession of territories, threatened both the countries.

The first information about the involvement of Afghan mujahideen faction led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in the training of Kashmiri subversives in the use of weapons

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<sup>37</sup> *The Hindu*, 30 August 1990.

<sup>38</sup> *Times of India*, 14 February, 1990.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

and also giving them actual combat training on the Afghan front was provided to the Government of India by the Afghan Government.<sup>40</sup> This was a vital aspect of the evolving relationship at that point of time between these two countries. According to some diplomatic observers, a sort of link existed between the happenings in Afghanistan and Jammu and Kashmir suggesting direct involvement of fundamentalist forces.

The Afghan President Najibullah's third visit to India took place during August 1990 in the background of the increasing role of Afghan mujahideen in the Kashmir insurgency. It must be viewed in the context of three factors:

- 1) The US decision to terminate its involvement in the affairs of Afghanistan.
- 2) The ouster of the Benazir Bhutto Government on Pakistan and the consequent revival of the flow of aid to the mujahideen group, Hizb-e-Islami, headed by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.
- 3) The resolve shared by New Delhi and Kabul to combat the flourishing drug trade in the sub-continent.

This visit of Najibullah was different from the previous ones, particularly in regard to its timing. By then he was on a firmer footing in his country than at anytime after the withdrawal of the Soviet troops. The national reconciliation process initiated by him had forged ahead on the terms and parameters set by him. He had broad based his government of which twenty three members, including the Prime Minister out of thirty nine do not belong to his party the Watan Party.<sup>41</sup> The divisions among the mujahideen groups particularly those based in Pakistan and between them and the Iran settled groups were an additional though a negative source of strength.

New Delhi then wanted the SAARC to play a role in bringing about a negotiated political settlement in Afghanistan. This was favoured for varied reasons

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<sup>40</sup> *Hindustan Times*, 8 June, 1990.

<sup>41</sup> PDPA was renamed as Watan Party.

- 1) It would pull the Afghan problem out of the vortex of big power politics.
- 2) It would subject Kabul to the South Asia pull at a time when fundamentalist rumblings were beginning to be heard in Central Asia.

On this and other aspects on the political agenda, the degree of agreement between India and Afghanistan was remarkable.<sup>42</sup>

At this juncture it appeared that Indo-Afghan relations have finally moved out of shadows of uncertainty and that the two countries were on the threshold of a multi-dimensional cooperation, which might have a positive fall out in South Asia. What appeared to have accelerated New Delhi-Kabul cooperation was the realisation that the diplomatic manoeuvre going on in Pakistan poses a threat to both India and Afghanistan and requires a coordinative approach.

The training centres of anti-Afghan and anti-Indian militants were found to be common and the weapons used against both, also had common origins. It has also been found that the narcotics trail involving Kashmir militants and Punjab terrorists had its origins in the anti-Kabul Afghan opposition. A common response to common challenges implied cooperation in all spheres-defence, external affairs, economic development, culture more importantly in the reconstruction process. Indian assistance it was envisaged would be through active programmes involving several ongoing projects in the areas of public health, industrial development, and education geared to the direct benefit of the common man. Regarding defence, Kabul has for long been eager to shift its reliance from the USSR to India.<sup>43</sup>

India and Afghanistan might not have entered into a formal treaty of peace, friendship and cooperation but the political like-mindedness that emerged was just as significant. This was a culmination of bilateral dealings over a long period of time. It was no coincidence that India was the only country, which Najibullah had visited thrice including a transitory halt. Outside the Soviet block India alone pinned faith in the

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<sup>42</sup> *The Hindu*, 5 September, 1990.

<sup>43</sup> *News Time*, 26 June, 1990.

Kabul regime's capacity to withstand pressures after the Soviet withdrawal. New Delhi's stand was vindicated.

### **Post-Najib Period:**

The increased tensions between the Najibullah Government and externally instigated mujahideen ambitions ultimately led to the displacement of the Najibullah's regime by the opposing mujahideen groups in 1992. It was succeeded by an interim council headed by Hazrat Sibghatollah Mujadidi. The Indian Government officially acknowledged the mujahideen council in Afghanistan as the interim government of that country and looked forward to a continuous dialogue with the new regime there. An official statement released by the Government of India stated that India would be ready to assist Afghanistan in whatever manner it could. That India stood for a "sovereign, independent, non-aligned and united" Afghanistan and as earlier supported a political settlement in that country "based on the aspirations of the Afghans and worked out by the Afghan's themselves".<sup>44</sup>

The head of the Afghan interim council Sibghatollah Mujadidi in a press statement said that Afghanistan's relations with India would be warm and cordial. That Afghanistan would give top priority to the region and in that context the traditional ties with India will bear significance and importance.<sup>45</sup> However this interim council was replaced by Northern Alliance headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani in line with the Peshawar Accords.

It took some time for both sides to get along as President Rabbani's views on Kashmir were not quite palatable to New Delhi. Addressing the tenth NAM summit, President Rabbani spoke of self-determination for Kashmir at a time when Pakistan in connivance with the mujahideen elements was actively involved in a proxy war in

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<sup>44</sup> *The Statesman*, (New Delhi), 1 May, 1992.

<sup>45</sup> *The Patriot*, 1 May, 1992.

Kashmir. During the summit Afghanistan was the only other country to support Pakistan in demanding the right of self-determination for the people of Kashmir.<sup>46</sup>

Since 1992, the conflict around Kabul and other major Afghan towns intensified forcing India to frequently close down its diplomatic mission and aid disbursing agencies. Whatever humanitarian assistance and relief supplies that India gave to Afghanistan after 1992 had to be routed through the UN coordinating Agencies. India found it politically risky and physically difficult to provide any military assistance to the Kabul regime which increasingly came under pressure with the rise of the Taliban.<sup>47</sup>

In its 1994-1995 Annual Report, the Ministry of External Affairs of India admitted that “unstable conditions” in Afghanistan had made it difficult for India not only to “keep the momentum of bilateral exchanges”, but also to “continue cooperation programmes”. At a time when India should have been active in Afghan affairs owing to the above constraints India maintained a low profile.

But with Pakistani attempts to control the levers in Kabul by installing a friendly regime and its training and funding of the Taliban in correspondence with the US and Saudi regime and India’s friendly postures in the form of continuous humanitarian assistance and technical assistance in the process of reconstruction left the Rabbani government with no choice but to reconcile with the Indian Government. Indian Government also pledged its unflinching support to the Rabbani regime even after the Taliban take over. Though there emerged an understanding, Indian involvement was minimal leaving the ground open for countries like Pakistan for unhindered political manipulation.

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<sup>46</sup> *The Pioneer*, (New Delhi), 6 September 1992.

<sup>47</sup> Muni, n.18, p.340.

### **Taliban Take Over and the Indian Response:**

Taliban captured Kabul on 27 September 1996. The rise of Sunni fundamentalist regime in Afghanistan did not go down well in New Delhi. This proved to be the greatest set back to India's Afghan policy. This marked the dominance of Pakistan in Afghanistan and the rising influence of Islamic extremist forces, which were to provide strong impetus to the militancy in Jammu and Kashmir.

India which considered Taliban movement as another twist given by Pakistan to achieve their objectives in Afghanistan did not recognise the Taliban as the legitimate government representing the people of Afghanistan. I.K.Gujral the then Minister for External Affairs in a joint statement to both houses of Parliament on 25 November 1996 said, that the Taliban were "obscurantist's" with little respect for human rights and are not the legitimate government, even if they rule the capital, Kabul. He also, said they were a direct threat to India's security.<sup>48</sup>

India he asserted, has a "vital interest" in who rules Afghanistan and how, and, accordingly, a role in "restoration of peace there". Coupled with his statement of no place for a military solution, barely two months after the Taliban conquered Kabul, he made clear India's determination to get the Taliban's opponents back to power, even if they have to share it.

He specified how the Indian government was maintaining contact with Burhanuddin Rabbani, whom the Taliban ousted from Kabul. India for the first time was talking to a government in exile. Calling him President Rabbani, Gujral told the house about this meeting with Prime Minister Deve Gowda during the latter's recent visit to Rome and about an official delegation led by his ministry's secretary for the region to General Abdul Rashid Dostum, a key Rabbani ally (then) and Taliban opponent, at the warlord's headquarters in north-west Afghanistan. Gujral also had strong words of

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<sup>48</sup> Chopra, n.15, p.222.

condemnation for the brutal and abhorrent murder of Najibullah and for the Taliban's position on women, saying it was a "greatly disturbing denial of human rights".<sup>49</sup>

On what should be done, Gujral said an end to the ongoing civil war and the demilitarisation of Kabul was needed. Afghan leaders will have to "forsake the path of confrontation".<sup>50</sup> For this to happen, foreign powers (an indirect reference to Pakistan) must cease interference. India at the UN conference which recognised the Rabbani Government expressed that the Afghan people should be provided full opportunity to decide their own future without any outside intervention.<sup>51</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Though India and Afghanistan had legacy of shared history, relations between the two sides consolidated only during the British rule in the nineteenth century. Clear departure was evident in the relations that existed during the early twentieth century and in the later years. India respected Afghanistan as the founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement and developed cordial relations with Zahir Shah and Sardar Daud.

There was a marked difference in the approach after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, which India opposed initially. But Indira Gandhi who took over shortly after, without being critical of the intervention supported the Afghan revolutionary leadership and urged for withdrawal over a period of time with due respect to independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity by opposing any form of external interference and intervention. Though India did not vote at the UN in favour of the resolutions moved by the anti-Soviet lobby as hasty withdrawal would pave way for dominance by external forces inimical to India's security interest, India supported the UN efforts for restoring peace and stability in Afghanistan and continued its humanitarian assistance.

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<sup>49</sup> *Times of India*, 28 November, 1996.

<sup>50</sup> *Times of India*, 28 November 1996.

<sup>51</sup> BBC, *Survey of World Broadcasts*, (London), FE/2775, A/3, 21 November 1996.

Post-Soviet withdrawal, India continued to support Najibullah regime that was seen as Soviet favourite. But Najibullah's efforts in broad basing his government and longer stay in power vindicated India's stance. Relations with this regime were on a high note. Increased internal strife within Afghanistan necessitated change of guard. India continued its humanitarian assistance and good will with the new regime under Rabbani and continued to support the Northern Alliance led by Rabbani after the Taliban take over which was not recognised by New Delhi. Apart from the good will that emerged, India maintained a low profile. India had to dexterously balance between morality and interest in Afghanistan unlike Iran whose relations were purely based on safeguarding and maximising its interests.

The content in the three chapters discussed so far will help in understanding the dynamics involved in the convergence of India-Iranian views on Afghanistan and also to understand the inconsistencies if there were any in their cooperation with respect to Afghanistan under Taliban.



## CHAPTER – III

### INDIA-IRAN COOPERATION

#### **Introduction:**

Global politics are so dynamic that relations between any two countries never run in a straight line free from any friction. The end of Cold War with the disintegration of the Soviet Union resulted in the emergence of a new world order at the global level. With the United States of America emerging as the sole dominant power at the global level and a rise in transnational security threats like terrorism which have scant respect for national boundaries called for a greater cooperation among the states. Issue specific tactical alignments by middle rank and aspiring regional powers became popular. Furthermore, transnational nature of the new security threats has created powerful incentives for bilateral and region based cooperation.

Afghanistan which is at the cross-roads of Asian land mass, attracted significant attention from across the globe in general and from its neighbourhood in particular especially in the post Cold War years. It was the time when Afghanistan was plagued by a civil war among various factions within the country trying to grab the seat of power. Anarchy was wide spread with might being the governing principle. With security concerns assuming greater significance for the countries in the region, position on this tiny, landlocked country brought some countries closer to each other and at the same time erected hostile barriers between some.

India and Iran were among those countries whose interest converged on Afghanistan. It was not merely the growing energy needs of India and Iranian quest for better markets for its energy supplies that bound them together. There was certain regional responsibility and varied connected interests in Afghanistan where larger subject of accommodation, stability and progress that propelled them on to a similar path. If one were to probe into the concerns of both India and Iran regarding Afghanistan, one

could notice convergence of opinion way back in 1978 when army led coup in Afghanistan displaced Sardar Daud.

Developments in Afghanistan with their likely profound political implications for the region were believed to have prompted the Shah of Iran to have an exchange of views with India. It was felt that Sovereignty of any nation in the region had to be safeguarded and promoted by all countries concerned. The only interest of the neighbouring countries was to ensure that the trend towards stability and territorial integrity be maintained. During the then Indian Prime Minister Morarji Desai's stop over in Iran enroute to the US in June 1978, Afghanistan figured significantly in the discussions with the Shah and it was found that both the countries had similar attitude and policy regarding Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup>

After the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan the fact that, India though, not openly opposing the intervention was insisting on withdrawal of all foreign troops, made India's position on Afghan crisis acceptable to Iran. During the post-Soviet withdrawal period leading to civil war in Afghanistan, both the countries supported the Burhanuddin Rabbani led Northern Alliance Government. During the visit of Iranian Foreign Minister in May 1992 it was decided to have close consultations on issues of common concern like Afghanistan in the interest of regional peace and security. These instances are an indication to the understanding that existed between India and Iran regarding peace and stability in the region in general and Afghanistan in particular.

The most significant development in the Afghan conflict in the year 1994 was the rise of the Taliban movement. The overwhelming numbers of the Taliban are Pashtun Islamic students trained in seminaries in Pakistan and southwest Afghanistan. Most of these seminaries in Pakistan are controlled by the Jamiat-e-Ulema-i-Islam of Pakistan, led by Maulana Fazlur Rahman. The rise of Taliban was a response to the anarchic conditions in Afghanistan in general and Pashtun dominated areas in

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<sup>1</sup> *The Statesman*, (New Delhi), 16 June 1978.

particular. It had strong Pakistani backing, without which the movement would not have become so powerful as to defeat major warlords.<sup>2</sup> In fact the Taliban were depicted by Iran as an 'Afghan pustin' (fur cloak) which has been sewn by the United States, paid for by Saudi Arabia and worn by the Pakistani army.<sup>3</sup>

When the Taliban captured four provinces in the southwest Afghanistan in late 1994, they did not generate much controversy among the regional powers. Iran did not oppose the movement during the first few months of its rise. The Taliban's conflict with Iran began in March 1995 when Taliban captured Herat defeating pro-Iranian forces. It was at this juncture, that the Taliban movement emerged as a serious contender for Afghan national power, and Iran began to see the Taliban as an anti-Shia and anti-Iran force. Consequently Iran decided to cooperate with Rabbani and Masood in opposing the Taliban.

India which observed the events with caution, found it very advantageous to strengthen already existing relations with Rabbani Government because the major opponents of the Kabul regime-Hekmatyar before 1995 and the Taliban in 1995 and 1996 were supported by Pakistan.<sup>4</sup> This facilitated an informal alliance between the two countries along with Russia at this stage. Also the rupture in Pakistan-Iran relations, followed by growing tensions between Washington and Tehran, compelled Tehran to move away from a Pakistan centric policy in South Asia. This got translated into softening of Tehran's line on Kashmir and a desire to develop closer economic ties and strategic cooperation.

Ali Akbar Velayati the Iranian Foreign Minister during his visit in January 1996 emphasised and shared India's belief that Indo-Iranian cooperation is an important factor for ensuring regional development, peace and stability. There was a commonality of interest for both the sides in preventing Afghanistan from becoming a

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<sup>2</sup> Anwar-ul-Haq Ahady, "Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Conflict in Afghanistan", in William Maley, ed., *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan And The Taliban*, (London, 1998), pp.125-6.

<sup>3</sup> David Menashri, *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power* (London, 2001), p.254.

<sup>4</sup> Ahady, n.2, p.126

base for extra-regional powers to dominate, which would have had negative political and strategic implications for both countries especially in the Central Asian Region.<sup>5</sup>

The then Minister for External Affairs in India Pranab Mukherjee visited Washington, the Clinton administration brought up the question of India's developing relations with Iran. The American's expressed concern about growing links New Delhi was forging with Tehran. Mukherjee's reply was that the US should encourage these ties rather than worry about Indo-Iranian bonhomie as Indian influence on the Islamic regime would be a moderating factor, not a disruptive presence. About the American calling Iran a terrorist state, he replied that India was unconvinced about Iran's support for terrorism.<sup>6</sup> This was evidence to growing India-Iran rapprochement irrespective of their respective relations with a third country in the matters of common concern.

By the time the Taliban captured Kabul on 27 September 1996,<sup>7</sup> India and Iran were closely monitoring the situation. The fall of Kabul and the imminent consolidation of the Taliban militia raised a flurry of diplomatic activity at the global level in general and in the region in particular. Neither India nor Iran recognised the Taliban Government. They continued to recognise the Rabbani Government which went into exile then. The rise of Taliban raised many security related questions in both New Delhi and Tehran. Some of these were common to both the countries which could have affected their growing relations and the rest were confined, threatening peace and stability within their territories.

The next two sections will deal with the threat perceptions of both the countries which made Afghanistan under the Taliban the focal point of the relations between India and Iran.

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<sup>5</sup> J.N.Dixit, "Indo-Iranian Ties Crucial for Regional Peace", *Indian Express*, (New Delhi), 23 January 1996.

<sup>6</sup> *Indian Express*, 9 September 1996.

<sup>7</sup> *Asian Recorder*, (New Delhi), vol.xxxiii. no.44, p.25999, 28 October 1996 – 3 November 1996.

### **Indian Threat Perceptions:**

Fall of Kabul to the Taliban definitely created a sour note in New Delhi which was evident from the immediate withdrawal of its mission in Kabul. Changes in Kabul further intensified some of the existing threats and also raised some new challenges. Even before the Taliban came to power, Afghan mercenaries armed with sophisticated weapons had been fighting the Indian army in Kashmir. The most visible sign of this was the Chrar-re-Sharif incident when the terrorists there set the famous shrine on fire to escape the army encirclement. That the Afghan mercenaries masterminded the operation at the instance of the ISI and Mast Gul, the leader of the terrorist group was able to escape despite massive deployment of troops bore testimony not only to the dare-devilry of the Afghan fighters but also the efficacy of the ISI mobilisation.<sup>8</sup>

The support that the Taliban militia enjoyed from the Pakistani authorities was evident from the process of legitimisation of the Taliban that started in the Pakistani media from early 1995. Reports in early 1995 said that several thousand Taliban were enlisted from madrasas on the Pak-Afghan border in January-February 1995 with the help of Afghan Ulema who issued a fatwa in favour of the Taliban and vouched for righteousness of their cause. These reports also observed that beginning in 1994, training camps have been set up in Pakistan, to train Taliban militia by the Frontier Corps and army Commandos of Pakistan before they ventured into Afghanistan to drive out the local warlords. One report even said that Pakistan's Interior Minister in the then Benazir Bhutto's Cabinet Naseerullah Babar personally supervised the whole Taliban operation.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that the then Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto managed to cajole the fundamentalist militia in the Organistaion of Islamic States to give out a fresh call for self-determination in Kashmir was a testimony for the intensification of peace

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<sup>8</sup> *News Time*, (Hyderabad), 8 October 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, (London, 2000), pp.26-29.

threatening activities.<sup>10</sup> In the subsequent years, identification of training camps in the Taliban held Afghanistan for deploying militants in Kashmir by the Indian intelligence agencies further raised the alarm in New Delhi which by then had spent quite a fortune in fighting the proxy war in Kashmir.<sup>11</sup>

Pakistan's strategic inroads into Afghanistan had another far reaching security implication for India. Afghanistan could have ended Pakistan's thirst for "strategic depth" vis-à-vis India. Pakistan's security planners acutely conscious of Islamabad's disadvantage in combat because of its smaller size, have been seriously looking for an out-of-country safe heaven. In the post Cold War era with the changing geo-political equations and the turmoil in Afghanistan cementing bonds between India and Iran, Pakistan looked for a strategic cushion in Afghanistan. Had this been secured, Pakistan would have been in a position to launch air strikes from an altogether new front.<sup>12</sup>

The civil war in Afghanistan has, over the years resulted in the proliferation of small arms in the entire region. The Afghan mujahideen in an attempt to gain legitimacy and acceptability have managed to establish linkages with other sub-nationalist/insurgent movements in the entire northern belt of South Asia. With these arms reaching the militants in Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab and further eastward in the Terai region of Uttar Pradesh and the North-East, raised considerable concern in India. With the Taliban takeover this proliferation did not show any signs of diminishing.<sup>13</sup>

Closely connected to this was the emergence of the northern arc of South Asia as a focal point of narcotic trade. The production of opium has gone up manifold in Afghanistan since the Taliban take over. Much of the production was in Taliban controlled areas. According to Ambassador Masoud Khalili, who represented the

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<sup>10</sup> *News Time*, 10 October 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Refer to Map IV for identified training camps for Islamic radicals in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

<sup>12</sup> *The Hindu*, (New Delhi), 1 April 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Sreedhar and Mahendra Ved, *Afghan Turmoil: Changing Equations*, (New Delhi, 1998), p.153.

Rabbani regime in New Delhi, laboratories have been set up in the Taliban-held areas for the first time, to enable easier and quicker transport of the narcotics in processed form. Under the Taliban, drug trafficking has grown into a multi million dollar business, creating a vibrant black economy in the entire region.<sup>14</sup>

India at this stage was receiving some contraband consignments either from Karachi or through the Wagah border and in Mumbai.<sup>15</sup> The drug seizures by the Indian Narcotic Control Bureau indicated that this drug money was largely used to sustain the militants and to purchase arms for these militants and sub-nationalist groups.<sup>16</sup> Covert role of Pakistani authorities here was not overruled.

India also saw a threat to its trade with the Central Asian Republics at a stage when its trade with these newly emerged states started flourishing in close cooperation with Iran. America which had an eye on these energy rich Central Asian Republics wanted to edge out Iran from any form of transit arrangements. Pakistan also started lobbying for arranging transit facilities for the transport of oil and gas through its territory which was the shortest route in comparison to the other routes. The rise of Taliban and an increase of strife and its likely spill over to these Central Asian countries remained a cause of concern for India, which saw a potential market for its finished products and a source to meet its increasing energy requirements being threatened

India had another reason to be wary of the large number of Afghan refugees living in refugee camps in New Delhi. An overwhelming proportion of the estimated twenty three thousand refugees loathed Najibullah because they were forced to flee their country after the Soviet invasion. It was thought that many of them would thus be looking towards the Taliban with hope and indulgence. The Indian Government could have ill afforded not to keep a close watch on their activities as their gullibility would

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<sup>14</sup> Ahmed Rashid, "Back with a Vengeance: Proxy War in Afghanistan", *The World Today*, (Richmond, Surrey), vol.52, no.3, March 1996, pp.61-62

<sup>15</sup> Refer to Map III for flow of weapons and drugs from Afghanistan.

<sup>16</sup> As cited in Sreedhar and Ved, n.13, p.154.

have been a temptation to the ISI-Taliban association to use some of them for subversive activities.<sup>17</sup>

The Taliban's treatment of Hindus provided further motivation for Indian stance against them in the later years. From May 2000 until their fall, the Taliban ordered all Hindu in the areas they controlled to wear a piece of yellow cloth, as they put it, to protect them against Taliban religious police tasked with ensuring that Muslim men attended the mosque and did not cut their beards. Hindus and Muslims were prohibited from sharing the same house.<sup>18</sup> The underlying motive of the Taliban here was to discriminate and persecute Hindu minorities living in Afghanistan.

### **Iranian Threat Perceptions:<sup>19</sup>**

Developments in neighbouring Afghanistan always had strategic implications for Iran which shares a long border with Afghanistan. The rise of purist Sunni Islamic movement at its doorsteps had serious implications for Iran. Iran initially perceived the rise of Taliban to prominence as a plot by US-Saudi-Pakistan alliance to crush the Shias in Afghanistan and contain Iran in the region.

Iran saw in it US policy of containment and Saudi Arabia's intentions to project itself as the protector of Islamic interests by bypassing Iran and Pakistan's interest in providing safe trade routes from Central Asia. Pakistan's greater enthusiasm to provide oil and gas pipelines routes for Central Asian energy sources and transit facilities for the movement of goods sent a note of great concern to Tehran, which had by then developed better infrastructural facilities for the said purpose.

Drug production in Afghanistan and trafficking by the warlords and later by the Taliban which had debilitating effect on some of the economies in the region did not

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<sup>17</sup> *The Pioneer*, (New Delhi), 8 October 1996.

<sup>18</sup> Ben Sheppard, "India and Pakistan's military and security relations with the Middle East", in Hannah Carter and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds., *The Middle East's Relations with Asia and Russia*, (London, 2004), p.125.

<sup>19</sup> Here in this section a summary of Iranian threat perceptions is presented as details are included in Chapter-II: Iran-Afghanistan Relations, pp.34-38.



leave Iran which shares a long border with Afghanistan on its eastern flank. The rise in the production of narcotics after the take over of the Taliban did throw a serious challenge to the Iranian Governments continuing efforts to fight drug trafficking. Also the smuggling of food stuffs from Iran to Afghanistan became a cause of concern.

The Taliban treatment of the Shia minorities generated pressure from within the Iranian hierarchy. The rise of purist Sunni movement was seen as a destabilizing factor as the Taliban were harbouring anti-regime elements who recruited Sunni Iranians with an aim to establish Taliban style regime in Iran. Also the frequent trips of the Iraq based main opposition group in Iran the Mujahideen-e-Khalq, in pursuit of operational base did create concern. Above all the consolidation of the Taliban power in Afghanistan would have given an opportunity to the Wahabi Sunnis to project it as an alternate model to the Shia brand of Islamic Revolution in Iran. This could have challenged the Iranian influence in the Muslim world.

Thus, both India and Iran which felt insecurity looming large in their neighbourhood had shared concerns about Talibanisation of Afghanistan that could generate centrifugal impulses both in India and Iran. In that overall context there was certain parallelism in the regional concerns and interests of both the countries. This generated an overriding necessity for sustaining and intensifying the already existing “strategic convergence” between India and Iran as there was complementarity and mutual benefit in undertaking this exercise where both the countries were prepared to counter the Taliban and work for the return of normalcy to Afghanistan to safeguard their interests.

The kind of cooperation that existed between India and Iran with respect to Afghanistan will be discussed in the subsequent sections with emphasis on bilateral visits between both the sides and important events that fortified their solidarity.

### **Tehran Conference:**

In a major diplomatic initiative, Iran convened a conference of the “Friends of Afghanistan” on October 28-29, 1996, to help resolve the crisis. India was also invited to the first regional Asian move of its type.<sup>20</sup> The final declaration of the conference stressed on respect for human rights in Afghanistan and expressed support for the steps taken by the UN Secretary General in order to organise an international conference to find a solution to the Afghan problem. The conference expressed its deep sorrow over the fighting in Afghanistan, which has resulted in many casualties and irreparable damage to the economic, social and cultural structure of that country and which has threatened the peace, security and stability of the region.<sup>21</sup>

The conference emphasised respect for the government, territorial integrity, independence and national unity of Afghanistan and called for an end to outside interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. Furthermore, the conference called on the warring Afghan factions to refrain from the use of force and settle their differences through peaceful means and negotiations, with the aim of reaching a lasting solution and a unified government. Here the message was clear from India, Iran and other participants that emphasis should be on regional initiatives with due respect to the UN initiatives to restore peace and stability in Afghanistan.

India was invited to the conference by Iran at a time when Pakistan was trying to keep India out of this whole enterprise suggesting that participants in any initiative should be confined to world power and the neighbours.

At the UN conference in New York in November 1996 both India and Iran took a similar stance and expressed their respect for UN initiatives. Iran reiterated its policy of resolution through negotiations and broad-based government of national unity.

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<sup>20</sup> Foreign Ministers or Special envoys from Turkmenistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Turkey, China, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, The Russian Federation and India, as well as special envoys from the UN-Secretary General and the Organisation of Islamic countries and observers from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Union participated in the Tehran conference.

<sup>21</sup> BBC, *SWB*, (London) FE/2758, A/4, 1 November 1996.

India side expressed that Afghan people should be provided full opportunity to decide their own future without any outside intervention, indicating towards a negotiated settlement and respect to independence and territorial integrity.<sup>22</sup>

### **Visit of The Iranian Speaker:**

Ali Akbar Nateq Noori, the then Speaker of the Iranian Parliament visited India soon after the UN conference in November 1996. Great deal of understanding emerged between the two sides during this visit. Iran reiterated that India is an important regional power having legitimate concerns about the presence and influence of outside powers in the region. India responded by saying that Iran is an equally important power.

The visiting Iranian speaker said that India's importance, in matters related to Afghanistan has already been recognised by the UN through invitation to New Delhi to participate in the proposed peace talks. This should not be questioned by any country particularly Pakistan. "After all", he added, "all the countries in the neighbourhood are affected by the current crisis in Afghanistan as it will have serious repercussions on the security of the region". Iran also shared India's approach of negotiated settlements instead of military solutions for regional disputes.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from this both the sides shared common perspective on many issues, including the dangers of growing foreign interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, Pakistan's continued interference in the Afghan internal affairs and its continued support to the fundamentalist Taliban militia and the reopening of training camps for mercenaries for terrorist activities in Kashmir. The visit which took place at a time when international efforts have been mounted to stop the civil war in Afghanistan, helped consolidate a relationship based on mutual understanding and benefit.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> BBC, *SWB*, FE/2772, A/3, 20 November 1996, and FE/2775, A/3, 21 November 1996.

<sup>23</sup> *Times of India*, (New Delhi), 28 November 1996.

<sup>24</sup> M.K.Dhar, "India-Iran ties Need Fresh Impetus", *National Herald*, (New Delhi), 12 December 1996.

The latest and immediate concern for New Delhi at that stage flowed from credible reports that the Taliban have handed over terrorist training facilities in Afghanistan to the dreaded Harkat-ul-Ansar. In these camps Pakistani and other youths were trained for terrorist activities in Kashmir.<sup>25</sup> Iran too which was in possession of similar information shared its concern about it. Despite the common Islamic ties that bind Pakistan and Iran, Iran was deeply suspicious about Pakistan's role.

### **Indian Foreign Minister's Visit:**

The then Indian Minister for External Affairs I.K.Gujral visited Iran in February 1997. During the said visit main focus was on economics rather than politics. It was observed that the relationship is based purely on economic pragmatism with an eye on future. Even then Afghanistan did attract attention. Both sides shared the perspective that the Sovereignty of Afghanistan should be safeguarded free from external influences. It was also agreed that the elements and forces backing the Taliban were the same as the ones trying to destabilise Kashmir.<sup>26</sup>

During this visit a trilateral transit agreement was signed between the foreign ministers of India, Iran and Turkmenistan. The agreement was to provide a land cum sea route connecting Mumbai to Bandar Abbas port to Sarakhas to Turkmenistan.<sup>27</sup> The hidden interest behind this agreement appears to be political though driven by economics. India and Iran had converging views regarding trade with Central Asian Republics. But with the rise of the Taliban, and US-Pakistan alliance becoming active to edge out Iran from playing a vital role in these republics, both the sides felt threatened. Perhaps, this agreement which was signed at a time when Afghanistan was torn with strife was to signal that Iran can provide safer trade routes in cooperation with India. This in a way could have relieved India and Iran from major security concern. The Inter-governmental Agreement of International North-South Corridor between Iran, India and Russia can also be understood under the same light.

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<sup>25</sup> BBC, *SWB*, FE/2778, A/3, 25 November 1996.

<sup>26</sup> *National Herald*, 25 February 1997.

<sup>27</sup> *FBIS*, transcribed text, accessed from Agency France Press at <http://www.afp-direct.com/abonnes> on 14 October 2004.

Though, India and Iran shared their concerns regarding the said issue and were working in close cooperation to counter Pakistan, they could not counter Pakistani diplomacy which succeeded in keeping India out of the 6+2 group on Afghanistan. Pakistan's insistence on the "major powers and neighbours" formula for participation resulted in India's non-inclusion.<sup>28</sup> India's position on the composition of this group was that this format being "inherently flawed" was not expected to deliver peace in Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup> Indian assessment proved correct in due course of time.

During the later half of 1998 the Mazar-i-Sharif incident gave new dimension to the existing cooperation. After the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif to the Taliban Iran had to explore new routes to deliver its material help to its Shia allies who were concentrated in central Afghanistan.<sup>30</sup> Also there was a marked increase in Iranian military assistance to the Northern Alliance after this incident. Iran also requested India for technical assistance regarding military related aspects.

#### **Mazar-i-Sharif Incident and After:**

In the year 1997 after the failure of the UN and the Islamic Conference Organisation to bring about a ceasefire between the opposing camps in Afghanistan Tehran and Islamabad agreed to work jointly to bring about peace in that war-torn country. But Islamabad, which recognised the Taliban regime in September 1996, did the contrary. It reportedly assisted the Kabul government to mount a series of offensives to capture the rest of Afghanistan. This ultimately culminated in the capture of Mazar-i-Sharif by the Taliban militia on 8 August 1998.<sup>31</sup>

The fall of Mazar-i-Sharif exposed the scale of Iranian involvement. Two Iranian C-130's packed with military equipment were seized at Mazar-i-Sharif airport, besides huge caches of sophisticated small-arms and ammunition which were abandoned by

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<sup>28</sup> S.D.Muni, "India's Afghan Policy: Emerging from the Cold", in K.Warikoo, ed., *The Afghanistan Crisis: Issues and Perspectives*, (New Delhi, 2002), p.345.

<sup>29</sup> *Annual Report, 1999-2000*, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi, 2000.

<sup>30</sup> Refer to Map II for ethnic distribution in Afghanistan.

<sup>31</sup> BBC, *SWB*, FE/3301, A/2, 10 August 1998.

the Iranian sponsored Hizb-e-Wahadat militia. The Taliban also captured thirty five military trailers along with Iranian military drivers. Reports also added that Iran had pumped in over three billion dollars worth of military equipment and cash to sustain the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. To sustain the alliance, Iran had established an air bridge which extended from Tehran and Mashad to Mazar-i-Sharif, Bamiyan and Kulyab in Tajikistan.<sup>32</sup>

It was clear that Iran's scope of involvement in Afghanistan was not restricted to political manipulations aimed at forging unity among anti-Taliban forces and provision of military and logistic sustenance, but also entailed provision of military advice, guidance and liaison. The presence of officers and personnel of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard made it evident. To help manage the numerical superiority of the Taliban, Iran also trained and raised a corps of seven thousand Afghan refugees in the Iranian hinterland to fight against the Taliban.<sup>33</sup>

After the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif the imminent fall of Bamiyan province was foreseen. Iran announced that ten of its diplomats based in the Iranian consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif along with an IRNA<sup>34</sup> correspondent were missing. Nevertheless, Iran did not escape from answering discomforting questions, regarding the presence of so many diplomats in the war torn area. Perhaps the so called Iranian diplomats would have been involved in facilitating role.

Later when it was announced by the Taliban official sources that nine of the missing persons died during Taliban offensive on Mazar-i-Sharif Iran prepared itself for a military offensive on Taliban. The military exercises code named Ashura-3, part of this preparation were the largest staged in North-East Iran since 1979 Islamic Revolution and brought tens of thousands of elite Iranian troops to Torbat-e-Jam,

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<sup>32</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, (Paris), 7 September 1998.

<sup>33</sup> Sreedhar, Mahendra Ved, *Afghan Buzkashi: Power Games and Gamesmen*. vol.I, (New Delhi, 2000), p.176.

<sup>34</sup> IRNA is Iran News Agency, the official news agency of Iran.

forty kilometers from the Afghan frontier.<sup>35</sup> Iran's state radio announced that Iran had the right under International Law that is Chapter 7, Article 51 of the UN charter to take all necessary action in the context of legitimate defence.<sup>36</sup>

Another factor contributing to Iran's anger was a report from Amnesty International that among thousand's of civilians killed in the capture of Mazar-i-Sharif most were Shiites from Afghanistan's Hazara ethnic minority.<sup>37</sup> Because, Iran portrays itself as a guardian of Shiites worldwide, it would have been under pressure from both the thirst to retain that status and from the hardliners within Iran. Later Iran retreated saying it seeks a prudent solution.

The then Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, wrote to the Iranian President Mohammad Khatami expressing shock and revulsion at the murder of the Iranian diplomats by the fanatical Taliban. The view in New Delhi was that Iran has so far exhibited commendable restraint in dealing with a very murky situation. India had also noted Iran's stand as reported by the Iranian official news agency that "both the Taliban militia and Pakistan were directly responsible for (the) martyrdom of the Iranian diplomats."<sup>38</sup>

The Indian response to the incident and acceptance of the Iranian reports on the incident were an endorsement of the mutual interest that existed. The act of convenient ignorance by the Indian side to the reports on Iranian military assistance and support was probably a muted approval of Iranian acts. This also raises questions regarding Indian involvement through Iran in supporting the Northern Alliance through military and material assistance apart from the humanitarian assistance which India had consistently extended.

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<sup>35</sup> *Asian Age*, (New Delhi), 2 September 1998.

<sup>36</sup> *The Times*, (London), 7 September 1998.

<sup>37</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, 7 September 1998.

<sup>38</sup> *Hindustan Times*, 13 September 1998.

Iranian military aid to the anti-Taliban allies escalated after the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif .After this incident Iranian intelligence flew in plane-loads of arms to Ahmed Shah Masood's base in Kuliab in Tajikistan and Masood became a frequent visitor to Tehran. That Iran also started exploring alternate routes for the supply of arms after the fall of Mazar was evident when Kyrgyzstan security forces stopped a train in October 1998, in which were discovered sixteen rail cars loaded with seven hundred tons of arms and ammunition. The train had been traveling from Iran to Tajikistan with the weapons disguised as humanitarian assistance.<sup>39</sup>

The year 1999 had been an eventful year when it comes to the cooperation between India and Iran regarding Afghanistan. Though certain inconsistencies appeared, in retrospect it can be understood in terms of their attempts to safeguard their respective interests without straining the existing understanding in their relations.

### **Inconsistencies?**

An agreement was reached between Iran and Afghanistan in 1999 to reopen their official border at Doghuran-Islam Qala for trade purposes. In that agreement, Iran had placed no conditions while agreeing to reopen its border with Afghanistan.<sup>40</sup> The terms seemed to be improving when Tehran decided to send a two member delegation to Afghanistan to ameliorate the situation. The frequent tours by the Iranian officials were welcomed by the Taliban. It is interesting to note here that the then Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi issued a statement that his country was interested in initiating a dialogue with all the Afghan factions aimed at restoring peace in Afghanistan.

Iran and Taliban also signed cooperation Accord to monitor the joint border for preventing drug trafficking, in the Iranian city of Mashad. Iran however ruled out the possibility of establishing diplomatic relations with the Taliban and clarified that Iran

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<sup>39</sup> Rashid, n.9, p.203.

<sup>40</sup> *The News*, 21 November 1999.



was following up talks with the Taliban as an Afghan group, regarding checking smuggling of narcotic drugs, Afghan refugees and border security.<sup>41</sup>

Iran and the US also held talks with the Taliban to ease the tension and improve relations during March 1999.<sup>42</sup> This shows the US realisation of Iranian importance in the region and peace threatening Taliban activities. These should be seen as part of the Iranian initiatives for restoring peace in the region and its security in terms of safe trade with Central Asia which made Iran not to leave any stone unturned.

On the other hand India had also established direct contacts with the Taliban régime. Although the secret contacts sanctioned by the Indian Government fell far short of diplomatic recognition, they assumed enormous significances in the light of a breakthrough in the UN initiated Afghanistan peace talks that were concluded in March 1999. sources at the peace talks at which the Taliban was represented by a high level delegation, felt that India turned a new leaf in its relations with the Islamic militia when it had sent a plane load of medicines to the Taliban controlled areas.<sup>43</sup>

The reality was that the supply of medicines was in response to a desperate request from the Taliban for humanitarian relief in Afghanistan, where fighting has become a part and parcel of the routine life since the Soviet invasion. New Delhi has consistently followed a policy of providing humanitarian assistance to all Afghans, irrespective of their politics, even during the Soviet occupation.

Later during that year with the coming to light of the involvement of trained Afghan militants along with Pakistani army regulars, particularly during the Kargil intrusion by Pakistan called for a reappraisal of India's Afghan policy. There were in fact media reports of the government trying to establish secret links with the Taliban in

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<sup>41</sup> *The Nation*, 24 January 2000, as cited in Farah Naaz, "Indo-Iranian Relations: Vital Factors in the 1990's", *Strategic Analysis*, vol.25, no.2, May 2001, p.233.

<sup>42</sup> *Asian Recorder*, vol.xxxxv, no11, p.27967, 12-18 March, 1999.

<sup>43</sup> *The Telegraph*, (Kolkata), 17 March 1999.

order to neutralise Pakistan's influence.<sup>44</sup> Hinting at the possibility of change in the government's policy, the then Indian President K.R. Narayanan in his address to the joint session of Parliament on 25 October 1999 said "The situation in Afghanistan demands a careful assessment and a fresh approach. We shall work together with like minded countries for an early return to stability in Afghanistan. Essential condition for this would be cessation of outside interference in internal affairs of Afghanistan".<sup>45</sup>

It seemed that India was willing to adjust with the Taliban only if it could distance itself from Pakistan. Reports of tensions between Pakistan and the Taliban had encouraged India to think in that direction. The landing of the hijacked Indian plane IC-814 in Kandahar in December 1999 created a compulsion for the Indian authorities to establish direct contacts with the Taliban. There were media reports that India's the then Minister for External Affairs Jaswant Singh who accompanied the Pakistani terrorists to be released for the safe return of the passengers was willing to discuss establishment of diplomatic ties between India and the Taliban.<sup>46</sup>

It cannot be ascertained if this was really so, but there was certainly a positive assessment of the Taliban's role in the hijacking crisis. Jaswant Singh said, "India is gratified to report that the Taliban are fully cooperating with the relief and the negotiating team. The senior leader of the Islamic regime has reiterated its warning to the hijackers that its commandos would storm the aircraft if any passenger is harmed".<sup>47</sup>

Afghanistan's ruling Taliban also wanted India to consider renewing diplomatic ties with Kabul, citing the close cooperation extended by the militia to resolve the hijacking of the Indian Airlines plane. The Taliban interest in developing diplomatic ties with India and Iran must have flowed from their realisation that to get themselves

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<sup>44</sup> *Hindustan Times*, 26 October 1999.

<sup>45</sup> Muni, n.28, pp.345-6.

<sup>46</sup> *The Tribune*, (Chandigarh), 6 January, 2000.

<sup>47</sup> As quoted in *The Tribune*, 31 December 1999.

rehabilitated internationally they need help from countries such as India and Iran. There was, however no sign that even diplomatic relations with India would have reversed the Taliban's relationship with Afghanistan and Pakistan based jihadi organisations that were deeply involved in insurgency and terrorism in Kashmir.

### **Visit of the Indian External Affairs Minister:**

The visit of the Minister for External Affairs in India Jaswant Singh to Iran during May 2000 was aimed at further cementing New Delhi's increasingly close ties with Iran based on shared geo-political concerns and economic interests. At the geo-political level, both the countries were deeply disturbed by the recent developments then in Afghanistan.

The Taliban, which by then controlled most of Afghanistan, harboured the notorious terrorist Osama bin Laden, who has declared jihad against India. The Taliban have also been closely assisting terrorist organisations like the Lashkar-i-Toiba, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, and Al-Badr. These terrorist organisations creations of Pakistan's ISI have intensified terrorist activities in Kashmir and have remained a threat to peace. For Iran the extreme Sunni creed was a threat to the Shia faith it professes besides being outraged over the latter's persecution of Shia minority and Persian speaking people in Afghanistan. On several occasions Iranian troops have come close to clashing with the Taliban forces.<sup>48</sup>

Threatened by the forces of destabilisation radiating out of Afghanistan, India and Iran had a common objective of limiting the domination of the Taliban and in ensuring that peace and stability returned to the war torn country. Both the sides wanted to contribute to international efforts aimed at establishing a government in Kabul that fully represents the ethnic and cultural diversity of Afghanistan.<sup>49</sup> Jaswant Singh at the end of his visit said that there must be a "marriage of convenience",

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<sup>48</sup> *FBIS*, transcribed text accessed from Agency France Press at <http://www.afp-direct.com/abonnes> on 14 October 2004.

<sup>49</sup> C. Raja Mohan, "India, Iran look for Bigger Role in Kabul", *The Hindu*, 23 May 2000.

between politics, economics and security.<sup>50</sup> Here both the sides only reconfirmed their earlier position in the light of increasing threats.

The whole world was struck with horror by the un-Islamic destruction of the heritage Buddha statues in Bamiyan, as the renegade Taliban regime refused to heed its pleas for tolerance in deference to Islamic principles. Even Iran's plan to buy the statues and transport them out of Afghanistan was summarily rejected.<sup>51</sup> Later the Iranian President condemned the barbaric act when the Indian Prime Minister visited Tehran. The most significant nuance is that he regretted the use of Islam not merely in connection with the destruction of the Buddha statues but in the overall context of talibanistaion.

#### **Visit of the Indian Prime Minister:**

The then Prime Minister of India Atal Behari Vajpayee visited Iran during April 2004. India-Iran cooperation against the Taliban was codified during the visit with the signing of a new strategic pact. Embarking upon a landmark strategic partnership, Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee and Iranian President Khatami, signed the Tehran Declaration upholding the principles of dialogue between civilisations.

The declaration gave evidence of political convergence between India and Iran on important subjects that have a direct bearing on their national interest. Refuting the orthodox Huntingtonian thesis of 'clash of civilisations' the top leaders of the two ancient Asian civilisations forged an agenda rooted in joint commitment to dialogue, rather than conflict. Facing increasing threat from virulent talibanistaion in the region and cross border terrorism, together the two countries condemned international terrorism. They castigated nations which aid abet and directly support terrorism in all its forms.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *Indian Express*, (New Delhi), 21 July 2000.

<sup>51</sup> *National Herald*, 30 March 2001.

<sup>52</sup> *Indian Express*, 12 April 2001.

Given the world wide condemnation of the Bamiyan Buddha statues by the Taliban, the two leaders rightly agreed that the present regime in Afghanistan should be replaced, not militarily, but through negotiations between the various belligerent groups and thereby, come up with a broad based government. This again was reiteration of the stance that the two countries had been consistent with. Both the sides also reaffirmed their commitment to strengthen transport and transit cooperation in the light of Agreements with Turkmenistan and Russia, thereby expressing their resolve to provide safer trade and transit routes in cooperation with the countries of the Central Asian region.<sup>53</sup>

In October 2001 India admitted that, in an attempt to contain the spread of the Taliban, for two years it had covertly assisted the Northern Alliance, providing technical assistance, defence equipment and medical aid. India's involvement was intensified after the hijacking episode. For over a year by then the Indian army doctors had been running a field hospital near Farkhor on the Afghan border south of Dushanbe.<sup>54</sup>

India also reportedly supplied the Northern Alliance with high-altitude warfare equipment worth \$8-10 million through Tajikistan. A handful of Indian defence advisors were reportedly based in Tajikistan to assist the Northern Alliance in operations against Taliban and helicopter technicians from the secretive aviation research centre. India's overseas information gathering agency, helped repair the Northern Alliance Mi-17 and Mi-35 attack helicopters. India also purchased Russian helicopters from Moscow to pass onto the Northern Alliance. There were unconfirmed reports of India assisting the Northern Alliance forces and providing cash grants through its embassy in Iran.<sup>55</sup> Had it not been for the US military involvement in Afghanistan post 9/11, India was expected to provide further

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<sup>53</sup> Text of Tehran Declaration as Published in *Strategic Digest*, (New Delhi), July 2001.

<sup>54</sup> Sheppard, n.18, p.124.

<sup>55</sup> Rahul Bedi, "India's secret war against the Taliban", *Janes Intelligence Review* (Kent), vol.14, no.6, June 2002, p.19.

assistance to anti-Taliban forces through Iran and to fight Taliban sponsored insurgents operating in Jammu and Kashmir.

### **Conclusion:**

The new scenario that emerged after the Cold War no doubt propelled India and Iran on to a similar path. But, the opinion of the sides regarding Afghanistan matched since the army led coup in Afghanistan in 1978. The concerns that the two sides had with respect to the volatile situation were only intensified after the rise of the Taliban in Kabul in September 1996. The understanding for cooperation that had already existed made Afghanistan under the Taliban the focal point in the light of intensified mutual threat perceptions.

For India, the role of Afghan mujahideen in perpetrating terrorism in Kashmir in close association with Pakistani authorities, Pakistan's hunt for strategic depth in Afghanistan against India, the linkages that were developing between the mujahideen and other terrorist and sub-national groups in the country, proliferation of small arms and drugs, treatment of Hindu minorities along with the gullibility of the Afghan refugees in India were major causes for concern. Above all it was the developing trade with Central Asian Republics in close cooperation with Iran that was threatened.

Iran also shared some of these threat perceptions though, with a varied degree of intensity. For Iran, the rise of purist Sunni movement at its door steps was a destabilising force and its treatment of the Shias in Afghanistan remained a major cause of concern. The destabilising forces with centrifugal tendencies radiating out of Afghanistan under Taliban and imminent threat to their trade with central Asian Republics resulted in strategic convergence. Neither India nor Iran recognised the Taliban Government. Instead they continued supporting the Northern Alliance through possible means and recognised its government which was also recognised by the UN.

At a time when Pakistan was intensively campaigning to keep India out of any peace initiatives on Afghanistan, Iran thought otherwise. India was invited to the Tehran conference in October 1996 along with other concerned countries. There it was agreed to work for early return of normalcy to Afghanistan with due respect to its territorial integrity and a broad based government. This stance did not change and both sides were consistent enough to reiterate it in their subsequent exchanges at higher levels. The transitory trade agreements that both the sides had with Russia and Turkmenistan, were intended to signal that they can provide safer trade routes than Pakistan.

The year 1999 saw some interesting developments. Though there were incidents of opening of communication channels between India-Taliban and Iran-Taliban, in retrospect they could be seen as their attempts to restore peace in the region which motivated them to explore all possible avenues. In spite of these attempts to influence and contain the Taliban through negotiations there was no marked change in the Taliban mode of operation, in fact their peace threatening activities were further intensified. This also resulted in the US considering Iranian significance in the region. The consistency in the cooperation was further noticed during the visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Iran.

## CONCLUSION

A study undertaken with a view to test a set of hypotheses could lead to interesting and at times, unexpected conclusions. The findings which emerged from the present study which was an attempt to lay bare various nuances involved in India-Iran relations regarding Afghanistan under Taliban, strengthened as well as contradicted the hypotheses of the present study. For the present study, it became imperative to explore the details of India-Iran relations in general along with Iran-Afghanistan and India-Afghanistan relations to understand the dynamics involved in India-Iran cooperation regarding talibanised Afghanistan.

The developments in Afghanistan always had decisive impact on Iran which shares nine hundred kilometers border with Afghanistan. During the monarchical regimes both Iran and Afghanistan shared cordial relations in spite of their alliances; Afghanistan with NAM and Iran with US manufactured military alliances like CENTO. Revolution in Iran and Soviet intervention in Afghanistan changed the tone of the relations which were defined by Iranian interests. Owing to Afghanistan's strategic location Iran desired a peaceful and friendly neighbourhood catering to Iranian interests.

Khomeini's ambition to export Iranian revolution sent negative signals to Soviet supported Sunni dominated regime in Kabul. With Cold War culminating in its neighbourhood, Iran demanded Soviet withdrawal and supported the mujahideen groups especially the Shia factions. During this period the Iranian foreign policy was determined by the moderates. But these moderates were later replaced by hardliners who were in favour of supporting Shia factions in Afghanistan and maximising Iranian interests.



Iran which was involved in a war with Iraq during this time also purchased arms from Soviet Union, exposing its double standards and selfish interests. Iran which took initiatives for preserving Afghanistan's territorial integrity and independence supported UN efforts. To this extent its interests converged with that of India. But Iran refused to deal with the Soviet Union on any matters related to Afghanistan during this period.

The Post-Soviet withdrawal period gave enough space to Iran to play the role of a facilitator and Iran grabbed the opportunity. Iranian dialogue initiative in 1989 for peaceful transfer of power saw Iranian preparedness to communicate with the Soviet Union, to which it was opposed earlier, along with Shia factions and Pakistan based Sunni groups to increase its credibility and influence. Iran also played a crucial role in bringing all the eight Shia factions under one Hizb-e-Wahadat party which remained its main stay in Afghan affairs. Though, Iran advocated an alliance of all the factions within Afghanistan, its continued support to the Shia groups to prevent the domination of Sunni groups supported by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, prevented an early resolution of the conflict.

The continued unrest resulted in the rise of a purist Sunni Islamic movement the Taliban. Initially Iran was not opposed to the Taliban. It was only after the capture of Herat from its allies that Iran started opposing Taliban. Iran did not recognise the Taliban Government and continued supporting its ally, the Northern Alliance led by Rabbani. Iran also gave military assistance to the Northern Alliance to check the rise of Taliban which had thrown many challenges to the Iranian leadership.

The rise of purist Sunni movement was seen as a destabilising force and its consolidation as an alternate model of Revolution in the Islamic world. Iran considered it as a product of Saudi-Pakistan-US alliance to contain Iran. Iran was also concerned about the harsh treatment of the Shia minorities in Afghanistan, the

refugees and drug trafficking which had debilitating effect on its economy. Above all it was the Central Asian factor which caused great concern in Iran.

Iran became pre-occupied with the containment of the Taliban at this stage. Its policy initiatives also focused on pragmatic solution to the conflict with a broad based government with due respect to the territorial integrity of Afghanistan and strict opposition to external interference. This was a moral stance from a country which tried to influence the internal affairs of Afghanistan by cultivating anti-regime groups through financial and military assistance, to safeguard and maximise its interests. Thus, Iranian relations with Afghanistan were purely interest driven and were punctuated with contradictions.

Though India and Afghanistan had legacy of shared history, relations between the two sides consolidated only during the British rule in the nineteenth century. The clear departure was evident in the relations that existed during the early twentieth century and in the later years. India respected Afghanistan as the founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement and developed cordial relations with Zahir Shah and Sardar Daud.

There was a marked difference in the approach after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, which India opposed initially. But Indira Gandhi who took over shortly after, without being critical of the intervention, supported the Afghan revolutionary leadership and urged for withdrawal over a period of time with due respect to independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity by opposing any form of external interference and intervention. Though India did not vote at the UN in favour of the resolutions moved by the anti-Soviet lobby as hasty withdrawal would pave way for dominance by external forces inimical to India's security interest, India supported the UN efforts for restoring peace and stability in Afghanistan and continued its humanitarian assistance.

The Post-Soviet withdrawal, India continued to support Najibullah regime that was seen as Soviet favourite. But Najibullah's efforts in broad basing his government and longer stay in power vindicated India's stance. Relations with this regime were on a high note. Increased internal strife within Afghanistan necessitated change of guard. India continued its humanitarian assistance and good will with the new regime under Rabbani and continued to support the Northern Alliance led by Rabbani after the Taliban take over which was not recognised by New Delhi. Apart from the good will that emerged, India maintained a low profile. India had to dexterously balance between morality and interest in Afghanistan unlike Iran whose relations were purely based on safeguarding and maximising its interests.

The rise of Taliban in Afghanistan raised some serious concerns in India. The role of Afghan mujahideen in perpetrating terrorism in Kashmir in close association with Pakistani authorities, Pakistan's hunt for strategic depth in Afghanistan against India, the linkages that were developing between the mujahideen and other terrorist and sub-national groups in the country, proliferation of small arms and drugs, treatment of Hindu minorities along with the gullibility of the Afghan refugees in India were major causes for concern. Above all, it was the developing trade with Central Asian Republics in close cooperation with Iran which was threatened.

India and Iran were involved in lengthy periods of extensive contacts in the political, economic and cultural spheres. This interaction was curtailed after the consolidation of the British rule in India. The formal diplomatic relations between the two countries were established on 15 March 1950. Till the Iranian Revolution, the relations were more of meticulous balancing, primarily shaped by external factors. India saw the Revolution in Iran as a positive development and extended its cooperation. In spite of this, there were strains in the subsequent decade but, the overall relations were described as smooth. The restrained sustenance was evident during this period.

The end of Cold War with the disintegration of Soviet Union resulted in the emergence of new world order at the global level. The notion of National Security derived from a state centric approach became less significant in the light of transnational security threats which have exposed the limitations of national power and national strategies. The emergence of the United states of America as the sole dominant power at the global level and a rise in transnational security threats like terrorism, flow of drugs and small weapons which have scant respect for national boundaries called for a greater cooperation among the states. The transnational nature of these threats has created powerful incentives for bilateral and region based cooperation.

During this period both India and Iran shared some correspondence in their threat perceptions and pursuit of security. The challenge was of balancing relationships and separating issues and finding ways so that the relations they had with other countries did not impede progress in their relations. With the US putting Iran on top of the list of American demonology and tensions in relations with Pakistan, India was the obvious choice for Iran. After all Kautilya's doctrine of "a neighbour's neighbour being a natural friend" has enduring validity. India saw a reliable ally in Iran to counter Pakistan in the Islamic world.

There was certain regional responsibility and varied connected interests in Afghanistan where larger subject of accommodation, stability and progress that propelled both India and Iran on to a similar path. With the rise of the Taliban, the similarity of views that existed between India and Iran on Afghanistan since 1978 transformed into "strategic convergence". Realisation of the mutuality of interests has become deeper and the perceptions about the continuity of threats radiating out of Afghanistan under Taliban have grown stronger. This made Afghanistan under the Taliban the focal point of India-Iran cooperation during this period. Neither India nor

Iran had recognised the Taliban Government and continued their support to the Northern Alliance.

At a time when Pakistan was intensively campaigning to keep India out of any peace initiatives on Afghanistan, Iran thought otherwise. India was invited to the Tehran conference in October 1996 along with other concerned countries. There it was agreed to work for early return of normalcy to Afghanistan with due respect to its territorial integrity and a broad based government. Subsequently, both the sides agreed that a military resolution of the conflict in Afghanistan is not possible and the establishment of a genuinely broad based government representing the aspirations of the Afghan people was essential for peace and stability in Afghanistan.

This stance did not change and both the sides were consistent enough to reiterate it in their subsequent exchanges at higher levels. The transitory trade agreements that both the sides had with Russia and Turkmenistan, were intended to signal that they can provide safer trade routes than the one's proposed by Pakistan. It was an effort to safeguard their trade interests in Central Asia where both the countries had larger stakes.

Domestic political contingencies like the Kargil episode in May-June 1999 and the hijacking of Indian Airlines flight in December 1999 and economic exigencies in Iran compelled them to open communication with the Taliban regime. In retrospect these moves could be seen as their attempts to restore peace in the region and safeguard their interests which motivated them to explore all possible avenues. These initiatives by both the sides were also aimed at toning down the Taliban style of functioning. Therefore, these instances should not be seen as mere inconsistencies in their cooperation, for this is realpolitik, and has to be seen as such. This indicates that one need to resist the temptation of investing it with ideological overtones. It reaffirms the fact that there never are any friends or enemies in Global politics but only 'Interests'.

The tone of the Tehran declaration in April 2001, the running of a field hospital by Indian army doctors on the Afghan border south of Dushanbe, increased military assistance from India and Iran to the Northern Alliance after 1999 in close cooperation were indications of the consistency in cooperation between the two sides. They are also an indication of the Taliban's desire to gain international legitimacy without compromising on their fundamentalist ideology.

In retrospect, one cannot refrain from thinking whether India and Iran could have done more than what they had done to counter the Taliban threat. Since, had it not been for the post-9/11 US campaign against terrorism the Taliban would have persisted with its fundamentalist mode of functioning.

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