



Contemporary Afghan Geopolitics and the Main Geopolitical Advantages of Afghanistan's Geography

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Abstract

In the Cold-War era Afghan geopolitics were concerned with major powers such as Soviet-Union and United-States, in addition regional powers such as India, China, Turkey were also considered as important actors in Afghan geopolitics, moreover the role of Afghanistan neighbors, Iran and Pakistan in geopolitical decisions of the country is undeniable. The new peace-settlements and round of peace-talks between the Taliban leaders and US-Afghan affiliations has ignited the possibility of a new government in Afghanistan in which Taliban will have a vital and significant position. Concerning this fact that Taliban will be again part of Afghan political sphere and thus main future geopolitical actors, will definitely change the political and geo-political equations of the region.

In this paper I will focus on the current and contemporary Afghan geopolitics, the end of Cold-War and also the collapse of Taliban regime has started a new chapter in the political life of Afghans, old actors with new foreign policies following new and changed foreign policies has started to seek their strategic goals in the region thus, bringing once again into consideration the geopolitical importance of Afghanistan. I will also discuss the Pakistan-Afghanistan prolonged border issue which recently gone conflictual, triggering a major breakdown in the relations of both strategical neighbors, the geopolitical importance of border-area region created clash of interests between two neighbors since the establishment of Pakistan in 1947 (Qassem and Durand, 2008, p.87).

Furthermore, geopolitics and geo-strategic differences and their area of influence will be discussed in order to differentiate geopolitical and geo-strategical concepts, their main points and decisions, my main goal in this topic will be to point out the differences and similarities between these two concepts to avoid further ambiguities. Subsequently I will note down some significant political and strategical pros and cons of Afghanistan's geography, this will let us know that despite unique strategic location, the geography of the country also contains disadvantages e.g. the country is land-locked, which limit the trade of goods to far distances thus increasing dependency on neighboring countries' ports for import and export purposes.

Mountainous aspect of the country despite being a stronghold for Mujahidin forces during Soviet-Union air-strikes, has now become a safe hiding spot for insurgent group leaders and members, this in return has made the fight against insurgency so difficult for internal and external forces in the country, in addition other political and strategic disadvantages of Afghanistan's geography will be discussed.

Keywords: geopolitics, Afghanistan, geostrategic, relation

A. Contemporary Afghan Geopolitics

The end of Cold-War and collapse of Taliban regime subsequently followed by US-led invasion and new democratic government in Afghanistan started a new pattern for foreign policy and geopolitics of the country. Presence of United-States along with several Western powers in the strategic location of Central-Asia provoked Moscow and Tehran's concerns, Iranian authorities started to condemn the Western illegitimate presence in the region which in return deepened U.S-Iran' already chaotic relations. From the other side Russia feeling uncertain about U.S and NATO's intentions being on his backyards, started to show anxiety about Western expansion deep in Central-Asia. The United-States presence also created anxiety for Beijing authorities, China being the neighbor of Afghanistan and a major source of import for the country, has always been cautious about the political condition of Afghanistan.

There are visible pattern of India and Pakistan rivalry over influence in Afghanistan after 2001. India and several other countries included United-States has repeatedly blamed Pakistan for supporting and providing shelter for insurgent groups, a claim which refused by Islamabad authorities. While Iran and Saudi-Arabia's ideological rivalry in Afghanistan still continues, Riyadh promised to build several Islamic schools in the country, meanwhile Afghan-Iran relations recently deteriorated over water sharing issues and drown of several Afghan workers in the territories of Iran. The main geopolitical actors (United-States, Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, India and Saudi Arabia) in Afghanistan in the post-Cold-War, are warily playing their cards in the country, in order to have influence on the region of Central-Asia, its energy reserves and to save their position in Afghanistan as an strategic location which serve as an energy corridor.

1. Afghanistan's Current Geopolitics and Relations with Russia

Afghanistan due to its strategic location has been important for Russia during Cold-War and in the post-Cold war too. In addition, Afghanistan problem is unique and unlike other countries whom had civil war and then recovered, Afghanistan is suffering from war and unrest for four decades. In this essence Afghanistan's issue has also become important for Russia's regional energy policy in Eurasia. Russia's regional energy policy is mainly about taking benefit and having control over the regions' resources, therefore, Central Asia despite of being one of the vast containers of hydrocarbon resources, is also function as one of the main crossroads of world's energy trade in Europe-Asia routes (Dolgushev, 2011, Yinhong 2007, Campbell 2013, cited in Sangar, 2016, p. 66). In sum, Moscow authorities under the umbrella of Russia's regional energy policy struggles to maintain the country's role as primary energy transit route from Central-Asia to Europe and to subsequently decrease the influence of other actors in the region (Bergsager, 2013 cited in Sangar, 2016. P. 66).

Its noteworthy to mention that, since 1991 Afghanistan has been taken as a 'potential energy corridor'. 1990s were the time when deal of constructing a trans-Afghan pipeline into South-Asia was initiated between Turkmenistan, Taliban and UNOCAL oil company (Rashid, 2010, cited in Sangar, 2016, p. 67). After the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, two important and alternative pipeline projects, initiated, the US backed TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) and the China-backed TKPI (Termez-Kabul-Peshawar-India), however due to the current instability in Afghanistan the practicability of these two pipeline projects has been questioned. According to Sangar 2016, the interesting point is that in all these two projects, Russia is not included, which considered as a threat and undermines Russian hegemony in Central-Asia with regard to energy substructure (Sangar, 2016, p. 67).

According to claims of experts, Russia is taking advantage of Afghanistan's instability, because it will prevent construction of any pipeline in the country (Mankoff, 2009, Kuchins, 2010, 2011, Malashenko 2012, cited in Sangar 2016. P. 68). Policies that Russia pursues in the region are based on two patterns; first to not allow any gas pipeline go around Russia and to prevent any sort of military appearance in other states except for those states pertaining to coast (Trenin, 2010, cited in Sangar, p. 68).

Moreover, there are few other implications for Russia to be involved in Afghanistan geopolitics. Russia after the collapse of Taliban regime and the empowerment the new democratic government of Afghanistan headed by president Karzai, started to invest and initiate economic cooperation which has been neglected or undermined. In the Post-Taliban regime, Russia has shown interests in the economic construction of Afghanistan with the priority to rebuild destroyed economic locations which were constructed at the time of Communist regime in the country. In addition, Russia was mainly eager to invest in the field of energy, transport, and construction systems in Northern and central regions of Afghanistan (Menkiszak, 2011, p 30). In the field of economic cooperation, Russia was not alone, the other players especially China and United-States apart from their political and geopolitical interests in the region were so keen to take economic benefit from this rich-resource land. According to

Sangar 2016, many believe that Russia lost the economic rivalry with China over Afghanistan and Central-Asia, the very tangible instance is Afghanistan's Aynak copper mine which is believed to be one of the world's largest copper reserve. Despite the fact that a Soviet geologist discovered Aynak copper mine, but in 2009 it was a Chinese company (China Metallurgical Group) who got the right for exploration of Aynak copper mine, Russia failure to win the right of exploration over the Aynak mine, has given the opportunity for Chinese and Americans to take the benefits of the copper reserve and according to many claims left Russia as the loser player of the economic game in Afghanistan and Central-Asia (Sangar, 2016, p. 70).

The growing security threats and Islamic fundamentalism is one of the primary reasons which made Afghanistan so important for Russia. According to Sangar 2016, since 1990s Afghanistan image has been socially portrayed as source of "instability" and "Islamic fundamentalism" which can possibly spill-over into Central-Asia (Sangar, 2016, p. 71). When in 2014 a major part of NATO and American troops withdrew Afghanistan, Moscow authorities began to consider a full American withdrawal which implies the failure of U.S policies in the country and leaving behind an unstable and chaotic country behind. Russia's fear was that if such scenario happen the created vacuum would eventually fill by Taliban or similar fundamentalist groups. Basically, a major downfall in the relations of Russia and United-States over Ukraine crisis in 2014, put Afghanistan as another area of global rivalry between West and Russia, in which Russia was able to challenge the West and exhibit its role as superior geopolitical actor in the region (Lewis, 2020).

Russia has recently increased its security involvement in Afghanistan, this is mostly due to his own security concerns and geopolitical observations. Moscow has hosted Afghan political groups and also leaders of Taliban in 2019 with regard to peace negotiations, the aim was to start a dialogue to reach a consensus on political future of Afghanistan. Moscow's intention behind such meeting amid the Washington-Taliban peace talks is that, however that Russia seeks to accelerate the process of U.S withdrawal from region but at the same time Moscow authorities are concerned with an Afghanistan after withdrawal of U.S troops, which might bring back the country to 1990s when several multi-ethnic, tribal, Islamist groups formed. The possibility of such a scenario in post U.S withdrawal is imaginable, this is why Russia is concerned about the spill-over effect of Islamist militias from Afghanistan into Central-Asia and into backyard of Russia (Jamal, 2019).

It's also noteworthy to mention that initiation of such meeting by Russia in which Afghan government headed by President Ashraf Ghani was marginalized, there was no government representative in the peace-talks. Russian marginalization of Afghan government and engagement with opposition of Afghan government has challenged Ashraf Ghani's sovereignty (Ramani, 2019).

2. Afghanistan's Current Geopolitics and Relations with United-States and Iran

a. United-States

Since the U.S-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, United-States has spent billions of dollars and thousands of American soldier lost their lives to fight against insurgency and terror but still after nearly 2 decades of U.S military presence in the country the militants groups specially Taliban continues to fight and recently has agreed to make peace with United-States. Amid all the ups and downs Afghanistan remains a significant geopolitical zone and an important partner of United-States in the fight against terrorism. However, one cannot deny that security concerns and cooperation, constitutes a major part of the relationship between these two countries but relations of United-states with Afghanistan is not only limited to security consideration, economically and geopolitically Afghanistan is significantly included among the long-term policies of United-States for Central Asia.

United-States has significantly helped to bring a unity government into power after the chaotic 2014 presidential election, in which the two frontrunners of the election have accused each other for widespread fraud in the election. One of the United-States' main policies in Afghanistan is to maintain stability in the country, a stable country and political system will facilitate the fight against terrorism, corruption and drug-trafficking but nevertheless, United-States' commitment to maintain stability in the country has been questioned multiple times because of its unfeasibility.

Afghanistan is neighboring Iran, the country from a geopolitical point of view poses serious advantage for United-States against his old enemy The Islamic Republic of Iran. This will allow United-States to establish bases near to Iran's backyard which has been always brought-in Tehran's anxiety. The fear that Iran will export his Islamic Revolution ideology to Central-Asia through Afghanistan's Western provinces and providing support and weaponry for Armed Islamist groups to fight against Americans, has been one of the core conflicts between U.S and Iran. United-States-Iran' tensions also poses serious threats to Afghanistan security and territoriality, in case the conflicts between these two rivals grow further, Afghanistan will become the epicenter of the conflict.

Furthermore, United-States and Taliban has signed a peace agreement on 29th February 2020 after eighteen years of war, the agreement is based on the following main terms; cease-fire against U.S, withdrawal of foreign troops, "intra-Afghan peace-talks," "prisoner swamp" and reduction of violence (Mehvar, 2020). The peace agreement has several geopolitical implications for regional countries as well as for United-States. The withdrawal of U.S troops has increasingly created anxiety about the future of Afghanistan, among regional countries as well as for U.S, the question which arise is 'what if after the withdrawal of U.S forces, Afghanistan again become the safe haven of terrorism?' basically the power vacuum that will be created in the aftermath of U.S withdrawal will probably create severe competition between regional actor, Taliban and other existed groups over power in Afghanistan. therefore it

requires a transparent and guaranteed peace-agreement in which Taliban, Afghan government and people and United-States should come into a concrete solution, thus it will allow for a peaceful power transition in the post U.S withdrawal and will eliminate the possibility of intervention and influence of regional actors in a post United-States, Afghan political system.

Economic cooperation and U.S foreign assistance, constitutes a considerable part of U.S-Afghan relations. The estimated worth of exports from United-States in 2017 was \$937 million, (U.S Department of State, 2019). Still further efforts are under consideration to increase the trade exchange between two countries. Moreover United-States have been providing billion-dollar worth of financial aid to Afghanistan since 2001.

b. Iran

Iran and Afghanistan despite of being neighbors, also shares many commonalities in term of history, religion, culture, language and etc..., the strategic location of Afghanistan has also tempted Iran to pursue both political and geopolitical goals in Afghanistan. Iran since the emergence of Islamic Revolution headed by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, has been trying to export the ideology of his Islamic Revolution into Afghanistan and Central Asia, a policy which has been challenged with the invasion of Afghanistan by United-States in 2001.

One of the main geopolitical concerns of Tehran authorities is the energy resources passing through Afghanistan, the TAPI (Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline project according to Darkhor and Salehi (2014), will negatively impact Iran's economic and energy trade. The possible scenarios that awaits Iran, if TAPI project become operational are; first it will result into a significant decrease in Iran transit income, while it will allow Pakistan to earn approximate 14 billion dollar in the extend of 30-year which also hinder Iranian's national security. Secondly; it will result into elimination of Iran from regional equations in the field of energy (Darkhor and Salehi, 2014, p. 63). Surprisingly Iran since the beginning of TAPI project has been trying to sabotage the project "politically" or "violently," by imposing pressure on Afghan government or by providing money and weaponry to militant groups in order to destroy or restrict the development of TAPI project (Majidyar, 2018 and Karimi, 2018).

The new geopolitics of Afghanistan in which Afghan government has intensively struggling to fuel the peace negotiations with Taliban, however that Afghan government and United-States have achieved considerable gains with regard to peace-talks and a peaceful agreement is imaginable in near future, Tehran officials are not content with the Taliban's role in the future of Afghanistan's political system. According to Darkhor and Salehi (2014), the spread of Wahabism and instigating of anti-Shia views are the negative consequence of such policies for Iranian national security. Its noteworthy to mention that the consequence of new Afghan geopolitics which according to Darkhor and Salehi (2014) is influenced by the United-States' presence, might have the potential to turn Taliban as a leverage force against Iran for the sake of United-States interests, he then added that if such a predication turn into fact, the regional security as well as world peace is sentence to a terrible fate (Darkhor and Salehi, 2014, p. 66).

3. Afghanistan's Current Geopolitics and Relations with Pakistan and India

a. Pakistan

Afghanistan and Pakistan share a long history since the birth of Pakistan in 1947, despite conflictual relations over certain political issues, both countries' have a good cultural and commercial relation with each other. One of the main issues in the relations of both countries is the dispute over Durand Line which has divided Pashtuns on the both side of the Pak-Afghan border, this issue along with the issue of Taliban and competition with India over a strategic depth in Afghanistan has been the subject of Pakistani policy makers (Siddique, 2011, p. 7). The issue of Durand Line still constitutes one of the main objectives of Pakistan geopolitical policies since the birth of the country and remain the same as it was during the Soviet-Union period but recently tensions emerged between two countries over construction of fences by Pakistan along the Durand Line, the tensions led to clash between two countries' border forces (Farmer and Tipu Mehsud, 2020).

Moreover, one of the Pakistan's prioritized geopolitical policy in Afghanistan is to block Indian influence in the country because Pakistan consider India a major threat to its sovereignty and territorial integrity therefore whatever India might do in Afghanistan, be it political or economic cooperation, Pakistan consider it as plot against himself (Frédéric Grare, cited in Hanauer and Chalk, 2012, p.25). as India and Pakistan both seek influence in Afghanistan, the rivalry over Afghanistan between two states of India and Pakistan has often resulted into clash of interests, both countries occasionally expressed their anxiety and mistrust of each other.

Furthermore, the use of extremist especially Pakistani-trained extremist and providing safe haven to them, for later use as jihadist proxies constitutes major principle of Pakistan's foreign policy and national security. Therefore, control and support over the extremist groups will allow Pakistan to adjust the level of violence against India which is seem to act as a tool of defense against India's development in Afghanistan (Hanauer and Chalk, 2012, p.26). The use of insurgency by Pakistan in the territory of Afghanistan to counter the Indo-Afghan nexus is not a new phenomenon. According to a report by United-Sates Institute of Peace, Pakistan in order to oppose and weaken Indo-Afghan relations, has been following a "dual-track strategy," which means that Pakistan is seeking relations with Afghanistan and at the same time providing haven and shield for Afghan Taliban's leaders (Constantino, 2020, p. 11).

Pakistan aims to utilize Afghanistan geography as passage for regional trade and transportation to Central-Asian Republics (CARs), this is basically contradicting with India's economic goals in Afghanistan, because India poses the same goal. Once Pakistan fulfill this objective of becoming regional trade actor, especially if able to influence northern trade paths, the significance of Iran's Chabahar port and Indian-constructed Zaranj-Delaram road will be undermined. Pakistan is enthusiastic about having access to Central Asian natural gas, this is generally due to quick economic growth which increased demand for energy. Since the

domestic production of energy cannot fulfill the current need for energy, therefore Pakistan government is eager to import the demanded natural gas from CARs. The path to CARs natural gas crosses from Afghanistan which implies the significance of Afghanistan's geography for Pakistan's policy makers (Hanauer and Chalk, 2012, p.27).

The peace and reconciliation talk between Afghanistan and Taliban have provided a good opportunity for regional actors to take advantage and be part of this important process which determines the political future of Afghanistan and thereby would affect the regional security and development. Since India has hard times finding its proper relevancy to Afghan peace talks, Islamabad has constituted a significant role for itself in the Afghanistan's peace negotiations' process (Verma and Schaffer, cited in Hanauer and Chalk, 2012, p. 29). Despite unstable political relations with Pakistan, Kabul authorities has come to the conclusion that Pakistan's role in accelerating peace-negotiations is vital, thereby maintaining friendly relations with Pakistan will allow the country to continue a constructive role in Afghan peace process. After his succession as President in 2014 Afghan election, Ashraf Ghani during the first year of his presidency has designed his foreign policy with preference to Pakistan, which in turn has improved relation with Islamabad and thus, fueled Afghan peace talks with Taliban (Constantino, 2020, p. 7).

b. India

Afghanistan and India, despite of religious and cultural otherness has built a long-lasting friendly relation, amid Pakistan's opposition to India's presence in Afghanistan, the country could establish a good image both within the Afghan government as well as Afghan nation. The collapse of Taliban regime in 2001, has provided a new opportunity for India to reconsider and harden its foothold in the country.

In the aftermath of Taliban collapse, India's closed embassy in Kabul, reopened, after the embassy started its activity, eventually India started to increase its relation and influence in Afghanistan. This followed by the opening of several consulates in Afghanistan and working-out aid programs which placed India as one of the largest regional donors and top five in global contributors' rank (Siddique, 2011, p. 41).

India's strategy in Afghanistan is to secure a place in the heart and minds of Afghans, by seeking political, economic influence and providing aid and military assistance to Afghan government. India in order to make sure that Afghanistan will not fall into a Pakistani-backed terrorist net, is actively and enthusiastically struggle to acquire influence in Afghanistan. India's opposition to Pakistani-backed terrorists and Taliban, dates back to Taliban regime period, that India took side and supported NA (Northern-Alliance) with weaponry, and equipment, in their fight against Taliban (Hanauer and Chalk, 2012, p. 14).

Generally, India's strategy in Afghanistan is anti-Pakistan oriented, Delhi authorities, scrutinize Islamabad's moves in Afghanistan with anxiety and suspicion. Afghanistan-based militancy with found signature of Islamabad over them, is the main concern of India. According to a report by United-States Institute of Peace (2020), India's main strategy in Afghanistan are as follows; supporting and promoting "stable democratic order," averting Pakistan's influence and countering Pakistan-backed insurgency in order to prevent them from

using Afghanistan soil as podium for spreading terrorism which could jeopardize India's interests in the region (Constantino, 2020, p. 4). Thus, according to what mentioned, fighting Pakistan-backed militancy form the major part of Delhi's strategy in Afghanistan.

Moreover, Afghanistan and India, despite of mutual political relations, also enjoy large commercial interaction. The bilateral trade (export and import) value of both countries in 2012-13 worth 588.3 million Dollar (Amin, Dwivedi and Sharma, 2015, p. 22). India provided fund and support in developmental projects in Afghanistan, the construction of 290 million Dollar worth Salma Dam (later named as Afghan-India Friendship Dam) in Herat province is a major instance of India's developmental projects. The Dam construction by India has resulted in Iran and Pakistan's anger (Ramachandran, 2018a). Therefore, more or less India has been able to establish good and friendly ties with both Afghan government and nation, a survey conducted in 2016, shows that nearly 62 percent of Afghans expressed positive view towards India, while Pakistan received only 3.7 percent of Afghan's positive view (Ahmadyar and Osmanzoi, cited in Constantino, 2020, p. 5).

4. Afghanistan's Current Geopolitics and Relations with China and Turkey

a. China

Afghanistan and China are sharing border with each other, and that makes China the only major power in Asia that has direct access to Afghanistan. The geopolitical interest of China dates back to the era of Cold-War, China's desire to challenge Soviet-Union's dominance in Central-Asia and generally in Eurasian area, inspired Chinese authorities to join United-States' funded Jihad against Soviets' invasion in Afghanistan. After the collapse of Taliban regime and currently in the era of President Ghani's rule, China's geopolitical policy toward Afghanistan stands on several factors: initiating bilateral dialogues with CARs neighboring Afghanistan for energy reserves. Chinese authorities aim at promoting alignment with Russia, since Russia also serve as major regional actor countering U.S' influence in the region, both countries share mutual interest and that's countering U.S presence in Central Asia (Dhaka, 2014, pp. 97, 103-104).

According to Van Der Kley (2014), Afghanistan's long-term stability has been part of China's interest in the country. China's major interest is to ensure that the instability and extremism from Afghanistan does not spill-over into Xinjiang, to ensure that Chinese authorities understands the military intervention is not a solution (Van Der Kley, 2014, p. 13). Moreover, China is eager to utilize diplomacy for security development in Afghanistan, aims mainly at mediating and peace-making with Taliban, Beijing authorities has joined meetings in Islamabad with Afghanistan, Pakistan and United-States as part of QCG "Quadrilateral Coordination Groups." QCG focus is to establish dialogues with Taliban in order to maintain peace in Afghanistan (Stanzel, 2018, p. 12).

It's interesting to assert that China has greatly evolved into providing infrastructure and developmental aids to Afghanistan. China in the period between 2001-2013 has provided 250-million-dollar aid to Afghanistan (Chéné, 2015, p. 8). The amount of aid provided by China only in 2014 reached \$80 million, while China promised to give \$240 million in the next three

years, subsequently China allocated \$90 million aid for developmental projects in Badakhshan province (Ramachandran, 2018b).

b. Turkey

Turkey enjoy a special relationship with Afghanistan, despite both countries lack direct border with each other but Turkey aim to constitute close ties with Afghanistan. Existence of religious and cultural similarities among both countries formed even closer relations.

Turkey under the ambition of its regional leadership, has been providing cooperation and support to Afghan government by tilting its foreign policy on the issue of security and socio-economic reconstruction. In the U.S-led military operation in Afghanistan in 2001 which resulted into the collapse of Taliban regime, Turkey as ISAF member provided both military and non-military support but refused to deploy troops in direct warfare in the country. Turkey focused its efforts on the security issue of Afghanistan by providing training and military equipment to Afghan police and Army. Subsequently in recent years Turkey gone beyond security and military consideration and has adopted a more civilian-favored policy, this included opening of provincial reconstruction team (PRT) in Wardak province in 2006 (Weitz, cited in Karacasulu, 2010, p. 50), following by building of another PRT in Jowzjan province in 2010 (Erman, cited in Karacasulu, 2010, p. 50). It's of importance to mention that despite of pressure by United-States, Turkey refused to take part in direct military operation but remained active in providing military assessment to both international forces and Afghanistan's security forces (Kaura, 2017).

Amid Taliban and U.S peace agreement in 29 Feb, Turkey's Kabul envoy has announced its preparedness to mediate Intra-Afghan peace process if there is a need for it (Daily Sabah, 2020). This clearly demonstrate Ankara's intentions toward Afghanistan, that Turkey in the shadow of its regional leadership and mediating role, wants to maintain good relations with Afghan government using its soft power.

Finally, the Other regional actors are also eager to take advantage of Afghanistan route to Central -Asian republics and their energy resources and form their foreign policy based on geographical observation of Afghanistan, one of those regional actors is Japan. Japan is the second-largest aid provider for construction and development of Afghanistan, Japan's role in becoming part of Afghanistan's reconstruction process, is to maintain the objective of 'Central Asia plus Japan' which is set to start a dialogue between Japan and Central Asian republics (Siddique, 2011, p. 41).

B. Geopolitics Vs Geostrategic

The main focus of the paper is geopolitics and issues that are affected by/or affecting geography and politics. The fact that I added this title is to provide a clear picture of what these terms ‘geopolitics’ and ‘geostrategic’ means, while collecting data for the current paper, I have come across several cases that the author used geostrategy and geopolitics instead of each other or another writer of a research paper defined geopolitics and geostrategic equal to each other without any differences. Since, both terms reflect different meanings and has distinct usage in scholarly debate and articles, its necessary to use the appropriate term in the relevant context, neglecting that, might result into the failure of writer to transmit a proper analyze of geopolitical and geostrategic issues, thereby, will also undermine the credibility of a research.

Geopolitics is referred as “analysis of the geographic influences on power relationships in international relations” (Deudney, 2019). Geopolitics, is generally, taking political decision and policies on international scale while considering geographical factors, for instance Russia’s policy of involvement in Afghanistan is partly because of Afghanistan geographical location. The vicinity of Afghanistan with CARs and also presence of United-State in the region, has motivated Russia to adopt such policy based on geographical consideration.

Geostrategic is not a new division in political science but rather it’s sub-field of geopolitics, according to Merriam-webster, geo-strategy is “a branch of geopolitics that deals with strategy” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The provided definition reflects two main points: first, that geostrategy is not distinct from geopolitics in term of relevancy but it’s a branch of it; secondly, geostrategy in contrast with geopolitics that —deals with political decisions affected by geography— deals with strategy, which is required to solve geopolitical problems. Grygiel (2006), has provided a comprehensive definition of geostrategy:

Geostrategy is the geographic direction of a state’s foreign policy. More precisely, geostrategy describes where a state concentrates its efforts by projecting military power and directing diplomatic activity (Grygiel 2006, p. 22).

Thereby, geostrategy mostly deal with foreign policy, that to where and to what extend a state should concentrate its scope, this implies that states can concentrate their foreign policy on specific area whether by using military power (hard power) or diplomatic activities (soft power).

Interestingly geostrategy do not take into account the motivation and decision-making processes, rather it only focuses on the ability of a state in focusing political and militarily on specific areas in the world. Grygiel (2006) then added that:

The geostrategy of a state, therefore is not necessarily motivated by geographic or geopolitical factors. A state may project power to a location because of ideological reasons, interest groups, or simply the whim of its leader (Grygiel, 2006, p. 22).

According to what aforementioned, a geostrategic based foreign policy can be motivated by something that does not necessarily include a geographical factor. Consider the case of Iran, One of the Iran’s strategies in Afghanistan is constructed on ideological consideration, which is exporting the Islamic revolution by building close ties with religiously similar ethnicities in

Afghanistan such as Hazaras and portion of Tajiks, mostly in the Western parts of Afghanistan including Herat—Herat shares border with Iranian city of Mashhad— and Nimruz provinces.

C. Main Political and Strategic Advantages and Disadvantages of Afghanistan's Geography

Locating in the South-Central Asia, Afghanistan geographical location poses some political and strategical advantages as well as disadvantages. The land-locked and mountainous Afghanistan is positioned in the 4000 miles lengthy ancient silk-route which is identified as crossroad of Chinese, Persian and Indian civilization through the course of history (Hamdam, 2016).

Moreover, the country's vicinity to Central and South Asian countries has granted the ability for the country to serve as entrance to Central-Asian energy resources and trade opportunities. Furthermore, existence of Wakhan corridor and Khyber Pass has provided another advantage for Afghanistan in term of trade and finally the existence of various mineral mines which according to some surveys, worth nearly \$1 trillion (Akbari, 2018) and according to another geological survey Afghan mineral deposits worth \$3 trillion (Najafizada, 2011).

Interestingly the country's geographical location also poses disadvantages, one of the most obvious and widely attended disadvantage is that the country is land-locked and do not have direct access to international sea or oceans which to some extent making the country dependent on neighboring countries' ports, therefore hinder country' cross-boundary commercial revenues. In addition, the mountainous terrain of Afghanistan has become a preferred hideout for leaders of the most dangerous terrorist organizations, because the remoteness of mountains can provide a safe-haven.

The main political and strategical advantages of Afghanistan' geography is as follows:

1. Geostrategic and geo-economic potential of Afghanistan's geography

Afghanistan located at the center of Asia neighboring CARs, China, Pakistan and India, these all poses a great geo-strategic and geo-economic potentials. Historically Afghanistan had important trade and communication interactions with regional countries, especially China through famous Wakhan Corridor and "Silk Road". Today after nearly two decades of instability, those routes have been left untouched but once revived again, it has the potential to bring great prosperity and economic development for Afghanistan.

a. The Wakhan Corridor

The Wakhan Corridor is positioned at the cross-road of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, China and Pakistan, therefore the strategic importance of Wakhan Corridor has given a unique advantage to Afghanistan geography both in the past and present. Since the corridor is also surrounded by China, Pakistan and Tajikistan, it has direct influence on these countries. The Wakhan Corridor is regarded as an ancient trade route and path and also served as a strategic route directing to China which start from Eshkashem and going along the rivers of Panj and Pamir. In the past Wakhan corridor was used as an ancient trade route known as the Silk Route by Germans to reach China (Malik, 2014, p. 308).

Topography of Wakhan Corridor is also an important factor influencing the history of it. Wakhan positioned at the crossroad of mountains such as the “Hindu-Kush,” “Himalayas,” “Karakoram,” and the Tianshan Mountains, surrounding an area of 14,080 km², length of 220 km, and an estimated width of 10 to 64 km (Malik, 2014, p. 309).

Wakhan corridor since the start of 7th century was indicated by Chinese travelers in their narratives, and constituted an important “highway of trade and communication” and was also used as travel route between the inhabitants of northern Afghanistan such as Balkh and Chinese Turkistan (Minorsky, cited in Malik, 2011, p. 55). It was in 19th century during the “Great Game” that Wakhan earned popularity, several geographical researches were carried-out by British and Russians in the region. John Wood who was serving East India Company, paid a visit to Wakhan during the 1836-38 and came up with his observations that grave poverty, slave trade, remoteness and internal conflict are the features of the region (Shahrani, cited in Malik, 2011, p. 56).

The strict control by Russians after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 ended the utilization of that region for trade as Silk Road, again during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the Wakhan Corridor repossessed its significance. Russians constructed two military camps, a “signal intelligence post” and various missile sites (Malik, 2011, p. 56). The military advancement of Russia in Wakhan has put Islamabad authorities into concern. The Wakhan and its adjacent in the post-Soviet withdrawal and rule of Taliban regime was remained inaccessible and out of Taliban’s influence due to its unapproachability (Mojumdar, cited in Malik, 2011, pp. 57-8).

Furthermore, in the period after Taliban regime, Wakhan is being neglected by government for its climate, culture and remoteness. The sub-zero temperature and inaccessibility of the region made it untouched that even some tribes living there do not know Taliban and the United-States invasion of their country (Taylor, 2016). Wakhan corridor if revived again can change the destiny of Afghanistan, retransformation of Wakhan into trade and communication hub, will have geostrategic and geopolitical advantages for the country. Taking all aforementioned information about the Wakhan history, topography and current status into consideration, Wakhan not only plays an important role in term of trade and communication for Afghanistan but it also displays a geo-economic and geostrategic implications for China, CARs as well as for United-States.

According to Malik (2014), CARs are estimated to have trillion-dollar worth of reserve of energy resources, therefore they need to enhance their economies by selling and exporting the

mentioned resources. Since, Russia is located in the north and CARs were the former Soviet republics, Russia's desire to influence the CARs and their energy trade, is a barrier to transportation of energy resources to Europe, thereby affecting the CARs to take an independent decision to export the energy to Europe. The best available option is to transport it through the South by using Silk Route and Karakoram highway (Malik, 2014, p. 316). In addition, using Gwadar port is another suitable option and shortest route for CARs because transportation of large shipment of hydrocarbon requires deep sea ports with minimum 14-16 m depth (Svendsen and Tiedemann, cited in Malik, 2014, p. 10), CARs can reach the Gwadar port by Silk Route or Wakhan Corridor (Malik, 2014, p. 316).

b. Khyber Pass

Khyber Pass is another important strategic and commercial route. Khyber Pass located in mountains which divides present day Afghanistan and Pakistan and function as a bridge connecting Central Asia with South Asia. In the past the route was used to reach India by empires such as Alexander the Great and Moghuls (Wood, 2011).

According to the facts shared by "World Bank," recently there have been an economic cooperation named "The Khyber Pass Economic Corridor" (KPEC) that connects Afghanistan and Pakistan with Central Asia using Khyber Pass. KPEC is part of Corridors 5 and 6 of "Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation" (CAREC) routes, which in term of length will serve as the shortest link between "Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and the Arabian Sea." (World Bank, 2019).

This important cooperation will accelerate commercial and communication between regional countries of Central and South Asia. Afghanistan will also make profit out of this regional cooperation, since Khyber Pass located between Af-Pak border, it will increase the trade, exchange of goods and also will create job opportunity for hundreds of inhabitants settled along Khyber Pass.

c. Adjacent to Central Asian countries and their energy reserves

The close vicinity that Afghanistan geographically holds with CARs, is obviously can be counted as a major advantage for the country, as aforementioned, CARs estimated energy resource worth trillion dollars. The CARs must export their energy reserves to Europe and regional countries, in order to fuel their economy. Therefore, since transportation of energy reserves especially Hydrocarbon through north would not be an independent decision because Russia is located in the north and will definitely want to influence the process of energy transportation to Europe. Thereby, changing using Afghanistan territory they can transport their energy reserves to regional countries as well as Europe. TAPI pipeline project is a concrete example that can be provide in this regard, TAPI pipeline project transports Tajikistan's gas to Pakistan and India through Afghanistan. However, that feasibility of the project is being questioned due to instability in Afghanistan and external pressures, but once secured can provide country with huge profit and numerous job opportunities.

d. Rich mineral resources

Furthermore, Afghanistan geography hold one of the world's largest mineral riches, existence of vast untouched mineral resources in Afghanistan provide the country a unique economic opportunity. According to some geological surveys, the mineral resources of Afghanistan worth estimated \$1-3 trillion. Afghanistan's geography holds large amount of copper, gold, lithium, chromite, iron, uranium, silver, platinum and aluminum. In addition, Afghanistan's rare earth elements (REEs) one of the largest REE resources in the world (Katawazai, 2020). REEs constitutes a significant role in states' national security and are important elements used in military devices such as disk drive motors on aircraft and tanks, lasers for enemy mine detection, optical equipment for weapons and etc.... therefore, for this reason it has encouraged states to regulate utilization of REEs and urge on its importance for national security of their states (Grasso, 2013, p. 10). Since Afghanistan has been blessed with vast resources of REEs, this can create good opportunity to utilize it in country's military and defense section and also pave the way for exportation of REEs to other countries especially United-States, thereby it will also provide Afghanistan an opportunity to establish long term economic relations with United-States.

The aforementioned strategic and economic advantages of Afghanistan's geography, if managed properly can also create political advantage for the country. The geographical advantages can be used as a tool for exerting political pressure and fulfill diplomatic demands. For instance, let me remind of water dispute between Iran and Afghanistan, since a considerable amount of water flow into Iran from Hirmand (Helmand) River, Afghanistan recently managed the flow of water into Iran and gave Iran the rightful share of its water, but that wasn't enough for Iran and cannot fulfil Iran's water requirement, thereby resulted into rising tensions between two neighbors. Therefore, Iran's dependency over Afghanistan water can be a good political leverage, since Afghanistan is importing electricity from Iran, Afghan authorities can demand electricity in exchange for water.

2. Political and strategical disadvantage of Afghanistan's geography

Despite all geographical advantages that Afghanistan poses, there are also geographical disadvantages in the country.

a. Land-locked Country

Afghanistan is landlocked, which means the country do not have direct access to sea or ocean. Not having access to sea means lack of ports, since ports are an important source of income in term of trade and goods exchange, lacking it will decrease trade-related income. Afghanistan for trade exchanges with other countries need to use one of neighboring countries' ports and pay an extra money for using te soil and port of another country.

b. Mountainous Terrain

The mountainous nature of the country can be regarded as another geographical disadvantage. However, that the rugged terrain allowed Afghans to fight and resist against invaders throughout centuries (Grau, 2004, p. 130). it also became a hideout for terrorist leaders and members. Osama Bin Laden the leader of Al-Qaeda was hiding in Tora Bora Mountains in Afghanistan for a period (Hirschhorn and Bergen, 2015). The mountains have pragmatically made it impossible for ground forces to fight against insurgent groups hiding there because of the remoteness and inaccessibility of the mountain areas.

Conclusion

The end of Cold War following collapse of Soviet-Union and emergence of Taliban in Afghanistan, have once again brought the country's importance into attention of regional and global powers. The country's strategic location poses several political and geopolitical advantages. United-States led military invasion into Afghanistan paved the way for new regional and global cooperation for Afghanistan. the main regional actors such as Russia, China, Pakistan, India, Iran and Turkey following the change that United-States brought in Central-Asia, have designed their strategic policies toward Afghanistan. however, that every individual actor has its own strategical approach toward Afghanistan but the common interest of all the actors involved in Afghanistan's geopolitics is counter-terrorism, since Afghanistan located in South-Central Asia, the threat of growing terrorism and extremism spread into neighboring countries is high.

Moreover, the existence of various economic corridors and trade passes, have enabled the country to poses geo-economic importance, the Wakhan corridor, Khyber Pass, closeness to Central-Asian Republics and mineral richness, constitutes the main geo-economic vantage points. Initiation of vital economic projects such as TAPI pipeline project, "Khyber Pass Economic Cooperation," and shared water management with Iran, is evidence of central government's increasing ability in utilizing the geo-economic and geo-political advantages of the country. Despite all efforts done by involved countries in these projects, the feasibility of the projects is questioned due to instability. One thing should not go un-noticed that evidences made public are flagrantly reveling the efforts to prevent and undermine construction of such vital projects by regional countries, therefore, initially, the Afghan government should solve the issue through diplomatic measures.

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