

**AFGHANISTAN AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF INTERNATIONAL INTERACTION**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The interaction of a country with other countries in the neighbourhood is fundamentally affected by geography (physical, cultural, economic and political geography). These geographies define neighbourhood interaction and international relations. It also defines the geopolitics of the neighbourhood. On the other hand, the social and economic dimensions of life in a country are also determined by many factors including geography, geopolitics and international relations.*

*The geography, geopolitics and international relations create new opportunities for intensified cultural and economic relations. At times it also creates challenges (constraints). It has geopolitical implications for the neighbourhood.*

*Some countries have geographical advantages while others have geographical disadvantages. This paper examines the challenges and opportunities of international interaction between Afghanistan and its neighbourhood.*

*On conceptual and theoretical premises, it does not support geographical determinism. But geography becomes determining factor at times, depending upon the situation (location) and composition of the neighbourhood. Thus, the fundamental influence of geography cannot be denied. Therefore, this research argues that neighbourhood geography has been a crucial factor in determining international relations.*

*This research is intended to deepen the understanding of the geographical situation of Afghanistan and its neighbourhood and geopolitical situation in the region.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Afghanistan, Neighbourhood, Geography, Geopolitics, International Relations.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

The interaction of a country or countries with the neighbourhood is fundamentally affected by geography (physical, cultural, economic and political geography). These geographies define neighbourhood interaction and international relations. It also defines the geopolitics of the neighbourhood. On the other hand, the economic and demographic dimensions of the country are also determined by many factors including geography, geopolitics and international relations.

The geography, geopolitics and international relations create new opportunities for intensified cultural and economic relations. At times it also creates challenges (constraints). It has geopolitical implications for the neighbourhood.

Some countries have geographical advantages while others have geographical disadvantages. This paper examines the challenges and opportunities of international interaction between Afghanistan and its neighbourhood.

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geography becomes determining factor at times, depending upon the situation (location) and composition of the neighbourhood. Thus, the fundamental influence of geography cannot be denied. Therefore, this research argues that neighbourhood geography has been a crucial factor in determining international relations.

This research is intended to deepen the understanding of the geographical situation of Afghanistan and its neighbourhood and geopolitical situation in the region. This research endeavour also examines the role of political geography and economic Interdependence on the geopolitics of the neighbourhood. Although it presents the general linkages between geography and international politics, it also examines the effect of political geography and international politics as well as its geopolitical linkages (international conflict). Thus, it adds to the conceptual and theoretical understanding of spatiality and its roles in international politics. Thus, this study adds some information to the existing literature on the subject of geography, geopolitics and international relations. It also presents the geopolitics of interdependence on the international engagement of neighbouring countries of Afghanistan.

This research lays stress on the following causality:

**Geography → Geopolitical Environment → International Relations**

The stability of the region impacts the security of the region. The unstable neighbourhood, consequently, creates security problems for the region. The stability and security of the neighbourhood shape or determine the international relations in the region. It also shapes or determines the geopolitics (foreign policies and security measures) and the fate of the countries. In response, the neighbouring countries react to the environment in the neighbourhood and develop strategies to diminish or curb any potential geopolitical threats. International relations are thus correlated with the environment in the neighbourhood and the security or insecurity of the neighbouring countries. Thus, the countries or regions faced with lasting conflicts and insecurity are also a threat to regional security.

The geographical proximity and geocultural contiguity increase the security vulnerability of neighbouring countries. Because, the spillover effect increases the insecurity of the neighbouring countries.

The environments in the neighbourhood and the conditions of security or insecurity necessitate the countries to form an exclusive alliance for regional security. The regional security alliance thus shapes the relationship (cross-border relationship) of the countries or the geopolitics.

As a methodological tool, it presents regional analyses of the Afghan neighbourhood.

**Neighbourhood of Afghanistan**

The neighbourhood of Afghanistan is represented by countries of Central Asia and Inner Asia. It is also represented by Iran and Pakistan. The extended neighbourhood is represented by Russia and India.

# **Physical Geography;** The countries of the neighbourhood, particularly Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Iran, Pakistan and China share borders with Afghanistan. It is a porous border. These borders are open to terrorists and extremists. These borders are also open for drug trafficking and arms trafficking. There is also a possibility of human trafficking and the flow of refugees through these borders.

The geographical proximity of a fragile, unstable and conflict-prone state generates geopolitical influences on countries of its immediate neighbourhood. Because, the spillover effect from Afghanistan increases the insecurity of the neighbouring countries.

Afghanistan is a landlocked country (countries that do not have direct access to the sea) (**Assel**

**Satubaldina, 2022**). Three other countries in its neighbourhood (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan) are also Landlocked countries. Out of these countries, Uzbekistan is a double landlocked country (**Assel Satubaldina, 2022**). These landlocked countries have distinct geographical realities.

The geographical realities of landlocked countries play a crucial role in the international relations of such countries. It presents both challenges and opportunities in international interaction and thus creates a distinct geopolitical situation (the geopolitics of interdependence). Afghanistan and its neighbourhood present the same situation of geographical and geopolitical interdependence.

The physical geography of Afghanistan and the neighbourhood of Afghanistan also present the problem of resource sharing. Conflict over water issues and problems of the sharing water of the Amu Darya-Panj River in the north, the Helmand River in the southwest and the Kabul River in the east impact the relationship between countries of the region.

**# Cultural Geography;** Although Islam is a unifying factor in the region but there are many fault lines. Muslims of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia are Sunnis while Iranians are Shia. Even then, the countries of the region have many contiguities (overlaps) in the territory – history – culture. These (overlaps) are connected with shared cultural roots. The region is bound by ties of ethnicity, culture and language. The diverse population of Pashtuns, Tajiks and Uzbeks, among others, suggests the close ethnic, linguistic and cultural links with neighbouring cultural communities. This geocultural contiguity increases the security vulnerability of neighbouring countries. The cultural configurations of the region of the Afghan Neighbourhood make it more vulnerable to the spillover effect of the instability and insecurity in the region.

At times the countries of the neighbourhood exploit the ethnic mosaic of Afghanistan for their strategic interests.

**# Economic Geography;** A large part of the region is landlocked and resource-poor. The future of Afghanistan and that of the regional countries are closely bound together. The location of the landlocked country (or countries) determines its/their fortune for development because these countries depend on the neighbouring countries to access the international markets. These countries are forced to depend on the infrastructure (transit routes) of the neighbouring countries. Thus, the conditions in the neighbourhood (and relation with the neighbouring country) determine the development of the landlocked countries. This interdependence shapes the international relations between countries.

Constructive partnerships involving Afghans and their neighbours are essential to regional stability and economic sustainability. The countries of the region have their own strategic and economic interests in Afghanistan. Unlike Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have been engaged with the Taliban in the hope of securing economic access to South Asia. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan also have economic interests in Afghanistan. There is a possibility of stability in Afghanistan and the neighbourhood with a convergence of regional interests and increased connectivity, trade and commerce.

**# Political Geography;** Afghanistan has historically engaged and been impacted by neighbouring countries and it has impacted the neighbouring region through the export of ideology (Jihad) and insurgency.

Even today Afghanistan remains a potential source of instability. Instability in Afghanistan would result in spillover effects - increased terrorism, a large number of refugees and increased drug trafficking. Political instability in Uzbekistan or Tajikistan and radicalized Pakistan will also impact the stability in Afghanistan and the neighbourhood.

The territory of Afghanistan may be used to provide a safe haven for terrorists from Pakistan in

the event of a conflict with India. Other countries also viewed the regime of Taliban-2 as giving sanctuary to extremist elements. The countries of Central Asia fear a new wave of insecurity from the south. There is also a risk of 'spillover'.

## **Geopolitical Changes and New Circumstances**

In August 2021, the US completed twenty years of its War on Terror in Afghanistan. Soon after the withdrawal of US, the Taliban established its control over Afghanistan. Afghan Taliban has reconstituted the so-called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan that was toppled in late 2001 by US. As the days pass, observers, both within and outside the country, are wondering what the future holds for Afghanistan (**Yousaf and Jabarkhail, 2022**).

There is little reason to expect that the Afghan Taliban will change its ideological aspirations, sever ties with designated terrorist organisations or moderate its governing style in return for international recognition (**Charles J. Sullivan, 2021**). The developments in Afghanistan will have wider ramifications to the Central Asia region (particularly the possible growth in international terrorism and drug trafficking emanating from the Afghan territory).

All its neighbouring countries have a shared interest in a stable Afghanistan, although this appears not likely to emerge any time soon. The countries of the neighbourhood could have the most influence or be the worst affected by the presence or dominance of Taliban in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, the situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated drastically since the Taliban took control of Kabul. The international response to Taliban will make a critical difference in future developments in the country. Among the range of choices, a strong case can be made for engagement, dialogue and assistance. The immediate humanitarian needs and widespread extreme poverty warrant substantial aid, including funds to maintain basic programmes established over the past two decades in health and education (**Strand and Suhrke 2021**).

If the situation in Afghanistan worsens, it could result in the spilling over of unrest and militancy to the neighbouring countries which share borders with Afghanistan and also the countries in the extended neighbourhood. The countries of the neighbourhood are also going to face the problem of refugees.

This research makes an assessment of the geographical realities of Afghanistan and its neighbourhood with reference to the historical, social, cultural, economic and geopolitical factors in shaping the international relations in the Afghan neighbourhood.

## **Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan**

Pakistan is located to its southeast Afghanistan. It shares the longest border with Pakistan. It has a length of 2430 km. This is an artificial border known as the Durand Line. This borderline was officially marked by the Britishers. The Afghan Pakistan border separates the Pashtun tribal region between the two countries. Geoculturally it is often recognized as one of the most dangerous borders in the world. Afghanistan refuses to accept the Durand Line as the (official) border between the two countries.

Despite being part of the US-led War on Terror, Pakistan has been successful in maintaining a good relationship with the Taliban. Islamabad hosted Afghan peace dialogues and supported dialogues hosted by other countries, such as the US, China, Qatar and Russia. Islamabad has also supported the US-Taliban peace deal which was signed in Doha in 2020.

The rise of Taliban in Afghanistan has brought both opportunities and challenges for Pakistan (**Zahid Shahab Ahmed, 2022**). There are chances for continued instability in Afghanistan. It was expected that Pakistan will work on possibilities to bring in new stability in Afghanistan as Pakistan is seen as the key partner of Taliban. But unfortunately, in recent times, particularly since

the rise of Taliban, the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan has become strained on several issues. Despite friendly relations between the two countries, there is a growing trust deficit between Afghanistan and Pakistan and the two countries have been unable to bridge this trust deficit.

After the rise of Taliban - 2, Afghanistan has challenged the status of the Afghan-Pakistan border and it has questioned the sanctity of the Durand line. For this reason, there has also been growing friction among the border forces of Pakistan and Afghanistan. It poses threat to Pakistan on its western border. The harsh exchanges between Afghanistan and Pakistan are a sign of worsening ties. The new developments in Afghanistan will possibly influence the geopolitical landscape of the region.

Pakistan is also vulnerable to extremism and terrorism spreading from Afghanistan. Afghanistan has always remained a haven for insurgent organizations. Pakistan also blames Afghanistan for harbouring anti-Pakistan insurgent organization the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban in its territory.

Since the takeover of Taliban, TTP has increased attacks on Pakistani forces. In a major escalation, Pakistan carried out airstrikes at the suspected locations of TTP inside Afghanistan on April 21. The cross-border action has further strained the already strained relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Pakistan needs an Afghanistan that does not threaten it. In case instability persists in Afghanistan and the activities of TTP continue unabated, the border regions of Pakistan will suffer. Pakistan is also afraid that the terror attacks may spread to other parts of the country. Simultaneously, Islamic State-Khorasan is also a threat to Pakistan. It has been continuously attacking Pakistan. The Islamic State-Khorasan (ISK) was responsible for an attack on a mosque in Peshawar in March 2022.

Besides security reasons, drug trafficking is equally affecting the neighbouring regions. Islamabad is also concerned about the spillover of refugees which could be caused by the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Therefore, it has an interest in the stability of Afghanistan. To avoid a major spillover, therefore, Islamabad has no better option than to continue its engagement with Taliban.

Pakistan also has economic interests in Afghanistan. Pakistan wants to pursue strategic depth in Afghanistan. It wants control over energy exports from Central Asia. On the other hand, Kabul is eager to create multiple stakeholders on its territory. It will affect the monopolistic control of Pakistan.

### **Geospatiality of Iran and its Relations with Afghanistan**

Iran is located in the western and southwestern regions of Afghanistan. It shares a long 580 km border with Afghanistan therefore, it has a significant strategic interest in the country. It also has deep cultural relations with communities in Afghanistan. The two countries have experienced significant political turmoil, particularly around the border region, which has led to violence in this region.

Iran sees the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan as ‘an opportunity to bring in peace and stability in that country.’ Tehran is optimistic to play a constructive role in shaping the way Afghanistan develops under Taliban. But the increasing fragility in Afghanistan continues to have adverse effects on the security of the region along with the security of Iran.

The geopolitical orientation of Iran is influenced by some of its major concerns. It is largely due to the geographical proximity and cultural congruity (western Afghanistan was historically a part of Iranian territory). Hazaras in Afghanistan have Iranian roots. Iran also shares linguistic affinities with many Tajiks and Uzbeks.

Iran has fear that the rise of Sunni fundamentalism in Afghanistan will impact the Shias of Afghanistan. It is seen as a potential source of instability. Iran is concerned with the increased flow of refugees from Afghanistan and the repercussions it may have for its society and economy. Iran does not want to shoulder the burden of refugees coming from Afghanistan. Iran is also concerned with the plight of Hazaras and Daris. Iran is concerned that any destabilisation of Afghanistan will impinge on the stability of Iran.

Iran wants to prevent the spill-over effects of the ethnic conflict. Therefore, it has expressed its support for an inclusive government in Afghanistan. There is an anxiety of increased refugee flows. Many of the neighbouring countries of the region share a similar perspective. But other countries seek to pursue their own objectives in Afghanistan.

The larger concern of Iran is regarding the instability in Afghanistan. It is particularly concerned with drug trafficking across the borders. Earlier, Iran along with Pakistan and Afghanistan were engaged in a trilateral initiative against narcotics. They had agreed to cooperate in border management to control drug trafficking. Iran has fear that the insecurity and instability in Afghanistan will certainly give a boost to narco-terrorism. Iran is also concerned with the proxies of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

Iran has a deep interest in the economy of Afghanistan. It is among the top exporters and importers of goods to and from Afghanistan. It is also working to develop infrastructure and communication links in Afghanistan. In the recent past, Iran has heavily invested in Heart. It has built a railroad from Iran to Heart. It has also invested in building schools, roads and electricity transmission lines. It is also working on a rail network to connect the Iranian port of Chabahar with Zahedan in Afghanistan. Iran is also involved in the Silk Route initiative of China, which demands for regional integration. It is primarily intended to connect Afghanistan to the outside world.

Iran, primarily, wants to create its sphere of influence in Afghanistan. In the recent past, it was part of the Istanbul Summit, Bonn conference, Dushanbe conference and the Tokyo donor summit. Iran also attended the Delhi Investment Summit on Afghanistan. But in the present circumstances, Iran is unlikely to give full support to the Taliban.

Sharing the water of trans boundary rivers will also be a major issue between Iran and Afghanistan. Iran is concerned with the waters of the Farah River. The two countries also have a dispute over the sharing of water of the Helmand River.

## **Afghanistan and Geopolitical Environment in Central Asia**

Central Asian countries are situated in the immediate neighbourhood of Afghanistan. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are immediate neighbours of Afghanistan. The crisis in Afghanistan, which has been ongoing for several decades, has been and remains one of the most serious threats to regional security (Akram Umarov, 2021). The approach of Central Asian countries towards Afghanistan and their relationship is largely defined by the existing situation (conditions) in Afghanistan.

There is a growing fear of rise in transnational crime and Islamic radicalisation. Since these countries share their borders with Afghanistan, they have huge stakes in the stability of Afghanistan. The situation in Afghanistan impinges directly on their own stability. In the past, all these countries have remained actively involved with Afghanistan, on a regional, multilateral and bilateral basis. These countries have also cooperated with the US and NATO to varying degrees to sustain the War against Terror. Even today all these countries have found ways to live with Afghanistan. All these countries maintain strict vigil on their borders with Afghanistan to minimise the spill-over effects of the rise of Taliban as they are afflicted by Islamic radicalisation in Afghanistan. These countries are also faced with problems arising from drug trafficking and

other contraband activities.

## A Tough Road Ahead for Central Asia

Since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, the central Asian countries ((i.e., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan)) have relied on the Taliban to prevent non-state actors from operating in northern Afghanistan and launching cross-border attacks (**Bruce Pannier, 2022**). The deteriorating security environment in northern Afghanistan is bad news across the border in Central Asia. Since regaining power, the Taliban have repeatedly assured the governments there that they would not allow Afghan territory to be used for attacks against neighbouring countries of Afghanistan (**Bruce Pannier, 2022**). The assurances have to materialize in coming years. The Central Asian countries have also raised concerns about the rising Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan, which could possibly spillover to Central Asia as Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan share a 2,387km long border with Afghanistan. The security concerns in the Central Asian countries are compounded by the presence of terrorist outfits like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), Jamaat Ansarullah as well as radical Central Asian ISIS fighters who have been reported to have joined the ranks of different terror groups in Afghanistan (**Saaransh Mishra, 2022**).

In case of a humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan - which is actually approaching - neither Iran nor Pakistan will be able to accept such a huge population of Afghanistan. Given the situation of the three Central Asian countries- Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan - that border it, a certain portion of the Afghan refugees might go to these regions (**AsselSatubaldina, 2022**).

## # Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan has a 744 km long border with Afghanistan. Geographically it is situated on the northwest frontier of Afghanistan. Turkmenistan is adjacent to the Afghan provinces of Herat, Badghis, Faryab and Jowzjan. Besides geographical proximity it also has cultural contiguity with Afghanistan. Sharing the ethnic population translates into some cultural overlap between Turkmenistan and parts of Afghanistan. Afghanistan also has a large Turkmen population. It is mainly concentrated along its northern border with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Another ethnic community common to Afghanistan and Turkmenistan is the Uzbeks. Uzbeks are the second-largest ethnic community in Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan has always maintained a policy of neutrality and had refused to be a part of any anti-Taliban alliance. However, 9/11 changed its perspective on neutrality. Turkmenistan is now trying to build its relations in accordance with the geopolitical reality of the region.

The Central Asian countries are known for their landlocked geography. It makes them dependent on neighbouring countries for their economy. Afghanistan is a bridge between Central Asia and South Asia. The location of Afghanistan in the 'Heart of Asia' makes it a valuable country for countries of Central Asia. Turkmenistan is a resource-rich Central Asia country. It has the sixth-largest natural gas reserve in the world. The natural gas export from Turkmenistan is still monopolised by Russia. Turkmenistan wants to find alternative markets for its energy resources. In this reference, Afghanistan seems to be a major transit route for energy exports of Turkmenistan. It pipelines and road are developed that would bring enormous benefits to the countries of Central Asia and to Afghanistan itself if there were peace and stability (**AsselSatubaldina, 2022**). Afghanistan also imports electricity from Turkmenistan. Both the countries also have good trade and economic relations. Due to geoeconomic reasons, Turkmenistan has its own approach to its Southern neighbour.

Taking advantage of the location of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan has proposed the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline for its energy export. It is considered an alternative to

the erstwhile proposed Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline. Turkmenistan wishes to export gas to both Pakistan and India and electricity to Pakistan. The two countries Turkmenistan and Afghanistan have also agreed to build a railway line connecting the eastern part of Turkmenistan with Afghanistan (Atamurat-Ymamnazar in Turkmenistan to Akina-Andkhoy in Afghanistan).

In stark contrast with neighbouring countries, Turkmenistan began its engagement with the Taliban much before the fall of Kabul. The permanent neutrality of Turkmenistan has paved the way for it to engage officially with the Taliban. It even enjoyed cordial relations with the former Afghan government. That is perhaps why, Turkmenistan has been one of the most pragmatic of the Central Asian countries.

For Turkmenistan, the main concern is to prevent armed incursions of terrorists and militants from the shared border. Even if Taliban reassures about their 'national aspirations' to rebuild the Islamic Emirate only in Afghanistan and that they are not interested to undermine the national borders and sovereignty of neighbouring countries of Central Asia, the foreign fighters could benefit from the volatility along the border to lead destabilization inside Turkmen territory (**Fabio Indeo, 2021**).

Furthermore, Turkmenistan has always refused to join multilateral regional organizations backed by Russia and China in the field of regional security (namely the Collective Security Treaty Organization as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization). The self-exclusion of Turkmenistan from regional security organizations exposes the country to a dangerous vulnerability, due to its inability to provide security along the border with Afghanistan (**Fabio Indeo, 2021**).

#### **# Uzbekistan**

Uzbekistan has a common border as well as extensive historical and cultural ties with Afghanistan. The borders between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan runs for approximately 143 km. This common border is the shortest at the same time, the most protected.

The escalation of the Afghan conflict created the risk of expanding the zone of instability to Central Asia and posed a serious challenge to the national security of Uzbekistan (**Akram Umarov, 2021**). In the past, Uzbekistan has faced and continues to deal with serious threats to national security emanating from the conflict in Afghanistan. It is also faced with threats, such as drug trafficking, arms trade and terrorism. The biggest concern of Uzbekistan is the Islamic Movement of Turkistan (IMT), which poses a constant challenge to its security.

In the past, during the civil war in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan provided asylum as well as safe passage to Abdul Rashid Dostum. In the War against Terror, Uzbekistan also emerged as a major transit route for the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan. It has even allowed humanitarian aid to pass through its territory. It also allowed the Germans to use its airfield in Termez (Termez Airbase in Uzbekistan was leased by Germany). Thus, the territory of Uzbekistan emerged as one of the key geostrategic regions of the world. Even today Uzbekistan maintains good relations with Afghanistan.

Although, Uzbekistan is not in a position to influence events in Afghanistan. The terror organisations like the Islamic Movement of Turkistan (IMT) and Hizbut Tahrir continue to pose a threat to the security of Uzbekistan. Therefore, the fight against terrorism remains a major commitment of the government of Uzbekistan.

In its foreign policy strategy, Uzbekistan has adhered to the fundamental principle of establishing peace and stability in the immediate neighbourhood and developing mutually beneficial and constructive cooperation with all neighbouring countries (**Akram Umarov, 2021**). Besides, Uzbekistan is concerned about the infiltration of destabilizing elements into the country.

Uzbekistan does not believe that a military solution will lead to peace. It is even not hesitant in advocating dialogue with moderate Taliban members. One possible reason for continuing dialogue with the Taliban is its strong interest in broadening access to South Asia. Uzbekistan is one of the double-landlocked countries in the world, so overcoming logistical hurdles is a key consideration for Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan is interested in better connectivity in bordering provinces, new economic and trade opportunities, enhanced connectivity with the countries of the South Asian region and shorter routes to the sea. In 2003, Iran, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan took the decision to open up a trans-Afghan transport corridor to connect Central Asia with the Gulf. Uzbekistan has a rail network between Termez-Hairatan. It has been extended to Mazar-e-Sharief. Uzbekistan has also built 11 bridges in the region of Mazar-e-Sharief and Kabul. It even supplies electricity to Afghanistan. It has also constructed a high voltage transmission line for power supply to Afghanistan.

For the past few years, Uzbekistan was constantly communicating with the Taliban. Taliban expressed gratitude for the support of Uzbekistan in the energy and logistics supply. adding that Afghanistan can serve as a bridge of trust and cooperation between Central and South Asia.

## # Tajikistan

Tajikistan shares a long border with northern Afghanistan. It runs for approximately 1357 km. It is the longest border shared by any Central Asian country with Afghanistan. Ethnically also Tajikistan has cultural proximity to its neighbouring countries. The history of Tajikistan remains connected with both Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. A large number of Tajiks live in Uzbekistan and also Afghanistan.

Tajiks are believed to be the second-largest ethnic group in Afghanistan (**Catherine Putz, 2021**). They constitute around 25 percent of the population, following the Pashtuns. Tajiks and Pashtuns have long contested for power in Afghanistan. These Tajiks have always been a target of the Taliban. The return of the Taliban can once again create a situation of dominance and oppression over the Tajiks.

The proximity of the country and its history suggests the situation in Afghanistan contributes to the disturbances in Tajikistan. The civil war in Tajikistan in the recent past was launched by the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP). It was helped by Taliban in Afghanistan. Another organisation, the Islamic Movement of Tajikistan (IMT) is also supported by Taliban. In the recent past, Tajikistan experienced several bomb explosions. It was attributed to these Islamic elements. The government of Tajikistan fears the rise of similar activities with the re-emergence of the Taliban. With the increased influence of Taliban, the militant organisations from Tajikistan have again become active in Afghanistan.

Apart from terrorism, narco-terrorism is a major challenge that Tajikistan faces from instability in Afghanistan. Most of the drugs that originate from Afghanistan exit through Tajikistan.

Tajik policy toward Afghanistan had been characterized by its vigilance against the infiltration of extremists and its tough attitude toward the Taliban. Tajikistan is also concerned about ethnic Tajiks living in Afghanistan. In 2011, the two countries Afghanistan and Tajikistan signed an agreement to cooperate on fighting terrorism, narcotics and weapons smuggling. It will be in question now. Afghanistan has agreed to improve rail and road communication with Afghanistan and Iran. It has even agreed to transmit electricity to Afghanistan and Iran.

In the War against Terror, Tajikistan was the first Central Asian country to agree to support NATO transit through its territory. Tajikistan has been at the forefront of the War against Terror.

Tajikistan was the third-largest host of registered Afghan refugees (after Pakistan and Iran) and is the fourth largest destination for newly arrived Afghans since 2021 (after Pakistan, Iran and

Uzbekistan) (**ZharZardykhan, 2022**).

From the onset of the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the Tajik government, backed by a Russian military presence, refused to communicate with the Taliban. Tajikistan is not so keen on an exclusively Taliban government in Afghanistan. It has stressed an inclusive government in Kabul - including ethnic Tajiks - was necessary (Catherine Putz, 2021). Therefore, Dushanbe would not recognize the Taliban rule, as long as the new government continues to exclude ethnic Tajiks, who make up a quarter of the population of Afghanistan (**ZharZardykhan, 2022**). Besides, Tajikistan is also concerned with the training camps of militants located in north eastern Afghanistan where thousands of militants are waiting to enter Tajik territory. These are the reasons that the Tajik border has become the tense space of the northern frontiers of Afghanistan.

After the return of the Taliban, countries in Central Asia faced with a harsh reality. Challenges that the countries have feared for years, including rising terrorism and extremism, illegal drug and weapons trafficking - all of it became real (**AsselSatubaldina, 2022**).

### **China and its Engagements with Taliban**

China is located in the northeast of Afghanistan. It shares a short border with Afghanistan. It is just 76 km long. It is the shortest border of Afghanistan. This border is connected through the Wakhan Corridor. A mountain pass (known as Wakhjir Pass) connects the two countries. In the historical past, it was used for the Silk Route Trade. For long China has kept its border closed due to political instability in Xinjiang.

China has always been worried about the militancy in Xinjiang by Uyghurs (Chinese Muslims). The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan has compounded the worries of China of a possible spillover of Islamic militants belonging to ETIM.

In the past, China had good neighbourly relations with Afghanistan. It established diplomatic relations with Afghanistan way back in 1955. The two countries had a friendship treaty since 1960. their boundary was formerly demarcation in 1964. However, the relationship between the two countries remained subdued for a long.

During the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan China supported Mujahedin. It even supplied arms and ammunition to the Mujahedin. Although China did not recognize the Taliban government, it maintained close relations with the then Afghan government. during the period 1996-2001, several delegations of China visited Kabul seeking good neighbourly relations. China was concerned with the Taliban East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). It wanted assurance from Taliban not to support Uighur separatism in Xinjiang. China even concluded an agreement with the Taliban towards this end. China was concerned with the growing influence of radical Islamic ideology on the Uighur separatists of Xinjiang.

Later on, in 1996, China established the Shanghai Five to deal with the threats posed by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan and the neighbouring regions. China was mainly concerned with the issues of fundamentalism and terrorism emanating from Afghanistan. Chinese concerns were similar to those of other neighbours of Afghanistan.

On a regional level through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) China has been active in shaping the agenda towards Afghanistan. In 2006, the two countries signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. China also signed an agreement on a comprehensive economic partnership with Afghanistan. In 2012, China and Afghanistan established a Strategic and Cooperative Partnership between the two countries. In current circumstances, China is involved in several infrastructure projects in Afghanistan. It is engaged in projects to extract mineral resources (copper) in Afghanistan. China is also interested in oil exploration and extraction in Afghanistan. It even intends to develop a railway from Xinjiang to Afghanistan. Moreover, it supports the

development of the railway from Tajikistan to Pakistan. China is also planning to build border access routes through the Wakhan Corridor.

With the return of the Taliban China is cautious about the support of radical elements in Afghanistan to ETIM. In the past also, China maintained cordial relations with Taliban. This time again it has got assurance against the possible spillover of terrorism from Afghanistan. It has been successful in an effort to persuade Taliban not to give sanctuary to Uighur separatists.

It is believed that Chinese economic engagement will have a stabilizing effect on Afghanistan.

### **Afghanistan and its Extended Neighbourhood**

Apart from these six countries, there are many countries in the extended neighbourhood of Afghanistan. These countries do not share borders with Afghanistan but get directly affected by the existing situation in Afghanistan. Among these extended neighbours, Russia and India are two prominent countries. These countries (Russia and India) have the potential to influence the emerging situation in Afghanistan and contribute significantly to peace.

#### **# Russia**

The geography and geopolitics of Afghanistan and Central Asia have helped Russia to emerge as an important country in the extended neighbourhood of Afghanistan. Russia is concerned about the rise of Taliban in Afghanistan because it has implications for Central Asia. Russia is aware that the situation in Afghanistan may become a factor of instability in the future. Moscow is also aware of the weaknesses of Central Asian countries to deal with the emerging threat of radical Islam emanating from Afghanistan. The mutual mistrust and suspicion among the countries of Central Asia prevent them from a concerted regional policy that will protect them from the spill-over effects of the emerging crisis in Afghanistan.

For Russia, Central Asian countries remain crucial to its sphere of influence. Instability in Afghanistan may affect the stability of Central Asian countries. However, Russia maintains its security commitments with the Central Asian countries through various bilateral and multilateral instruments such as Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) yet its concerns are more than that. Russia wants to remain the main security provider to Central Asian countries and maintain its military monopoly over the Central Asian region. It is not interested in sharing the security responsibilities with Beijing.

Like Iran, Russia is also concerned with the spillover of drugs and Islamic fundamentalism from Afghanistan. At present Russia is closely watching the evolving situation in Afghanistan and also trying to develop synergy with countries like Pakistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Although The Government of Afghanistan is still unrecognized by any country in the world, Russia has established diplomatic ties with the Taliban.

#### **# India**

India is situated in the extended neighbourhood of Afghanistan. It has enormous security concerns regarding the stability of Afghanistan. The instability in Afghanistan affects the stability of the region. The rise of Taliban in Afghanistan also relates to the security concerns of India. It also defines the parameter of India and Pakistan relationships. Thus, the spill over of terrorists from Afghanistan provides a new challenge to India in the shape of regional security. The issue of stability in Afghanistan and its future support to terrorists active in Kashmir will always be central to the Indian approach toward Afghanistan.

In the recent past (before the advent of Taliban) India had good neighbourly relations with Afghanistan. It had also invested in the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan.

Currently, India aims to address the following concerns. Like other countries of the world, it

supports a plural government in Afghanistan representing all the ethnic communities. At the same time, India wants Afghanistan to develop as a viable state that can pursue an independent foreign policy (or at least remain free from the influences of ISI or Pakistan).

India will never like to see Afghanistan as a battleground for competing interests nor it will prefer Taliban to turn hostile to India. Therefore, India has adopted a pragmatic approach. It has continued with humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.

India always favours Afghanistan to develop as an outlet for the outside world. Connectivity, therefore, becomes the key issue and India is supportive of any endeavour to connect Afghanistan with Central Asia (be it through Iran or Pakistan).

## **CONCLUSION**

Taliban has once again emerged on the political and geopolitical space of Afghanistan but no country in the world has extended its recognition to the present government of Afghanistan. The re-emergence of Taliban in Afghanistan poses a direct threat to the internal security of Central Asian countries.

Iran also has obvious threats. the status of Shia Muslims particularly the status of Hazaras is a major concern of Iran. Therefore, Iran insists on an inclusive government in Afghanistan. Tajikistan also has similar concerns for Afghan Tajiks. Apart from the refugee problems, both the countries are also concerned with threats of spill over of terrorism and narcoterrorism.

Except for Tajikistan, have stated diplomatic engagements with Taliban. While all these Central Asian countries are also preparing for the potential security threats. The diplomatic priorities of each of these countries are different.

Uzbekistan aspires to get access to the open sea via Afghanistan. On the other hand, Turkmenistan provides electricity to Kabul. Afghanistan is also an important component of Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline. The stability in Afghanistan is a prerequisite for developing connectivity between South and Central Asia. Their economic interests can only be realized if Afghanistan remains stable and Taliban government is recognized internationally. Therefore, they have started humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. They also keep insisting on other regional countries to provide assistance to Afghanistan.

There is fear in countries of Central Asia and also India that with the rise of Taliban, radical Islamist groups will get inspired and probably intensify their activities. India fears that Afghanistan could once again emerge as a regional haven for militant organizations under the Taliban. It may enhance the security challenges for India.

Although Pakistan now enjoys an advantageous position in Afghanistan with Taliban in power in Kabul. There has been an apparent rise in the activities of Tehreek e Taliban - Pakistan (TTP). The Pakistan Taliban has intensified its attacks against Pakistani security forces. It has prompted Pakistan to seek a ceasefire with the TTP. It is being mediated by the Afghan Taliban.

Although China has developed a closer link with Taliban. The rise in militancy is a threat to China also. Though Taliban has committed not to provide sanctuaries to militant Uyghurs, China is concerned with the possible rise in religious extremism, violent terrorism and ethnic separatism in the western regions of China.

The future prospects of peace and stability in the region (in Afghanistan and its neighbourhood) depend on the sincerity of Taliban.

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