

The Afghanistan Factor in the Power Equation of India and Pakistan

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Abstract: Afghanistan is a country with a special geopolitical position among the four regions of Asia and is actually known as the crossroads of Asia. On the other hand, Afghanistan is a country where the interests of major countries in the world and the region, especially countries like Pakistan and India, are in conflict. In the last century, this country has always been subject to continuous instability, which has had different levels. Considering the nature of political traditions and governance in Afghanistan, the role of external actors in the political sphere of this country is of particular importance. Understanding the role and key demands of each of these actors can be important in recognizing and drawing the upcoming scenarios in Afghanistan's political equations. This article tries to explain the role of Afghanistan in the power equation of two countries, India and Pakistan, as two important players in Afghanistan's internal politics, using a descriptive-analytical research method.

Key words: Power, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India.

Introduction

Geography in general produces opportunities and limitations for human life. In general, geographical values and factors include geographical location and space patterns that are politically desirable and attract the attention of actors. In fact, geographical values are opportunities desired by political actors, whether individuals or groups (without intermediaries or proxies); because, above all, they can be power producers. To the next degree, their use could lead to the deprivation of competitors. Finally, they can meet vital needs and collective and individual interests. For this reason, human beings try to benefit from the opportunities arising from these values and exceed their limits. Geographical values acquire a geopolitical character while taking on a political burden (Hafeznia, 2006: 155).

Afghanistan's special geographical location plays an important role in defining the geopolitics of the region and is referred to by terms such as "*Crossroads of Asia*" or "*Asian Heartland*". Mackinder believed that on every continent there were points that countries sought to control, and that sovereignty was seen as sovereignty over the heart and center of that continent. Afghanistan is a landlocked country and is separated by the Hindu Kush mountain range to the north, south, east, and west (Yazdanpanah Dero, et al, 2019: 800).

Afghanistan's geopolitical location lies on the security frontier of the Heartland (i.e. Rimland), which has brought the country's geographical necessity to a dead end. Such countries play a very weak and passive role in regional and international politics and are always caught between the great powers. In fact, this situation is more of an indicator of fierce competition between great powers. Therefore, their independence and territorial integrity are subject to regional and interregional competition. The lack of central authority and foreign independence endangers the territorial and national integrity of buffer states, including Afghanistan. Buffer states have always been occupied and divided by one or both major powers. For example, Afghanistan was occupied by great powers during the Great War between England and Tsarist Russia, during the Cold War between the USA and the Soviet Union, and after September 11 (Hadian, 2009: 144).

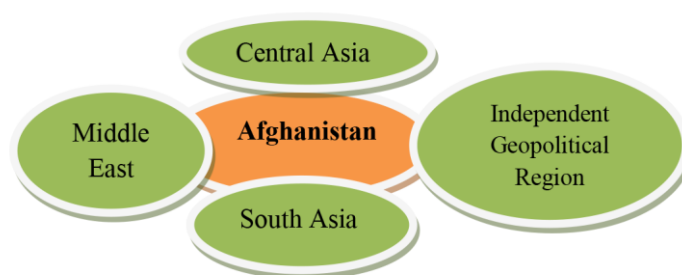


Figure 1. Position of Afghanistan in Different Geopolitical Regions
Source: Pishgahifard- Rahimi, (2010: 109).

In the past years, just as Pakistan has acted geopolitically in Afghanistan, India has automatically acted in the opposite direction, so both countries have supported different groups to defend their interests in Afghanistan. For this reason, the Indo-Pakistan conflict in Afghanistan has been one of the main factors in prolonging the war in this country. We can evaluate the conflict of interests between these two countries in Afghanistan over three periods.

Afghanistan and Power Equation between India - Pakistan

1. Competition in Afghanistan Before 2001

Both Afghanistan and Pakistan are more or less aware of their geopolitical role and influence on the world stage. Despite ethnic and cultural ties, the two countries have always had a tense history, largely due to territorial disputes between the two countries and Pakistan's territorial claims over Afghanistan, and the Durand Line is a lasting sign of this difference. On the other hand, the root of this difference is the issue of ethnicity, and its symbol is the Pashtunistan issue, which caused Afghanistan to have a negative attitude towards Pakistan's policies from the very beginning. The Durand Line, signed between England and India by King Abdul Rahman Khan of Afghanistan in 1893, has not been accepted by Afghans at any time in its history (Javadi Arjmand, 2009: 47).

With the Red Army invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the expansion of religious schools in Pakistan became a priority. Meanwhile, Pakistani religious schools provided opportunities and camps for recruitment, ideological and guerrilla warfare training for jihadists from various countries. Therefore, fanatical Deobandi scholars took over the ideological education of Pakistani religious schools to train jihadi volunteers in Afghanistan (Rafie, 2016: 192). Pakistan aimed to achieve various goals by cultivating religious groups. The first is to replace Islamism with Pashtun nationalism. Secondly, the same Islamic groups supported state establishment in Kabul; thus, on the one hand, the government of these groups wanted them not to interfere in Pakistan's internal affairs, and on the other hand, they wanted them to be away from India and close to Pakistan (Rahi, 2017).

Thus, the situation became more complicated when the Taliban emerged in the Afghan political environment. This was the first time in Afghanistan's history that Kabul's bilateral relations with Islamabad improved significantly compared to Delhi. During the Taliban Emirate in Afghanistan, Afghanistan-Pakistan relations were closer than ever and Islamabad reached "*strategic depth*" in Afghanistan for the first time in history (Mahdavi, 2016). Ahmad Rashid, a well-known Pakistani journalist, writes: At the beginning of the Afghan jihad, the opportunity for stratagems, not revenge, came to Pakistan. And the "*strategic depth theory*" began to be written into the policies of the Pakistani army. Pakistan, with constant political fear of India, tried to form a government in Afghanistan that would support Pakistan in security games (Timory, 2015).

India's policy towards Afghanistan is shaped by its rivalry with Pakistan. India and Afghanistan have had very close relations since the formation of India in 1947. Afghanistan voted against Pakistan's membership in the United Nations and subsequently supported India's policy of neutrality during the Cold War. During the Cold War in New Delhi supported Russia's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, despite strict principles of neutrality, ostensibly to maintain Pakistan's growing support for the Mujahideen. Since then, India has repeatedly supported Afghan actors that have proven useful in balancing or preventing Pakistani influence, including supporting the Northern Alliance fighting the Taliban in the 1990s (Sharan, Watkins, 2021). India's policy of not engaging with the Taliban was further emphasized during the hijacking of an Indian airliner in 1999. New Delhi accused a Pakistan-based jihadist group of hijacking the plane. The plane, taken to Afghanistan's Kandahar province, was immediately surrounded by Taliban fighters. Negotiations then began, in which the passengers on the plane were replaced by three detained rebels.¹

Pakistan supported the Taliban in Afghanistan following their conflict with India. The Pakistani army has tried to expand its strategic depth in Afghanistan to prevent Afghanistan from being encircled by India through

¹ "India announces first diplomatic contact with Taliban", *Deutsche Welle*, 01.09.2021, <https://p.dw.com/p/3zl7B>.

the Taliban. Therefore, the civil war in Afghanistan in the 1990s was actually a proxy war between India and Pakistan (Vosoughi, et al, 2014: 159).

2. Competition in Afghanistan After 2001

The geo-strategic structure of Pakistani territory is unstable and efforts to eliminate the lack of strategic depth have focused mostly on Afghanistan (Pishgahifard, 2008: 95). For Pakistan, the balance of power makes sense in South Asia in the context of its strategic rivalry with India. Therefore, Pakistan must have a dominant position in Afghanistan and, firstly, prevent India's influence in that country and secondly, prevent the formation of regional coalitions in Afghanistan. Pakistan will maintain stability in Afghanistan if a government is established under its protection. Pakistan's behavior before and after 9/11, which is, during the Taliban regime and after its overthrow, demonstrates this very well. During the Taliban regime, Pakistan had the best relations with Afghanistan; however, with the Karzai government coming to power, relations between the two countries became seriously strained. The Karzai government has repeatedly accused Pakistan of interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs and supporting the Taliban (Etaat- Ebrahim Ahmadi, 2015: 7).

During the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Pakistan gained a lot of influence and support in that country. India remained distant from Afghanistan's internal developments and its geopolitical influence diminished; because he supported Burhaneddin Rabbani's government and the Northern Alliance. After 9/11, the US launched a war on terrorism, providing India with an exceptional opportunity to vote to isolate Pakistan, and the country was able to persuade the international community to declare Pakistan a terrorist state. India immediately offered to fully cooperate with the US and provided air bases for US military operations in Afghanistan (Shafiee, 2012: 130).

India also played various roles in the Afghan state-building process. India was aware of Pakistan's policy of using Afghan territory as a training base for Kashmiri terrorists against its own territorial integrity, especially in Kashmir; Under the auspices of the US-led ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), it strengthened its position in Afghanistan by seeing the political situation in Afghanistan after the Taliban in its favor (Aghajari and Karimi, 2015: 59). Increasing India's financial aid to Afghanistan, participating in the training of Afghan police, participating in Afghanistan's energy projects, and opening four consulates in Afghanistan were just a few examples of India's increasing influence in Afghanistan. The above facts have demonstrated the vital importance of Afghanistan as a land bridge between Central Asia and South Asia (Vosoughi, et al, 2014: 159).

Afghanistan's new leaders have had close ties with India in the past. Hamid Karzai was educated in India, Abdul Rashid Dostum and Abdullah from the northern front received India's support during the Taliban period, and this relationship paved the way for friendly relations between the two countries in the post-Taliban period. Three months after the formation of Afghanistan's new government, Karzai met with Delhi's foreign, interior and defense ministers Abdullah Abdullah, Younis Qanuni and Mohammad Qasim Fahim. During the meeting, Abdullah's meeting with Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee emphasized the protection of the rights of the Sikh minority in Afghanistan, which is of concern to India. During his thirteen years in office from 2001 to 2014, President Karzai made more than ten visits to India (Modirshanechi, 2016).

The high point of India-Afghanistan cooperation came in 2011. In May 2011, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Afghanistan, where comprehensive cooperation agreements were signed between the two countries. During his visit to Kabul, the Indian Prime Minister supported Afghan President Hamid Karzai's efforts to make peace with the Taliban and declared Afghanistan to be India's strategic partner by providing financial aid of \$500 million to Afghanistan. Including this Indian aid to Afghanistan, total New Delhi aid to Kabul from 2001 to 2011 reached \$2 billion (Suri, 2011).

When Ashraf Ghani came to power in September 2014, he first put his closeness to Pakistan on his foreign policy agenda, with the aim of stabilizing the Taliban insurgents and bringing them to the negotiating table through the mediation of Pakistani officials. He went to Pakistan before other countries in the region and spoke at the Pakistan Army Headquarters and brought the relations between the two countries to a new and friendly level. Afghanistan has called on Pakistan to force the Taliban to hold peace talks or launch military operations and drive them out of Pakistan on its territory. He even agreed to risk Afghanistan's relations with India to gain Pakistan's support. At that time, he suspended a number of Indian projects in Afghanistan and refused to travel to the country for long periods. The coldness of relations with India was clear and tangible. However, Afghanistan's policy did not work and some groups in Pakistan continued to support rebels within Pakistan (Maroof, 2016).

During the Modi era, India's foreign policy changed and India provided Mi-25 military helicopters to Afghanistan, and this was a 180 degree change in India's foreign policy towards Afghanistan. Modi also announced \$1 billion in aid to Afghanistan during a conversation with Ashraf Ghani in New Delhi in September 2016, and India provided 130,000 tons of wheat to Afghanistan through the newly established Iranian port of Chabahar (Hakimi, 2019). In this meeting, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani pointed out the historical dimension of the two countries and underlined that there are many cultural, political and historical partnerships between the two countries. The use of the Chabahar port in southeastern Iran by Indian and Afghan traders was another sign

of New Delhi's determination to help Afghanistan's reconstruction and economic development. Afghanistan and India hope to expand the capacity of the Chabahar port - to transport the goods they need to their countries from this port and to expand their trade relations with Central Asian countries through the Chabahar port. At the same time as Kabul-New Delhi relations warmed up, Afghanistan's relations with its eastern neighbor Pakistan and long-time rival India became tense and strained, so that border guards of Afghanistan and Pakistan clashed with each other at the border of Torkham.¹



Map 1. Chabahar Location and Afghanistan
Source: <https://cfzo.ir/ns/2195>.

India and Pakistan strengthened their positions in Afghanistan and tried to use this as a trump card against each other; India wanted to break out of the tight fence of South Asia. And not just preventing it from being reined in by Pakistan and China; On the contrary, it will encircle and surround Pakistan with its presence in the region. In addition, Indian authorities have tried to create a stable position in the region and Central Asia by strengthening their position in Afghanistan in order to gain access to Central Asian energy resources and transport their goods to the region while fighting against terrorism (Etaat and Ahmadi, 2015: 7).

3. Taliban's Domination of Afghanistan and New Competition

The overthrow of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, with whom Delhi had friendly relations, and the sudden fall of the Western-backed government in Kabul on August 15, resulting in an unprecedented exodus of diplomats, made India the "loser" player in Afghanistan. As a result of these developments, India, like many countries, had to remove its citizens from Afghanistan, and as a result, New Delhi evacuated more than 800 people from Afghanistan within the scope of Operation Devi Shakti. According to Kugelman, there are currently two important factors against New Delhi: "The first factor was that India did not want to engage with the Taliban until the last minute. The second factor is that India's efforts in the national reconciliation process in Afghanistan have failed due to the Taliban's close ties with Pakistan." According to Michael Kugelman, the first factor puts an end to India's influence in Afghanistan, while the second factor puts New Delhi in a negative geopolitical position (Kuchay, 2021). After coming to power in Afghanistan, the Taliban stopped trade with India via Pakistan and closed two major trade terminals on the border. "Taliban has closed the land trade border and blocked the shipment of goods in transit with Pakistan," said the director general of the Federation of Indian Export Organisations. India is Afghanistan's largest market in South Asia. India's exports to Afghanistan in 2021 included medicines, medical equipment, computers, cement, clothing and sugar worth \$825 million.² The Taliban's suspension of trade with India will be a message for India and may also signal the level of bilateral relations in the future.

In addition, Indian officials have said that Taliban-ruled Afghanistan will not be part of the India-Iran-Uzbekistan Quartet, which will use the Chabahar port in Iran. The 7,200-kilometer north-south corridor was India's master plan to shorten trade time with Europe and enter the Central Asian market. The project covers thousands of kilometers of road stretching from Chabahar port in the south, through Azerbaijan in the north, to

¹ "Development of India-Afghanistan Relations", *Pars Today*, June 15, 2016, <https://parstoday.com/dari/news/afghanistan-i187>.

² The Taliban halted Afghanistan's trade with India through Pakistan, Tasnim News Agency, 29 August 2021, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1400/05/29/2557005/>.

Russia and then to Europe. Afghanistan will not participate in Chabahar port talks, although the corridor remains a priority for India, Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials said.¹

Following the latest developments in Afghanistan, the Pakistan Prime Minister's Office reiterated that the country will continue to work with all stakeholders to find a "*comprehensive political solution*" to the current crisis. However, recent statements by Pakistani leaders indicate their desire to recognize the Taliban in order to reduce criticism of the Taliban and undermine the legitimacy of the Afghan government. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan recently said, "*Afghans have broken the chains of slavery.*" In July, he described the Taliban as "*ordinary civilians.*" Lieutenant General Abdul Qayyum of the Muslim League-Nawaz opposition party said Pakistan "*should be the first country in the world*" to recognize a possible Taliban-led government in Afghanistan.²

The Taliban's control of Kabul could bring many gains to Afghanistan's southern neighbor. The two countries share a 2,400 kilometer border and there are 1.4 million Afghan refugees registered in Pakistan, with a similar number said to be living undocumented in the country. In terms of geopolitics, for Pakistanis, the rise of the Taliban means a decline in India's influence in the country. "*What particularly bothered Pakistan was the presence of Indian consulates on the border with Afghanistan, in cities like Jalalabad and Kandahar,*" said one expert. "*Pakistan viewed the consulates as the main motivation for anti-Pakistan elements such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan in the north and Baloch armed groups in the south.*" According to him, Pakistan sees the Taliban's return to power as an opportunity to regain its influence.³

Conclusion

In recent years, Afghanistan has had close political ties with many different countries simultaneously, many of which have created problems for Afghanistan due to their conflicting interests. The fact that regional powers as well as other non-regional powers involved in the developments in Afghanistan are in fact in a serious conflict of interest has made it impossible for Afghanistan to establish a reasonable balance in its relations with these countries in line with its own interests. Afghanistan has always been a very geopolitically important country for Pakistan. Pakistan had different objectives than intervening in Afghanistan, but two objectives seemed more obvious and fundamental, namely using Afghanistan as its strategic depth vis-à-vis India and creating conditions in Afghanistan that recognized the Durand Line as the official border. But after the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Pakistan's geopolitical influence decreased in this country and India began to take a dominant role in Afghanistan. During this period, Afghanistan and India were friends and strategic allies; Considering the political and security situation in the region, this situation posed common opportunities and threats for the two countries. The opportunities of this friendship and strategic alliance were that Afghanistan had many opportunities for economic growth and development. And India is one of the dynamic and growing economies of the New World and this can make the relationship between the two countries very beneficial and fruitful for both sides of the relationship. But following the US decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, it gave regional actors in Afghanistan the opportunity to gain geopolitical influence in this country again. During the four decades of war and conflict in Afghanistan, Pakistan has always been one of the most influential players in Afghanistan and this has brought Afghanistan closer to India and has made investments in Afghanistan over the past 20 years. In particular, by revitalizing the Chabahar corridor, it wanted to expand into different regions in the economic field and with this investment, it wanted to increase its geopolitical influence and maintain its superiority over Pakistan. This period ended for India when the Taliban took control of Kabul on August 15, 2021. Pakistan has a very deep-rooted relationship with the Taliban in Kabul to become an ally of Afghanistan, which means Pakistan is starting a new era in Afghanistan.

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¹ India: Afghanistan under Taliban Rule Cannot Use Chabahar Port, *Islamic Azad University News Agency*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.ana.press/news/602693/>.

² "Afghanistan Crisis; What Has Been the Reaction of Key Regional Powers to the Taliban?", *BBC News*, 29 August 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-58268582>.

³ "Afghanistan: What Are the Benefits and Advantages of the Taliban Presence in Power for other Countries?", *BBC News*, 29 August 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-58366772>

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