

Optimizing Mutual Interests in Afghanistan

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Key Points

- While regional and extra regional countries have competing interests in Afghanistan, there are opportunities for the international community to synergize and optimize security and economic efforts.
- Due to security challenges and a lack of willingness and limited capabilities of regional countries, the difficult situation facing Afghan refugees and internally displaced persons (IDP) will intensify.
- Afghanistan's natural resources and geographic importance can offset its economic challenges and lead to regional stability.
- Turkey's desire to play a role in Afghanistan presents an opportunity to address the issue of refugees and security concerns, but Turkey's direct involvement is contingent upon broad-based regional cooperation.

Introduction

While the present domestic political and security situation in Afghanistan is extremely volatile, there are opportunities to strengthen the partnerships beyond the military domain and address the Coalition interests. Every challenge creates new opportunities, but these opportunities can be time sensitive. Dividends from opportunities in Afghanistan can only be optimized when the interests of most, if not all, players are served.

Competing Interests of Regional and Extra Regional Countries

A detailed analysis on competing interests of regional and extra regional countries has already been published in the CSAG Strategy Paper 2021-11 titled, "**Competing Interest of Regional and Extra Regional Countries in Afghanistan.**"¹ The summary of respective interests follows:

China. China has long-term economic, connectivity, and security interests in Afghanistan. However, the exploitation of the new vacuum through their military and diplomatic efforts is not envisaged in the near to midterm period. While China does possess the military wherewithal to interfere in Afghanistan, its involvement is likely to remain confined to regional diplomatic efforts followed by economic efforts. Afghanistan holds vast reserves of rare earth metals, a prime need for Chinese future technical and industrial development. China is a net energy importer and desires to secure energy supply through pipelines from multiple countries. Hence, mineral exploration and development of Afghanistan as an energy and trade corridor are China's main objectives.

¹ Farhan Ali, CSAG Strategy Paper 2021-11, "Competing Interest of Regional and Extra Regional Countries in Afghanistan," May 26, 2021.

Russia. Russia does not possess neither the military and economic resources, nor the political will to physically fill the vacuum in Afghanistan. Thus, without adequate resources, Russian ambitions remains restricted, yet the notion of Russian resurgence motivates them to play a role in maintaining limited influence over future political dispensation in Afghanistan. Russian core concerns in Afghanistan remains drug trafficking, radicalization, violent extremist organizations (VEO), and maintaining regional influence.

Turkey. Turkey has historical relations with the Afghan people, especially with the Turkmen and Uzbek ethnicities. Being acceptable to most of the ethnic factions in Afghanistan, Turkey is amongst the very few countries which can play a positive role on the ground. As a NATO country with a desire to repair the strained relations with the US, Turkey is willing to remain in Afghanistan. Turkey's intention to maintain a presence in Afghanistan can serve as a conduit for balancing relations with the West, legitimizing the expansion of its influence in the East, and projecting its image as an emerging power.

Central Asian States. The main interests of the Central Asian States (CAS) in Afghanistan continue to be in the areas of security, connectivity, and economic domains. A stable and secure Afghanistan is a prerequisite to diversify CASS' energy market, grow trade, and reduce chances of radicalization of vulnerable youth. Despite having ethnic linkages and economic interests, CAS have refused to accept refugees and avoided active involvement in Afghan internal politics and security matters.

Iran. During President Trump's Maximum Pressure Campaign, the trade between Iran and Afghanistan flourished and even surpassed Afghanistan's trade with Pakistan, its major trading partner. While connectivity between the two countries is a common interest, human and drug trafficking, and disposition of refugees is a key concern for Iran. Over the past decade, in spite of Fatimiyoun Brigade patronage by Iran, Iran-Taliban relations have improved, and families of Taliban leaders reside in Iran. The Hazara community is the Iranian means to protect its interest in Afghanistan, hence Hazara inclusion in any future political dispensation is important to Iran. Iran see a continued US engagement in Afghanistan to prevent the US exerting more pressure in the Middle East and the Iranian hinterland. Therefore, Iran's core interest in Afghanistan remains security, economic/connectivity, and influence over the Afghan central government.

India. Indian interests in Afghanistan are related to markets in CAS and beyond, exploration of minerals, availability of energy resources through the cheapest and shortest route, and limiting Pakistan's economic, diplomatic, and military bandwidth. The economic opportunities are tied to the guarantee of trade routes to and from Afghanistan through Pakistan. Thus, India has pursued a policy to exert diplomatic, economic, and military pressure in order to achieve its interest without engaging with Pakistan on the core issue of Kashmir. Indian geopolitical leverage in Afghanistan is threatened due to the US pullout, and is dependent on a willingness to engage directly with the Taliban and Iran.

Pakistan. Pakistan helped the US to counter the Soviet invasion by creating the narrative of Jihad in Afghanistan. In order to garner support for the narrative, the Pakistani society gradually became conservative and thus allowed the Mujahdeen (Islamic freedom fighters) and Mohajreen (refugees) to be accommodated without any restriction. The resultant spread of refugees throughout the country brought along lawlessness; drug and gun culture; and incentivized smuggling. Hosting millions of refugees exerted enormous pressure on Pakistan's already strained economic resources and made it extremely difficult to contain the threat with limited resources. India's efforts in Afghanistan over the past two decades have complicated the security mosaic in Pakistan. Pakistan's geo-strategic location presents opportunities to be a regional transit hub for trade and the energy corridor. Thus, stability and peace in Afghanistan are core Pakistani concerns.

US/West. US/Western interests in Afghanistan are in the areas of security, political, and social domains. Response to threats from VEOs cannot be productive unless credible intelligence is furnished. Achieving this aim would warrant a presence on the ground for regional intelligence collection making the deployment of Coalition partners imperative. Saving human lives and protecting the rights of common Afghans are cornerstones of US/Western policy, and the basic pillar of maintaining higher moral ground. The political stability and assistance for the incumbent Afghan government is key interest. Comprehensive stability cannot be achieved unless the country is economically independent. Therefore, economic stability also becomes an important goal of the US/West for Afghan policies. In the context of Great Power Competition, maintaining the US enduring interests without exploitative influence by any other major player can also be viewed as a US concern in Afghanistan.

Security, Economic, and Refugees/IDPs Outlook

Today's Afghanistan is ethnically more divided and turmoiled compared to the pre-US invasion environment, making it difficult to develop a consensus on a framework of future political structure.² In the short-term, the security and economic outlook of Afghanistan is negative. No regional country has placed boots on the ground as a security provider, and none are likely to ever do so. Any physical involvement of a regional country to stabilize the security situation is likely to further deteriorate it, making Afghanistan a battleground of regional contestation and global security concerns.

Afghanistan is unlikely to function without foreign economic support in the short-term. The security and economic situation in Afghanistan will likely increase the number of IDPs and drive refugees towards neighboring countries.³ Currently, all regional countries are reluctant to host refugees because they want to avoid spillover of the security situation and incur economic constraints and domestic social complications associated with hosting refugees. The pending IDP and refugee crisis will test the West's resolve to protect human lives. The foremost and immediate need is to prepare for a refugee crisis. Civil War is envisaged to be around the corner and signals for a mass move of the Afghan people are already visible.

Needs Assessment

The Afghan people deserve peace and prosperity. To achieve this, it imperative to align, coordinate, and synergize regional and international efforts in the pursuit of peace. As in the CSAG Strategy Paper, "**Competing Interest of Regional and Extra Regional Countries in Afghanistan,**" the desired end state for Afghans, regional, and extra regional players would be:

*...a relatively united society governed through a largely acceptable decentralized system of governance, gradually moving towards becoming a peaceful and stable country, development of domestic institutions to achieve a considerable degree of regional and international neutrality, exploitation of its geostrategic location and natural resources for relative economic independence free of exploitative external influence.*⁴

² Shirin Jaffery and Ajmal Omari, "This is the first time I am holding a gun: Afghans take up arms to fight the Taliban," Pri.org, Jun 30, 2021, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2021-06-30/first-time-i-am-holding-gun-afghans-take-arms-fight-taliban> (accessed Jul 4, 2021).

³ Miriam Berger, "As Western forces pack bags in Afghanistan, aid agencies brace for new round of displacement," *Washington Post*, Jul 1, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/07/01/afghan-refugees-us-troop-withdrawal-crisis/> (accessed Jul 4, 2021).⁴ Farhan Ali, CSAG Strategy Paper 2021-11, "Competing Interest of Regional and Extra Regional Countries in Afghanistan."

The political settlement and economic stability are distant possibilities now with protecting lives being the most pressing need. Thus, the priority needs to be developing the future governance model and protecting Afghan lives.

Synergizing Efforts and Optimizing Overlapping Interests

Divergent interests of regional countries have used domestic Afghan factions in pursuit of their narrow, self-centered agenda. US/Western major interests are ending the prolonged war, scaling back the mission creep of nation building to ensuring security interests, preserving human rights, and protecting the social developments of the past two decades. As divergent interests cause instability, the interests related to security, stability, connectivity and economy, and control of rare minerals in Afghanistan are the common.

Afghanistan’s independence from international financial support will be critical for the West due to its linkages with the security domain. In the mid to long-term, the economic stability can be achieved by making Afghanistan a trade/energy corridor and exploiting its natural resources. In the context of Great Power Competition, countering growing Chinese influence, and securing control of rare earth metals/minerals is of paramount importance.

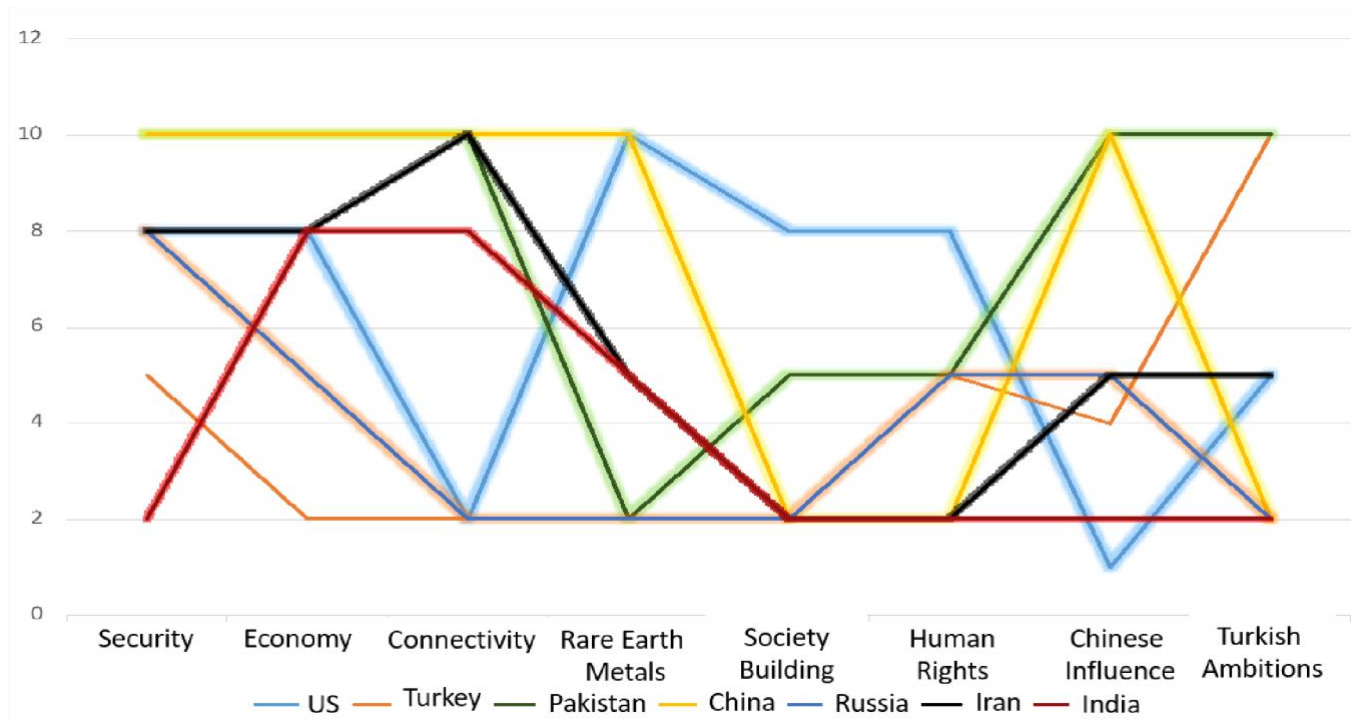


Figure 1. By-Country Interests in Afghanistan

Challenges and Opportunities

Figure 1 illustrates divergent interests in Afghanistan and highlights the complexity of coordinating regional and extra regional efforts in Afghanistan. Figure 2 highlights one of the rarest occasions where interests and opportunities to address key issues overlap. In addition, Figure 2 shows that a peaceful and economically stable Afghanistan is important for not only the region, but for the West alike. Two major challenges, which can be addressed by optimizing the efforts, are the growing concern of refugees and a power vacuum which can be exploited.

Exploitation of Afghanistan’s geographical location and its natural endowments are of value to major players. Thus, exploitation of the power vacuum in Afghanistan counteracts with the US long-term interest in the region.

The challenge of refugee outflows provides an opportunity to safeguard Western and regional interests by creating IDP camps within Afghanistan. The bases vacated by NATO forces have sufficient infrastructure to accommodate large numbers of displaced persons across Afghanistan. Turkey’s acceptance and will to play a role in Afghanistan makes Turkey a suitable option for setting up and administrating IDP camps. The establishment of IDP camps under Turkish administration will help the West to protect precious human lives and assist in addressing security interests through NATO member. Regional countries are also likely to support such an effort.

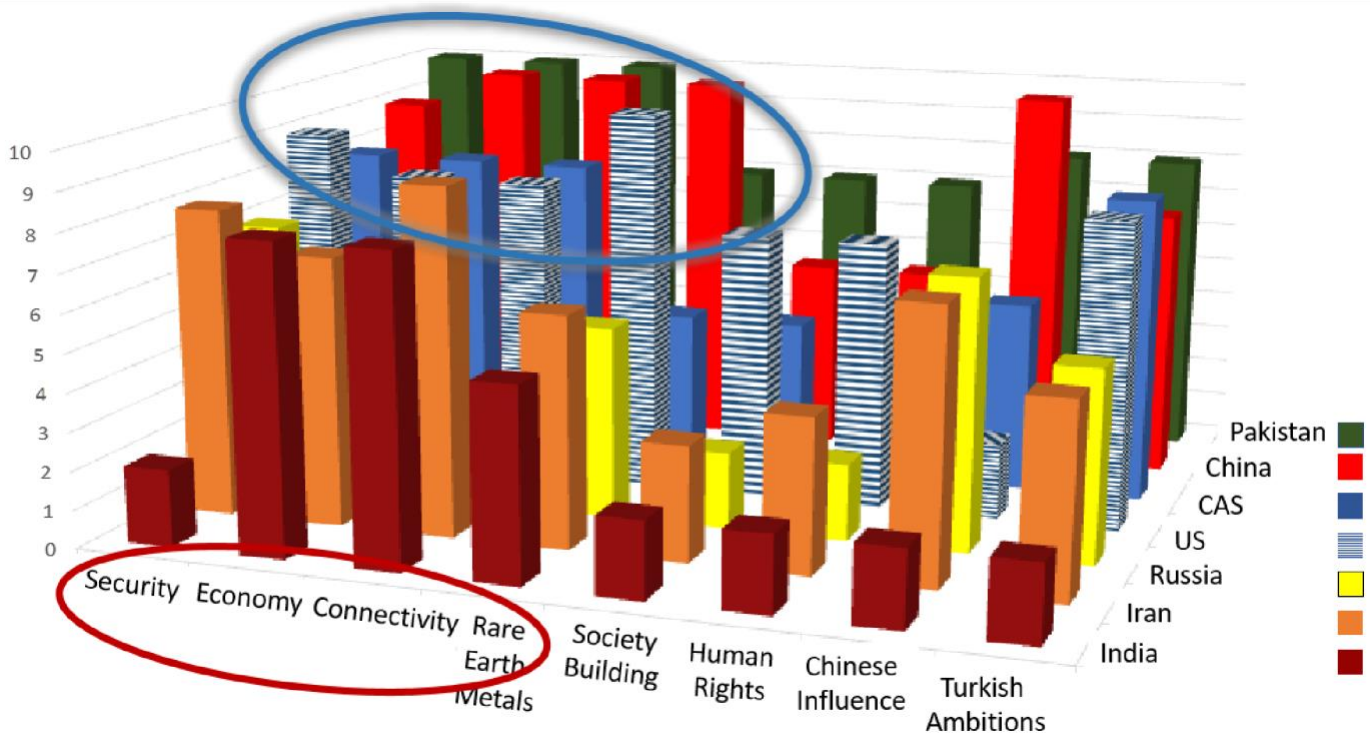


Figure 2. 3D Perspective of By-Country Interests in Afghanistan

Coordinated economic use of mineral resources, especially rare earth metals, and the facilitation of ongoing and future connectivity projects can help Afghanistan’s partners synchronize interests. Connectivity of CAS with the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean through Afghanistan is likely to foster common interests. Facilitating the completion of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India, CASA-1000, and Pakistan-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan railway connectivity project will improve economic conditions and create opportunities for long-term stability for Afghanistan and the region.

Recommendations for the US/USCENTCOM

- The Build Back Better World (B3W) paradigm should emerge as a key building block of maintaining and expanding US influence in CASA region.
- Assist local Afghan companies in mineral exploration, excavation, and evacuation.
- Coordinate with the State Department and the mining industry to establish a mineral processing plant in Pakistan.
- Coordinate with USAID / State Department on establishing 4-5 IDP Camps in vacated US bases in various parts of the country.
- Persuade Turkey to take a role in establishing and administrating the IDP Camps.
- Coordinate with regional countries in supporting the IDP camp initiative.