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The Role of Cultural Diplomacy and SAARC in Crisis Management and Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan

I. Introduction

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established in 1985 in Bangladesh with a set of objectives aimed to achieve economic prosperity and development in the South Asian region. Afghanistan became its member in 2007 by joining a list of other South Asian nations to jointly promote cultural, diplomatic and economic relations among each other to achieve a well-developed region. Afghanistan's admission into the SAARC was obviously a remarkable achievement for the newly formed government of Hamid Karzai since it came after three long decades of war and instability to recognize Afghanistan as a sovereign state able to jointly contribute to the promotion of the South Asian region. In this paper, I will appraise the role SAARC has played and can play in crisis management and conflict resolution as well as economic development of Afghanistan putting an end to the on-going array of war and conflicts in the country through cooperation, unification and contributing to the development and rehabilitation of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan, being one of the poorest countries in the world and in the South Asian region, has been through more than three decades of invasion, civil war and conflicts that have caused massive destruction to the country's economic, social and political structures. Today, Afghans desperately look forward to the results of upcoming presidential election in 2014, and hope that the election and new government will help bring peace, stability, unity among Afghans and prosperity to Afghanistan (Wilder, Andrew, 2013).

Three decades of war and instability in Afghanistan had virtually destroyed the country's educational, economic, infrastructural and political sectors. With the formation of the new transitional government in Afghanistan, Afghans from all over the world found a new hope to have a stable country. Since 2002, in the presence of the international community in Afghanistan, significant improvements have been made in various sectors of the country including educational, political and developing cultural, business and trading relations with other countries, especially with the neighboring and SAARC member countries.

International combat troops in Afghanistan are preparing to withdraw and handover complete responsibility of security throughout the country to Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) by the end of 2014 right after the election of a new Afghan president who will succeed the incumbent President Hamid Karzai to take the responsibility of forming a new government and bringing Afghans from different ethnic groups together to discontinue ethnic disputes and focus on priorities for building a united and developed Afghanistan.

The transition of security arrangements from the international combat troops to the Afghan Armed Forces (AAF) will take place after twelve years of major international development, and technical and security assistance provided to Afghanistan to rebuild the country and build the capacity of Afghans to govern and safeguard their country 2014 onwards. However, as this transition takes place, the majority of Afghan population and a large number of donor nations and international aid organizations that have provided assistance to Afghanistan since 2002 are concerned as whether or not this transition will also result in shifting Afghanistan from conflict to stability, confirming success of the international community in building an independent, secure and economically developed Afghanistan.

II. Research Question:

My research question for this paper is, How can Afghanistan benefit from the SAARC membership to end the on-going conflict in Afghanistan? I have used numerous sources of information to answer my research question for the paper.

III. Research Methodology

In the writing of this paper, I have mainly relied on secondary data. Data, facts and figures have been collected from genuine sources to ensure that this research paper represents the actual picture of Afghanistan's membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). This research paper is the outcome of studying and analyzing a number of books, articles, reports and other similar online sources. Majority of the sources used in this thesis come from books, journals and articles on the formation of SAARC, its activities to date and Afghanistan's membership. In the process of development of this research paper, every effort has been made to use only authentic sources to get accurate facts and figures. Furthermore, in order to make this research paper an actual reflection of the on-going development in Afghanistan in relation to the SAARC member countries' cooperation, I have tried to incorporate information that is reliable, timely and reflective of the true picture.

IV. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established in 1985 in Bangladesh with a set of objectives aimed to achieve economic prosperity and development in the South Asian region. Afghanistan became its member in 2007 by joining a list of other South Asian nations to jointly promote cultural, diplomatic and economic relations among each other to achieve a well-developed region.

Countries in South Asia have had strong economic, trade and cultural ties for centuries. These were generally seen by their inhabitants and rulers as a connected land mass and

integrated economic space well before they became part of the British Indian Empire. Thus, the three largest South Asian countries of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh had a common market with an integrated monetary and communication system until 1947 that is well ahead of the formation of the European Common Market in 1958.

These ties were disrupted with independence from colonial rule, and significant political differences and conflicts characterized the region during the second-half of the twentieth century. The situation worsened further in the seventies and eighties with ethnic strife resulting in the breakup of Pakistan and continued violence in Sri Lanka and parts of India and Pakistan. Afghanistan has also seen enormous instability and disruption over the last three decades. Thus, despite its common heritage going back centuries, South Asia has today emerged as the least integrated and one of the more unstable regions in the world.

Today the region has emerged as perhaps one of the most troubled and unstable neighborhoods. Six (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) of the eight current members are grappling with racial, communal, extremist or regional strife. Some of this strife is now decades old and well entrenched. With two of the major powers being armed with nuclear weapons and armed conflict in several sub-regions, it will be fair for an outsider to characterize South Asia as a potential flashpoint for major conflagration.

V. History of Conflict in Afghanistan

Afghanistan, a land locked country located in the Central Asia often referred to as the crossroads of Central Asia was founded by Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1747 when the tribal leaders unified different tribes to form a state of what is called today's Afghanistan. In the history books,

Ahmad Shah Durrani has been referred to as the founder and national hero of Afghanistan.

“Throughout his reign, Durrani consolidated chieftainships, petty principalities, and fragmented provinces into one country. His rule extended from Mashad in the west to Kashmir and Delhi in the east and from the Amu Darya (Oxus) River in the north to the Arabian Sea in the south (Michigan State University, 2013)”.

Ever since the tribal leaders united to form Afghanistan in 1747 and chose Ahmad Shah Durrani as a leader, this landlocked country in Central Asia has been fought over by outside powers from time to time. “In the 19th century it was key in the Great Game played out by the British and Russian Empires, which coveted the territory strategically located between the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, and along the ancient Silk Route used by traders. Afghanistan was severely influenced by the collisions of the British and Russian empires (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2013)”.

British concern over Russian advances in Central Asia and growing influence in Persia precipitated two Anglo-Afghan wars in 1839 and again in 1878. “The first resulted in the destruction of a British army. The latter conflict brought Amir Abdur Rahman to the Afghan throne. During his reign (1880-1901), the British and Russians officially established the boundaries of what would become modern Afghanistan through the demarcation of the Durand Line. The British retained effective control over Kabul's foreign affairs (Michigan State University, 2013)”.

Although, Afghanistan has had a turbulent history, during the period of the Second Anglo-Afghan War in 1880 to the coup of Mohammad Daud Khan in 1973, Afghanistan experienced a relatively stable and gradual period of state building and development. In 1919, the Afghan King Amanullah Khan gained independence from the British when he retook control

of the country's foreign policy by launching the Third Anglo-Afghan War. To commemorate this event, Afghans celebrate the 19th day of August every year as their independence day.

After a few decades of relative stability, progress and economic development in the country, the coup of 1978, followed by the Russian invasion in 1979, marked the initiation of the prolonged wars and conflict in Afghanistan. "In the years of conflict that followed, more than 870,000 Afghans were killed, three million were maimed or wounded, a million were internally displaced and over five million were forced to flee the country. Soviet forces withdrew in 1989, leaving the government increasingly reliant on militias to maintain control. While many Afghans hoped that the departure of Soviet forces would bring peace, the country became increasingly unstable. Through the first half of the 1990s, as mujahadeen factions turned on one another and waged bloody battles for control, civilians were subject to arbitrary, retaliatory and often random violence including robbery, torture, imprisonment and rape (The Cost of War, 2009)".

In 1995 the Taliban emerged out of the security disorder in the country and rapidly spread throughout Afghanistan, giving hope of security and peace to the Afghan population as Afghans were tired of more than a decade along war in the country. Afghans wholeheartedly welcomed Taliban so that they can bring peace to the country. However, instead of stabilizing the country, the Taliban's oppressive policies resulted in increased chaos, human rights abuses and extreme poverty. Conflicts between different ethnicities continued, while people continued migrating to the neighboring countries of Pakistan and Iran for refuge in search of peace for them and their families.

The Taliban ouster in 2001 with the help of the United States and international community again gave hope to millions of Afghans that violence would end and peace and stability would be restored in Afghanistan. However, continued insurgency and conflicts in

Afghanistan have shattered those dreams. “Though life has improved for some Afghans, still nearly half of the population lives below the poverty line, more than a quarter of a million individuals remain displaced inside the country due to the conflict and nearly three million remain in Pakistan and Iran. A whole generation has grown up never having experienced peace and many Afghans are struggling to cope with the psychological, economic, social and physical ramifications of the conflicts, past and present (The Cost of War, 2009)”.

In 2002, after the United States of America with the help of the international community ousted the Taliban from Afghanistan, the original plan of the Afghanistan’s transitional government and international community for a post-Taliban Afghanistan was to focus on prompt and fostered reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts throughout the country. In a war-torn country like Afghanistan, it obviously was a huge commitment of time, technical and financial resources to bring major fundamental changes in the government, politics and economy of the country. As of December 2011, the entire amount of external assistance (pledges) mounted to \$85 billion out of which \$70 billion had been disbursed to the government of Afghanistan. In July 2012, the amount of international pledges raised to \$119 billion which also included \$16 billion pledged in the Tokyo Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan in July 2012 and \$14 billion pledged in the Chicago Summit in May of 2012 (DCR, 2012).

The international community has made these commitments to Afghanistan for reconstruction, improvement of security, development and rehabilitation of Afghanistan after the Taliban ouster . Meanwhile, although the government of Afghanistan has significantly enhanced domestic revenue capacity, it still remains intensely reliant on external aid, without which the government would be unable to cover operational costs or fund developmental projects.

Although not as high as expected, the international funds and efforts have had some positive impact on state building and development of the country. Today, Afghanistan has an elected and recognized government, an elected parliament and a constitution that, while in need of major reforms, guarantees equal rights to all citizens, including children, women and minorities, which is a vast improvement upon the Taliban's political order.

Despite significant improvements made in many sectors, low capacity, extreme poverty, increased corruption, and on-going and increasing conflict continue to undermine the Afghan governmental institutions' ability to deliver basic services, justice and security to its people. Today, "Much of the population continues to suffer from shortage of housing, clean water, electricity, medical care, and jobs. Criminality, insecurity, weak governance, lack of infrastructure, and the Afghan government's difficulty in extending rule of law to all parts of the country pose challenges to future economic growth in the country (CIA, 2013)".

According to a report on aid and conflict in Afghanistan "Deteriorating security conditions are testing public confidence in Kabul's ability to manage the transition and are also constraining the ability of the government and international aid agencies to deliver emergency assistance and other services. Nevertheless, provided robust international political and economic engagement continues well beyond the withdrawal of foreign troops, and with a major shift in strategy, the international community still has a chance to ensure that Afghanistan survives as a viable state after 2014 (International Crisis Group report, 2011)."

VI. Role of SAARC, Cultural and Diplomatic Relations to End Conflict in Afghanistan

South Asia, comprising Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka is home to 1.47 billion people; one-fifth of the world's population¹.

¹ South Asia: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/overview>

Within this area, almost half of the population lives below the poverty line, making it one of the poorest regions of the world. A vast majority of people are illiterate, without access to proper health facilities and suffer from many negative social factors. Considering the region's social, economic and political problems, the SAARC was conceived as a regional organization which could alleviate problems and put individual states on the path to growth.

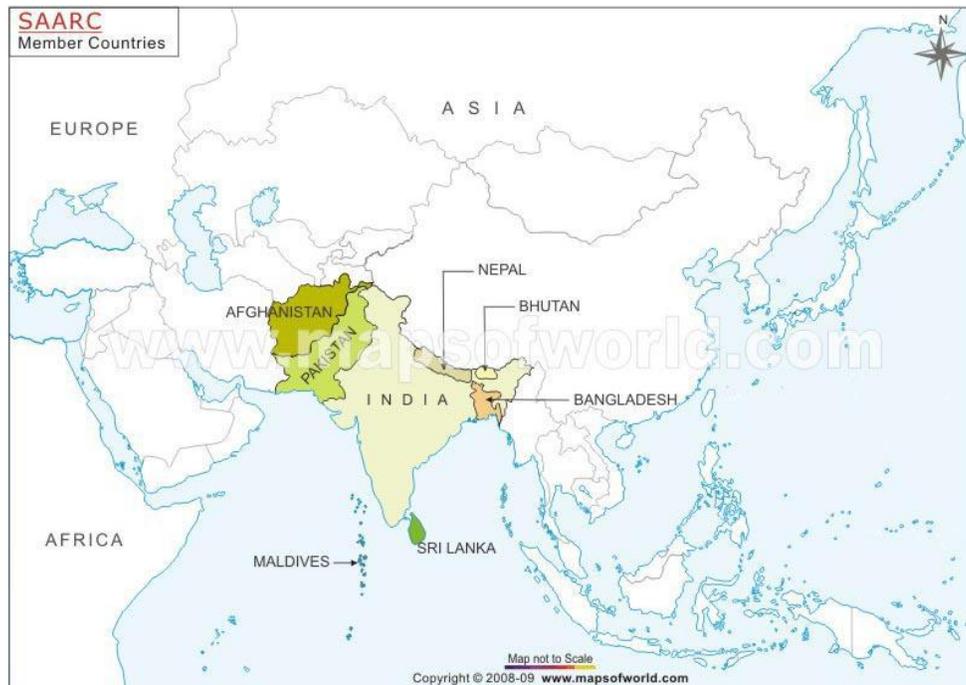


Figure 1: South Asia Map

Although, over the years SAARC has achieved a lot in bringing these countries together to jointly work to achieve socio-economic promotion and development, a lot of people still consider it less effective when compared to its sister institutions including Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). However, in this paper, I don't intend to touch that part of the issue. I solely want to focus on how maintaining good cultural and diplomatic relations with SAARC countries could be helpful to Afghanistan for the sustainability of peace and development efforts in Afghanistan since 2002.

Since 2002, the Afghan per capita GDP has been growing at an average rate of 9 percent, and domestic revenues have increased significantly from US\$ 130 million in 2002 to approximately US\$ 2 billion in 2011. Almost 8000 kilometers of national and regional highways have been either reconstructed or newly built. Around 10.5 million children are going to school, of which about 40 percent are girls. Close to 80 percent of the Afghan population have access to basic health services. Overall, the first decade of development partnership has brought significant improvements in lives of many Afghans. As follows, I would like to discuss the improvements made in the following areas in Afghanistan since 2002 and how these developments could be persevered and promoted in the next few years with the assistance of SAARC nations who are advanced in these areas:

i. Agriculture

Afghanistan's economy has always been agricultural despite the fact that only 12% of the country's total land is arable (CSO, 2013). According to the Central Statistics Organizations' (CSO) Afghanistan Statistical Yearbook 2009-10, 85% percent of the country's total population is dependent on agriculture for their livelihood and sustainability. The three decades of war and political instability has been especially detrimental to agriculture production in the country and had severely damaged agricultural lands and production declining the irrigable areas to 60%. There is hardly, if any, accurate statistics available on agricultural production and development in the country. Some available statistics show that Afghanistan's agricultural production grew at a rate of 0.2% during the era of conflicts as compared to 2.2% before the country fell into conflicts (The World Bank, 2013).

Since 2002, with the external aid and technical assistance provided by the international community, considerable progress has been made towards achieving self-sufficiency, food

security and food market-led growth. Capacity building trainings, improved seeds, fertilizers and microcredit loans have been provided to more than 750,000 farmers across Afghanistan that has helped in expanding the areas under cultivation and has increased agricultural production in Afghanistan (Department of State, 2013). SAARC nations have definitely played a huge role in making Afghanistan achieve the above mentioned figures. India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, are considered among the leading agriculture economies in the South Asian region. Over the years, these countries have had improvement in the production of wheat, cotton, corn, tea, and other products that have helped their economies significantly. Therefore, I believe that Afghanistan can progress in agriculture if the SAARC countries continue to assist Afghan farmers through the provision of improved seeds, technologies and training on how to use these.

ii. Health

Although the healthcare system in Afghanistan has come a long way since 2001 but like any other sector in country, Health sector was also severely damaged by the decades of war, political instability, gender biasness, and poverty. According to the International Human Development Indicators, Afghanistan is ranked 175 among 187 countries of the world for human development in 2013 that is based on three basic and important dimensions: health, education, income. The data gathered by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), shows that between 1980 and 2012, Afghanistan Human Development Index (HDI) rose by 1.6% annually (United Nations Development Program, 2013).

Despite significant achievements in the health sector, Afghanistan's health system still remains one of the weakest in the world. However, the government of Afghanistan in assistance from the International Community is addressing major issues in the health sector. No doubt, the challenges remain enormous but the progress in the work of the Afghan Ministry of Public

Health (MoPH) is appreciable in this connection. SAARC countries have the ability to play a major role in developing and improving the Afghan health sector. Through joint efforts, the Afghan ministry for public health can utilize the knowledge, technology and other resources available in the SAARC countries to cope with the challenges present in the health system currently. SAARC countries have already started contributing in this area through educating and training Afghan doctors who will be able to help in the next few years

iii. Education

Afghanistan's educational system was almost virtually destroyed during the three decades of war and conflicts. A large number of schools were destroyed, books and other teaching materials were put to fire and Afghan professionals, university and school teachers fled the country to protect their lives and families. Education in Afghanistan has seen many ups and downs over the years. Over a half century ago, during the reign of King Zahir Shah between 1933 and 1973, Afghanistan's education was dramatically expanded and both men and women were pursuing careers in the fields of medicine, engineering, economics, political science and other widely known fields. However, the three decades of war, conflicts and social unrest in Afghanistan have been especially detrimental to the educational sector, leaving Afghanistan's educational system as one of the weakest in the world.

During the Taliban times (1996-2001), Afghanistan's education went from bad to worse. The Taliban government banned nearly all girls from the basic right of attending schools to get formal education and a large number of boys also had a limited access to schools and universities (Bearak, Barry, 2007). The curriculum in schools and universities was highly dominated by religious studies instead of sciences, technology, literature etc. Upon the Taliban's ouster by the international community in 2001, and as a result of the new Afghan Constitution and new elected

government, education has now been made compulsory and complimentary from grade one till twelve and up to the undergraduate level for Afghans throughout the country.

Since 2002, there have been some significant improvements in the country's educational system. In 2002, CIA estimated that there were a total of 8, 00,000 students enrolled in the primary schools, most of whom were boys (Kamran, Taymor. Shah, 2012). Today, after twelve years, there are 10.5 million students studying in 16000 schools across the country of whom more than 40 per cent are girls (Adina, Sabir. Mohammad, 2013). The SAARC nations' assistance in this regard is appreciable in terms of paving way for Afghan students to study in universities in the countries of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and other SAARC nations throughout the years. Afghan youth currently forms 65% of the population in the country and therefore I believe it is importation for the Afghan government to seek SAARC help in educating the youth since the Afghan university don't have the capacity to accommodate as many students as are available every year to enter universities.

iv. Transportation

Three decades of war had left most of the roads and highways in Afghanistan devastated, making accessibility to most of parts of the country not only difficult but also full of dangers due to the bad roads and long-lasting trips from one province to another. This had also made access to quality healthcare, education, markets and other essential services difficult from all around the country. In 2002, after the ouster of the Taliban regime, it was on the government's top agenda to restore and reconstruct highways and roads to connect different provinces to Kabul to make it easier for the government of Afghanistan to implement its development and reconstruction plans. Most of the highways and intercity roads have been restored and completed with the external aid and technical assistance provided by international community. Although the Anti-Government

Elements (AGEs), time to time demolish these highways and roads with roadside mines and bombings.

Railways construction in Afghanistan were planned and started during different regimes but were never completed. Afghanistan was without railways systems until 2011. The first railways system in Afghanistan was completed in 2011 to connect the northern province of Mazar-e-Sharif to Uzbekistan for bilateral trade purpose (Railway Gazette, 2011). There are plans to extend this railway to the capital, Kabul and other major provinces of Afghanistan. Another major achievement of the present government in Afghanistan in the area of transportation is the revival and restoration of the Amu Darya (Oxus) River Bridge that connects Afghanistan with Tajikistan. During their invasion of the country, the Soviet Union had constructed a bridge across the Amu Darya to connect the two countries (Afghan Relief Organization, 2008). The United States and Norway in partnership agreed to restore this bridge to support the bilateral relations and trade between Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

The governments of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have significantly helped the Afghan government in building and restoring the country's transportation infrastructure. The Indian government facilitated the reconstruction of Kunar-Nangarhar highway while the Pakistani government helped in reconstructing the Nangarhar-Torkham Highway that is bordered with Pakistan to facilitate trade between the two countries. These countries have also helped in many other areas and the Afghan government must very well coordinate with SAARC nations for seeking their assistance in building new roads all over the country.

v. Security

After more than a decade of intervention by the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organizations (NATO), stability in Afghanistan remains a big question and a major

challenge for the international community. In spite of many efforts by the international community and Afghan government and substantial amount of resources aimed at bringing stability to Afghanistan, the result has been inadequate and unacceptable so far. Increase in security incidents over the last two years has created fears among Afghans and the international community as whether or not Afghan Armed Forces (AAF) will be capable of ensuring the security of Afghanistan after the exit of international combat troops in 2014 (The Frontier Post, 2013).

Among the major causes of the worsening security situation in Afghanistan are, the lack of proper planning and management, ever-changing policies, negligence of the geopolitical and on-ground realities of Afghanistan and over-reliance of the international community on military power without paying sufficient attention to infrastructural development, skills building and civilian assistance in Afghanistan.

As mentioned in the beginning of this thesis, a major portion of the external aid, about 51% in total, has been spent on security in Afghanistan. The number of Afghan security forces that include, the Afghan National Army (ANA), Afghan National Police (ANP), Afghan Border Police (ABP), Afghan Local Police (ALP) and members of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) has reached 3, 52,000 from none in 2002 (Government of UK, 2013). SAARC nations, especially India and Pakistan have played a major role in training the Afghan security forces in different areas including the Afghan army, Afghan police and Afghan air forces. The Afghan government must continue to seek SAARC nations' help and assistance in training and developing its Afghan national security forces to improve security and better safeguard the country.

VII. Conclusion:

An examination of key drivers, the environment and major influences reveal a potentially optimistic future for Afghanistan with continued assistance from the SAARC nations. Observing developments in the above-mentioned areas and Afghanistan's needs and requirements in different areas and knowing that after spending billions of dollars in the last 12 years the stakes are very high both for Afghanistan, for SAARC nations and for the rest of the world who directly or indirectly helped Afghanistan, I would like to conclude that although Afghanistan has significantly improved compared to the Taliban era or even before, it still needs to work hard and progress towards stability and development not just in Afghanistan but in the entire region. In this scenario, the SAARC nations' contributions will be significant to jointly put an end to the trouble in the region and help Afghanistan become independent and self-reliant.

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