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Afghanistan: Another frontier of Indo-Pak rivalry?

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July 16, 2008 | 16:29 IST

Following the [suicide attack on the Indian embassy](#) in Kabul, the role of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence has come under the scanner of the Afghan and Indian governments.

The casualties of the July 7 blast were not victims of yet another attack by the Taliban, as believed in the immediate aftermath of the attack, but rather had fallen to a carefully planned and neatly executed strike by the ISI. The increasing bonhomie in the Indo-Afghan relationship had posed a challenge to the ISI, which is interested in regaining its lost 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan.

It would now seem that the Afghan interior ministry got it absolutely right by blaming a 'regional intelligence agency' for the attack, within few hours of the incident. This was confirmed on June 11 by Indian National Security Advisor M K Narayanan, who specifically blamed the ISI. The emerging challenge for Indian interests in Afghanistan is gradually dawning upon policy makers and analysts.

'The Afghans blame Pakistan for all the trouble'

The challenge is indeed serious in nature, necessitating urgent attention if long-term Indian interests are to be sustained and to ensure that Indo-Afghan relations are not held ransom to such forces.

Indian projects, part of its \$750 million (about Rs 3,000 crore) pledged aid to the insurgency-ravaged country, have generated a lot goodwill among Afghans for India. These projects, unlike the short duration and high-visibility projects of the Western

countries, are essentially aimed at long-term development with active Afghan participation. The key Zaranj Delaram road project that would reduce landlocked Afghanistan's reliance on Pakistan for access to the sea through the Iranian port of Chabahar and provide India with an alternative route, is almost complete.

Both countries are currently working on a slew of new projects that can be taken up by India. An agreement to this effect is expected in August this year. India's non-participation in military operations alongside international forces has maintained India's image of a 'trusted friend' among the Afghan people.

For the ISI, with an enduring interest in the destabilisation of Afghanistan and reinstating its proteges in Kabul, India's projects have been seen as undermining Pakistani influence in that country. As a result, the execution of a plan of action to force India to quit Afghanistan or at least to scale down its presence has become inevitable. Afghanistan has emerged as a new theatre of Pakistani aggression on India's interests.

Why the Indian embassy in Kabul was attacked

It is ironical that the billions of dollars in aid provided by the United States to the Pakistan army to augment its capacities to fight the Taliban-Al Qaeda combine have not made much visible impact on the capabilities Pakistani security forces' counter insurgency operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The peace deals with the Taliban are only an inch short of outright capitulation. There is sufficient reason to believe that an enormous amount of money has been diverted to carry out systematic attacks on the Afghan government and Indian personnel.

There is, thus, little reason to believe that the July 7 attack would remain an aberration and India would be able to maintain its Afghan operations with marginal improvement in the security arrangements. It needs emphasis that this attack was preceded by several small scale attacks on Indian nationals and consulates, many of which received very little media reportage. Unconfirmed reports indicate that the Indians in Afghanistan are the third most vulnerable target after the American and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation forces. And in the coming days, such attacks are most likely to grow in both frequency and lethality.

In fact, the ISI's anti-India efforts have already been boosted by a resolution adopted at a conclave of jihadi outfits in early June in Rawalpindi. These militant groups primarily operating in Jammu & Kashmir, like the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, the Jaish-e-Mohammad and the Lashkar-e-Tayiba have committed more fighters for operations in Afghanistan. This has the potential of taking the 'proxy war' from Kashmir to Afghanistan. It is important to note that these groups have not reneged on their Kashmir cause but have kept it on hold till they drive American forces out of Afghanistan. Their enhanced involvement in Afghanistan will invariably be detrimental to Indian interests.

Some Afghans have named their daughters Tulsi

Notwithstanding the NSA's call for liquidating the ISI in Afghanistan, it will not be easy to dismantle the agency's deep network. The ISI's Afghan operations are almost three-decades old and its penetration levels are extremely comprehensive. Links with the Taliban and Al Qaeda have ensured that its presence is not just limited to the provinces along the Afghan-Pakistan border, but is diffused along the length and breadth of the country. **ISI cells are firmly entrenched in the headquarters of all Afghan provinces.**

In fact, ISI subversive activities in Jalalabad province have severely impacted aid delivery activities of the Indian consulate there. The consulate, despite demands from locals for more development projects maintains a low profile and its ability to extend its developmental mandate has been curtailed.

Indian intelligence operations, on the other hand, were intermittent and remained completely dependant on New Delhi's fluctuating ties with successive regimes in Kabul. India had closed its mission in Kabul in 1996 and from then on was seen supporting the Northern Alliance. During the [hijacking of the Indian Airlines flight IC 814](#) to Kandahar in December 1999, it had no contact left in that country and was constrained to be guided by the 'benevolence' of the Taliban.

India returned to the country in November 2001, a month before Hamid Karzai's interim government was installed. Since then, unlike the Pakistan's destabilizing operations in Afghanistan, India's primary focus has been in long-term stabilization of that country.

The NSA's call appears to be a momentary outburst and is unlikely to be executed with any level of seriousness. However, it needs emphasis that Indian intelligence in Afghanistan needs urgent augmentation, through generous resource allocation and trained personnel. While none want the agency to turn into a spoiler like the ISI, India must have the ability to foresee challenges and protect its interests.

To that effect, human intelligence in Afghanistan will have to be augmented by identifying and nurturing elements inside the fractured Taliban. A strategy of this nature is at a preliminary stage and needs to be deepened. On the other hand, any reprisal attack on the ISI will have to be swift and decisive. India cannot afford to engage in a protracted Indo-Pakistan covert war in Afghanistan.

India's tasks will be made easier by a possible agreement with the Afghan government to jointly address the challenges. Plans are being drawn up for intelligence agencies of both countries to share information about terror infrastructure and financial links of terror groups.

'The Taliban have returned'

The July 7 attack did lead to speculation about a pro-active Indian role in Afghanistan and the possible deployment of army personnel in that country. The Indian government has decided to retain its present course in Afghanistan. It, however, needs to be

understood that in the event of more attacks in future, the government of the day in New Delhi will find it extremely difficult to resist altering its long practiced policy in Afghanistan. Such a course will not be in India's long-term interest in the region.