Chapter 7

Conclusion

In the foregoing chapters an attempt has been made to examine the historical evolution of triangular relations among India-Afghanistan-Pakistan, in general, and since the fall of the Taliban regime, in particular. The chapters analysed the changing dynamics of Afghanistan-India-Pakistan relations since c. 2001 and outlined their diverse and competing interests within the triangular relationship. An attempt was also made to describe and analyse the major causes of the conflict between India and Pakistan and Afghanistan and Pakistan and relationships among the three states using the triangular approach. In this concluding chapter, the major observations of the preceding chapters are gathered together by way of summing up.

South Asia remains one of the most volatile regions of the world, which contains two nuclear powers, India and Pakistan, and a fragmented state, Afghanistan. The geopolitics of South Asia has been shaped by a dynamic triangular relationship among Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. They share borders, ethnicities and histories in common. These countries constitute a triangle on which depends the prospects of peace, governance, and stability in the South Asian region. It is a product of two bilateral conflicts, India-Pakistan and Afghanistan-Pakistan that involved diplomatic rivalry, conflicting views and wars that threatened regional security and cooperation many a times in the past.

The partition and the problems intensifying in its wake embittered the relationships among these countries. Historic developments have created enmity and mistrust in their dynamic relationships. Over the years, their mutual distrust and antagonism have risen and fallen. This pattern continues to the present day. Thus, the triangle has a history of conflicts, unproductive peace process, and deep mistrust rooted in the past animosities. Their relations continue to be marred by differences and distrust.

Due to its geostrategic and geopolitical significance, the Northwestern South Asia remains always a battlefield for great powers. Afghanistan was the centre of the “Great Game” in the 19th century, when imperial Britain and Russia tried to exert influence on
Afghanistan and in the whole region. It was a struggle for political dominance, security and control, conducted by two imperial powers over population and contiguous land areas. It was the geopolitical rivalry between these two imperial powers. The enmity of the two imperial powers led them to contain each other by fixing “strategic frontiers”. The game informed the emergence of the modern study of so-called “geopolitics”. Geopolitics is an approach to foreign policy study that comprehends the activities, interactions and the importance of nations in terms of geographical features, such as environment, location, terrain types, populace, and natural resources. Both political processes and geographical locations are dynamic and influence each other.

Consequently, these states follow diverse policies and approaches at various epochs depending on the geopolitical conditions. As a result, geographical circumstances of any state have enormous impact on its foreign policy. It is only one of the many factors affecting the power of a state. The major emphases of geopolitics included: First, the belief that nations have centres, consciousness, boundaries, communication wires, and diverse cultures. Second, area and resources could determine country’s power and strength. Third, countries are in persistent competition and the powerful countries could seek to enlarge to consolidate and fortify their influence (Chapman 2011).

Therefore, geopolitics is not a constant but a dynamic variable that describes the altering geographic distribution of routes and of natural and economic resource. Throughout history, geography has been the arena of which empires and states have encountered. It is the most vital element in international politics because it is the most permanent and also determining national power. This feature impacts the geopolitical course of states in the path of either sea power or land power. The major features that substance in the geopolitical importance of the triangle are: First, the geographical position of this sub-region on the global atlas; Second, the valuable natural resources and productivity of this specific area; Third, technological advancement; Fourth, massive manpower; and, Fifth, the accessibility of this specific area from the exterior.
Since 1990, the new geopolitical realities were largely driving major regional and external powers competing for influence both for maximising economic and security stakes in South and Central Asia. The propensity among the states of the region to interfere in the internal dealings of each other also offers a chance for extra-regional powers to uphold or contrary to political or territorial assertions (Paul 2011). India, China, Turkey, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and the USA have diverse interests and agendas that clash in one or more parts of the entire region. Many scholars, authors, practitioners and analysts view this as a “New Great Game”.

South Asia has yet again become a battlefield for this “New Great Game” though the players of the game have not remained the same. It has already altered. India and Pakistan’s involvement in Afghanistan is an extension of the “New Great Game”. Both became involved in a proxy war there. This is apparent in the military-security, commercial dealings, and political-diplomatic arena. Both countries indict the other of utilising their country to exert influence and destabilise the other. Afghanistan is playing an important role in regional politics, having its own agendas. It is playing a tricky game only for its own benefit.

Subsequently, these countries have witnessed highs and lows in their relationships since the inception of the triangle in 1947. So, their enmities are based on conflicting territorial claims, conflicting regional aspirations, asymmetrical distribution of economic and military power among the three states. Geopolitical orientation is vital for comprehending the triangular dynamics. All the three parties have overriding national interests and objectives in this situation.

However, the new geopolitical situation emerged in South Asia after the September 2001 terror attacks in the USA. However, no geopolitical issue has received more attention than the challenging security situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The acrimonious nature of their relations has played a significant role in undermining their political stability. Another key source of Afghanistan-Pakistan tension is the burgeoning Afghanistan-India relations since the fall of the Taliban rule.
In addition, the invasion of the USA-led NATO forces in Afghanistan since 2001 has exacerbated the challenges and issues in the region. Since then, the regional environment has changed considerably. The region faces environmental degradation, economic turmoil, political instability, refugees and displacements, secessionist movements, nuclear proliferation, civil wars, and the “War on Terror”. Issues of terrorism, fundamentalism, and religious radicalism have also plagued the region for the last three decades. Their dynamic perceptions have significantly shaped and influenced politics and policies among these complex states. This has also generated apprehensions among them despite a shared sense of geography, culture and history. So, this triangle has largely contributed a hostile environment in the entire region.

Coming to India-Afghanistan relations, Afghanistan became crucial for India since the Mughal rule in the subcontinent. Its geographical position has largely enhanced Afghanistan’s significance for India and other regional and extra-regional states. Afghanistan and India’s relationship is not merely a product of contemporary geopolitical orientation. But the geographical and socio-cultural dimensions reflect the long legacy of the close links between the two states. However, the cruel partition of the Indian subcontinent in August 1947 ended India’s physical proximity with Afghanistan. Since then, India’s ties with Afghan governments have remained relatively amiable except the Taliban regime. Both countries have maintained cultural, economic, and political links, but their relations underwent several changes and transformations since 1947. The issue of the famed Durand Line, however, got transferred to Islamabad given the conflictual nature of Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship.

The period between 1947 and 1996 can be characterised as the era of cooperation and harmony between them. But later the Afghan civil war and the Taliban occupied Afghanistan escalated tension between the two states. Afghanistan’s antagonistic relationship with Pakistan over the legacy of the Durand Line and for the establishment of Pashtunistan and preferences of non-alignment policy brought it very close to India during the Cold War era. Afghanistan tilted towards India and, later, the development of closer relations with the Soviet Union had negative effects on its relations with Pakistan. Afghanistan’s participation in the Soviet Union-India partnership was considered hostile.
and a menace by Pakistan. India and Afghanistan also signed Treaty of Friendship in 1950 to institutionalise their relationship.

Despite their cordial relations, few factors were responsible for deterioration of their friendly ties. These were included: First, India had remained silent on the question of separate Pashtunistan in the international meetings where Afghanistan needed more support; Second, Afghanistan sided with Pakistan during India-Pakistan wars in 1965 and 1971; and, Third, when the conflicts arose across Afghanistan between pro-communists and anti-communists it also did negative impact on India-Afghanistan relations. In addition, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan also laid a formidable challenge to India’s Afghanistan’s policy because it put India in a complex situation affecting its credibility and prestige at in the international arena. It was caught in between the NAM of which it was a founding member and the friendship treaty signed by India with the Soviet Union in 1971.

Two major factors led India to not endanger its relationship with the Soviet Union. First, the Soviet Union provided major supplier of space technology and defence programme. Second, it had also played an important role in supporting India over Kashmir issue and Bangladesh Independence War in 1971 in various international meetings. It has also been argued that the Soviet Union also served as a counterbalance to the USA-China-Pakistan alliance.

The 1988 Geneva accords endeavoured to resolve the Afghan problems through peaceful means, but later on, it was extremely politicised. Because of the failure of these accords, militant factions were locked in the power struggle during the period between 1992 and 1996, which intensified the Afghan crisis. When Taliban came into power in 1996, the conflict between the Taliban government and Tajik-Uzbek dominated Northern Alliance further exacerbated instability, insecurity, and power struggle. India, Iran, and Russia tacitly supported the Northern Alliance tried to make their influence in Afghanistan.

The period between 1996 and 2001 was frosty between Afghanistan and India. India had to close its Embassy in Kabul. India didn’t recognise the Taliban government
because it was antithetical to India’s interests. During that phase, the militants of Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI) hijacked India’s flight IC-814 from Kathmandu, Nepal and landed at Kandahar, Afghanistan. The Taliban government supported the hijackers and warned the Indian military to take any action against them. That forced the Government of India to deal with the Taliban regime and the then External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh handed over three militants in exchange for 155 passengers and the crew. Thus, their relations were reached at the lowest point in their historical relationship.

However, the September 2001 terror attacks altered the geopolitical situation of the South Asia. In October 2001, the USA-led NATO forces drove the Taliban government out of Kabul. It gave India a big opportunity to return to Afghanistan. India promptly joined the international community in seeking ways to reconstruct Afghanistan. Since then, India has adopted soft power and pro-active engagement in Afghanistan. It has made strong connections with diverse cultural and ethnic and religious groups and political affiliations in the country. India moved quickly to extend its footprints in this war-torn country by opening its embassy in Kabul and other four consulates in Mazar-e-Sharif (western Afghanistan), Herat (northern Afghanistan), Jalalabad (eastern Afghanistan, Kandahar (southern Afghanistan).

Subsequently, India has also played a significant part in the rehabilitation and renovation in this war-ravaged country. Their ties have moved from the cultural and historical traditions to the development cooperation covering all the areas. India has used a series of economic policy mechanisms – including development aid, private sector investment, and trade promotion – to foster peace and stability and intensified India’s influence in Afghanistan. India has pledged $750 million dollars towards reconstruction and rehabilitation process.

Today, India is the largest donor from the region to Afghan rehabilitation and reconstruction process. Its assistance focuses on building human capital and helping in a number of social and economic projects like rural electrification, small-scale irrigation projects, as well as improving security. It is also providing medical care, constructing new roads and dams, and assisting with the educational system in an attempt to enlarge and improve Afghanistan’s long-term capabilities. The 218 km Zaranj-Delaram
Highway, Salma Dam Power project, the Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul electricity transmission line, the Indira Gandhi paediatric hospital, and the Afghan parliament are some of the vital investments.

Both states signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2011 to extend their security. India also pledged to fortify the capabilities of Afghan national security forces. This marked the consolidation of their traditional bonds. Perceiving India’s role only to promote security and stability in Afghanistan is quite unrealistic. It has, however, some major interests there. These include: First, to deny Pakistan ‘strategic depth’; Second, to curb extremism and terrorism; Third, to exploit rich energy resource in Afghanistan and CARs; Fourth, aspire to become a major power; and, Fifth, to support democratisation process in Afghanistan.

The revival of the Taliban and other extremist groups, rising of opium production, factional fighting and lawlessness, and culture of war lordism still exist on the Afghan soil. Hence, the task of reconstruction and democratisation process so as to ensure stability and peace in Afghanistan is looking devoid of substance.

The relations between India and Pakistan and Afghanistan and Pakistan have never been friendly as history reveals ever since the partition of the subcontinent. Pakistan is closer to both India and Afghanistan but they are very complex neighbours. Geo-strategically, Pakistan is situated between India and Afghanistan and shares long borders with both. Both have a common problem in border relations with Pakistan: India over Kashmir and Afghanistan over Pashtunistan. The borders between Pakistan and Afghanistan and India and Pakistan have remained problematic and controversial down to the present day. The border disputes have poisoned their ties. The disputes have remained perennial factors in their relationship. Pakistan’s relations particularly with India have been full of tensions, wars, and complex conflicts.

Indeed, Afghanistan-Pakistan relations have remained estranged despite sharing several things in common like religion, history, geography, and ethnic groups. They are the major players in the region, with substantial demographic strength. Their destinies are so intertwined that they impact on each other. Political instability or economic stagnation
in either Afghanistan or Pakistan is bound to have a substantial effect on the other state. They have direct interests in each other. They have never succeeded in establishing cordial bilateral ties free of apprehensions. The relationships have been very complex due to antagonism and mistrust, ideological and political values, and above all the domestic politics of both states. Afghanistan was the only country in the world that voted against Pakistan’s inclusion in the United Nations.

The number of factors began to impinge their relationship. These included demand for independent Pashtunistan, the Durand Line, terrorism factor, and the growing India-Afghanistan ties. So, their tense relationship remains as one of the most serious challenges in the subcontinent. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in December 1979 has considerably altered the nature of their relationship. The intervention provided a great opportunity to Pakistan to organise the Afghan rebel groups and assisted them to set up their headquarters in Peshawar. Pakistan has played a significant role in the Soviet war and after the collapse of the Marxist government in Kabul. During that period, the Pakistani military developed a new concept, which was based on ‘strategic depth’. Pakistan helped the Taliban to install its government in Afghanistan in 1996. The period between 1996 and 2001 saw cordial ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

However, the regime was overthrown as a result of the USA-led NATO attacks in October 2001. In November 2001, the Taliban regime completely collapsed. Pakistan did a U-turn on its policy towards Afghanistan. Islamabad has joined the USA-led NATO forces against its former friend, the Taliban in Afghanistan, to protect its national interest. This decision marked a paradigm shift in Pakistan’s policy towards the Taliban in post-September 2001 era. In December 2001 a new interim government was formed under the leadership of Hamid Karzai. This was included many Afghan factions in a power-sharing arrangement.

The bitter exchanges and mutual recriminations have persistently spoiled the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The mutual pledges made by them, including prevention of interfering in each other’s internal affairs, and enhancing border security and counter-terrorism efforts, couldn’t be fully realised. The major reasons for this were the escalating Taliban attacks after the death of Mullah Omar. The Afghan
policy of peace and reconciliation with the Taliban and Islamabad has also failed till the present day. For Islamabad, an accommodation between Kabul and the Taliban would ease the pressure and also re-establish its influence in Afghanistan to balance the inroads made by India there. Until Afghanistan and Pakistan focus on resolving their issues and problems, the notion of stability and peace seems very complex.

Indeed, their geographic contiguity remains the root cause of their conflict and competition. So, their interactions, sometimes hostile and competitive, constantly define the security dynamics of South Asia. They are considered the most fragile places and unstable states in the world. As they have the most vulnerable terrorist elements, economic collapse, and political changes. Subsequently, the increasing terror attacks in both the countries make the condition worse in the region. The Taliban resistance has intensified in Afghanistan. In Pakistan, militancy has increased largely. So in both countries, extremist elements have increased, including attacks and suicide bombings on the state apparatus. Over the years, the border has proved the major source of friction between the two neighbors. Recently, they have also closed the borders as well.

India and Pakistan relations have witnessed highs and lows in bilateral relations since their inception as sovereign states. They have remained locked in a bitter enmity that has characterised their relationship. This enmity has led to wars between these two South Asian countries on four occasions 1947-48, 1965, 1971 and 1999 (in Kargil), decades of skirmishes and low intensity conflicts. They have some conflicting issues, but Kashmir issue is the ‘core’ which obstructs the creation of trust between them. Periodically, however, these two countries have engaged multiple times in pursuing peace with each other through negotiations and intended to reduce differences and resolve their controversial issues.

The third-party involvement in the Indus Water Treaty and Rann of Kutch settled the disputes and pushed both parties to reach compromises, but there was no arranged mechanism to navigate their enduring conflictual relationship. Both states have regularly engaged in bilateral talks to resolve disputes and differences on a wide range of issues. These included: trade and commerce issues, border demarcation, water distribution, protection of minorities, and nuclear and conventional CBMs. However, they helped to
ease their tensions by re-establishing broken contacts and upgrading them, enhancing people-to-people contact and providing institutional devices for them to discuss their differences. Thus, the normalisation of relationships becomes significant in the context of conflicting countries. Instead of resolution of earlier disputes, new issues arose between them out of the earlier agreements in the 1980s.

These two countries hardly implemented the Simla Accord, while they violated the agreement by occupying the higher peaks at Siachen glacier in 1984 which created a new dispute between them. In the 1970s and 1980s, instead of the resolution of their old conflicts and differences, the new disputes arose between them which includes Siachen and Tulbul Navigation.

Since the 1980s, development of nuclear weapons have played a vital role in India-Pakistan confrontation i.e., Siachen skirmishes, Brasstacks Operation in 1986-87, Kashmir Crisis 1990, Kargil 1999, military standoff 2002 and terror attacks in Mumbai in 2008. In May 1998, these two countries tested nuclear weapons. The issue of nuclear arms changed the whole spectrum of their relationship. Apart from Kashmir, the nuclear question has been a stumbling block in the accomplishment of the dialogue process. Since 1998, the region faced the dangers of nuclear war including Kargil war 1999, border confrontation in 2001-02, Mumbai attacks 2008, Gurdaspur attack in July 2015, Pathankot attack in January 2016 and Uri attack in September 2016. The relations between these two severely strained by the recent terrorist attacks on the Indian soil, have deteriorated considerably since then. Even a minor conflict runs the risks of escalating into an exchange of arms with nuclear warheads, which could have disastrous consequences for the region and beyond.

There were differences on the inclusion of major issues between them on the agenda of talks since their inception as free-standing states. They were able to eradicate this difference in 1997 to establish the CDP and agreed to include eight contentious issues namely peace and security CBMs; Jammu and Kashmir; Siachen; Sir Creek; Wullar Barrage/Tulbul Navigation Project; terrorism and drug Trafficking; economic and commercial cooperation; and promotion of friendly exchanges in various fields on the agenda of bilateral talks. This was the acknowledgment of the fact that both countries
have come to terms with the indispensability of the Simla Agreement as well as with each other in a good neighbourly spirit.

The first attempt of CDP was collapsed with the outbreak of the Kargil crisis. Following the Kargil crisis and the failing of the Agra Summit, prospects for negotiation worsened due to the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament on 13 December 2001. But the violation of these agreements made the peace process unproductive. The main achievements of the CDP have been the enhancement of India-Pakistan connectivity and contacts, while mistrust and limited contacts hindered them to resolve the concerns till date.

Bilateralism is the best way to provide harmonious solutions. The few summit meetings and gestures cannot bring solutions or peace between them. The CDP should be continued. The only possible way to solve their concerns is through CDP. The two countries should promote more and more contacts between people. It could assist them to move from a condition of mutual antagonism and reduce enmity that could enhance further security and stability in the region. It would also remove the mental barriers erected by the division of the subcontinent. The longer India and Pakistan remain estranged from negotiation on these issues, the more distrust would be built up and both sides could expect the worst from each other. In addition, the long-term sustainability of their CDP depends on achieving tangible progress on the ‘core’ issue of Kashmir. Without achieving any development on this issue, their relations will remain perennially vulnerable and hostile. Nevertheless, if bilateralism produces peace, then it will have to be embedded within a trilateral agreement involving Afghanistan as well for benefits of peace and stability to be shared by the entire sub-region.

The historical assessment proves that it is the incoherent relationship and unsettled issues between India and Pakistan, on the one side, and Afghanistan and Pakistan, on the other side, that have prevented them from harmonising their relationships. Their relationships also show that their destinies are tied jointly by a pattern of divergence that affects each country’s territorial security, its diplomatic and political identity and international position.
These states more frequently perceived each of their national interests. All these states have a different vision for one another and for themselves. They have a range of political, economic, and security interests with one another. These countries are employing different strategies to achieve their objectives in this region. So, the diverse interests of the sub-regional stakeholders have contributed to the regional instability and insecurity. The crux of this triangular relationship is that each player worries of the other two against itself. The threat exists for all of the states. Without a potential trilateral engagement and cooperation, endeavours towards enduring peace, security and stability not only in war-ravaged Afghanistan but in the entire region will most likely fail.