

Strategic and Economic Importance of Afghanistan for India

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ABSTRACT

Strategically, Afghanistan is important for India because of its dream of accessing the Central Asian market and these ties become stronger after the incident of 9/11. India has enormous security stakes in the stability of Afghanistan. As an emerging power, it cannot remain confined to South Asia and a peaceful Afghanistan is good for Indian trade and energy security. Having this background, the present paper focuses on the Strategic and Economic importance of Afghanistan for India and further highlights India's present role in making Peace and Stability in Afghanistan. India has a longstanding cultural, historical and economic association with Afghanistan. Indian military's non-involvement throughout Afghanistan's troubled past and the fact that the two countries do not share a common boundary also helps. As an important member of SAARC, India's influence in the Peace talks would have been instrumental in establishing the objectives of the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) agreement. It wants to retain Afghanistan as a friendly state from which it has the capacity to monitor Pakistan and even, wherever possible, asserts to influence activities in Pakistan. India is keenly interested in developing a significant partnership with Afghanistan. So, due to Strategic and security concerns, the India-Afghanistan cordial relations promote the interests of both the nations. And this paper highlights the various challenges that India is facing in Afghanistan to shape the regional security architecture to prevent the conflict dynamics and tries to play a proactive role rather than reacting to the evolving situation.

1. Introduction

Afghanistan has remained the focus of Indian regional policy because of its geo- strategic location. India has enjoyed cordial relations with Afghanistan since 1947. The relationship was further strengthened by the signing of the "Friendship Treaty" in 1950 and the Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between the two countries in 2011. India increased its investments in developmental activities in Afghanistan by co-operating industrial, irrigation and hydro-electric projects. It is the notational interests of both Afghanistan and India to unify their capabilities and respond against potential aggressors. Both Afghanistan and India have democratic governments committed to following international norms and cooperation. Afghanistan can serve as a bridge to Central Asia's energy resources and alter India's continental trade. The principal objective of India's development partnership, covering the entire and all sectors of development, is to build indigenous Afghan capacity and institutions. India has played an active role in the development of Afghanistan based on the understanding that social and economic development is to key to Afghanistan becoming a source of regional stability. India's pledged assistance to Afghanistan stands at U.S \$ 1.3 billion and is the sixth largest bilateral donor in Afghanistan.¹

Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru once remarked about Indian relations with Afghanistan

*'Ever since India's independence, we have grown closer to each other, for a variety of reasons. The long memory of our past was there, and the moment it was possible to renew them, we renewed them. And then came mutual interest, (our common hostility towards Pakistan) which is a powerful factor.'*²

These lines show the relationship between India and Afghanistan is not new and these old ties help India in this present situation. For India, Afghanistan's geo-strategic importance is manifold in terms of political, strategic and economic gains in the presence of major players in the country. Indian policy makers know that strategic presence and foothold in country like Afghanistan would give impetus to the Indian strategic objectives and give a hold over Indian claim of being a major global power. And further the Indo-Afghan development cooperation is likely to increase in importance and volume after the withdrawal of most international forces in 2014. In Humanitarian Assistance, India is currently supports a daily distribution of high protein biscuits and also included medical services and equipment through the reconstruction of the Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health in Kabul and the provision of free medical consultation and services to over 30,000 Afghans monthly through Indian Medical Missions in five Afghan cities. India's growing engagement in development cooperation with Afghanistan reflects its increasing regional and global ambitions. Securing access to energy and natural resources.³

From historical point of view, India and Afghanistan have maintained close and cordial relations except for the Taliban era. India had totally backed Afghanistan to continue propaganda against Pakistan to serve her own interests. At the time of Russian invasion of Afghanistan, India and her intelligence agencies provided full support to the USSR against the Taliban. Again 9/11 provided an opportunity to India to make inroads in Afghanistan particularly after the Bonn Agreement 2001. Since then, India has followed a policy of high-level engagement with Afghanistan. Presently, India is one of the primary donors towards Afghanistan's reconstruction. Apart from providing aircraft to Afghan Ariana

Airlines, India has been active in building roads, schools, hospitals, power and communication networks, besides training Afghan military and police.⁴

2. Review of Literature

Capt. C.P. Tandon (Retd), *Afghanistan Post-Conflict Reconstruction*, Sumit Enterprises: 2015

The author analyzes the nature of post-conflict reconstruction. Ending chapter of the book also introduce post-conflict reconstruction theory, explores how security is provided for the Afghan population and identifies actors in this field.

Roy, Arpita Basu, *Afghanistan Beyond 2014: Domestic and Regional Dynamics*, Pentagon Press, 2016.

It deals with themes such as: internal political dynamics and power-struggle in Afghanistan, criticalities of security transition in Afghanistan, reconciliation between the other ethnic groups and the Taliban, possibilities of an "Afghan-owned" and "Afghan-led" process, regional security and the role of the regional countries, global response to the Afghan issue, India's and Pakistan's security dilemma vis-a-vis Afghanistan and India's workable response.

Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, *The War on Freedom: How and Why America was Attacked, September 11, 2001, California: Tree of life Publications, 2002.*

The purpose of this study is not to provide exhaustive conclusion but to point to the most pertinent questions and issues that have as yet to be thoroughly examined in a comprehensive manner, by assessing the facts on record.

Shaida Mohammad Abdali, *Afghanistan, Pakistan, India: A Paradigm Shift*. Pentagon Press 2016.

The author is Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the Republic of India as well as non-resident Ambassador to Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal has a strong grasp on Afghanistan's international relations. This book explores the trilateral relationship and how a peaceful stable Afghanistan will lead to a peaceful and stable region.

Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, Pittsburgh: RAND, 2008.

The focus of this research is on the U.S military. However, since the actions of other U.S government agencies, countries, international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are obviously important, they are discussed where appropriate.

Raja Muhammad Khan, "China's Economic and Strategic Interests in Afghanistan" *FWU Journal of Social Sciences*, Special Issue, summer 2015, Vol.1, No.1

The article examines post 2014 scenario, 'constructive engagement with Afghanistan will serve the Chinese strategic, economic and security interests.

Edwards M. Lucy, "State-building in Afghanistan: a case showing the limits. *International Review of Red Cross*, Vol : 92,(880), 2010, pp.5-15.

This paper explores multilateral development agencies, too, must change their attitude to face- to-face relations and value them as much as they have previously valued bureaucratic forms of organization.

3. Significance of the Study

The proposed study is designed to study the role of India in State-Building and Peace-Making process in Afghanistan. The present study throws light on the strategic and Economic importance of Afghanistan for India. The importance of the present work lies in the fact that South Asia is one of the most volatile areas in the world from where extremism spread to the rest of the world, needs a deeper examination. And the present study focuses India's role in this direction. Moreover, the study will attribute to the existing literature related to the Peace and Stability in Afghanistan. It will undoubtedly present up-to-date information regarding the working, achievement and obstacles in the path of reconstruction of Afghanistan.

4. Objectives of the Research

1. To Explore India's Economic and Strategic interest in Afghanistan.
2. To Explore India's Soft power strategy in Afghanistan.
3. To highlight major challenges faced by Regional powers in State-Building process in Afghanistan.

5. Research Methodology

The study will be primarily analytical in nature and to make it more comprehensive- Historical, analytical, descriptive and documentary method will be applied. Various methods of data collection employed for the study included namely material available on internet sites in the shape of research articles, research journals and online documents available on various official and non-official sites. Intensive study of and review of various research articles, research journals, newspapers and books related to the current problems have been used in completing the current study. Primary sources include government reports, declassified documents etc. which are collected through official websites are used.

6. Historical Background

Historically, Afghanistan has been the land bridge to India from the West. The two countries also have a common history, with several empires having encompassed areas of present day Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Despite the Cold War and ensuing regional and geostrategic calculations of all neighboring countries, relations between India and Afghanistan remained friendly. The relationship only deteriorated when India was one of the first and few countries to recognize the Soviet installed government in Kabul in 1979. Yet India remained engaged with Afghanistan during the civil war that followed Soviet withdrawal in 1989, providing Afghanistan with several million U.S. dollars in grants and humanitarian assistance through the United Nations during the 1990s. Only

with the rise of the Taliban in 1993 India totally severed official relations with Afghanistan. Instead, from the 1990s up until 2001 India provided development assistance to Afghanistan through funding for United Nations (UN) agencies providing humanitarian assistance in the country. During this period India also provided intelligence and military support to the Northern Alliance, the main anti-Taliban force.⁵

The present study, focuses on the Strategic and Economic importance of Afghanistan for India and further highlights India's present role in making peace and stability in Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan began on October 7, 2001, as US led international forces launched Operation Enduring Freedom against the Taliban regime. The US administration removed the Taliban regime from power and established a democratic government in Afghanistan. But under domestic pressure and due to growing number of casualties of NATO soldiers the U.S decision to withdraw from Afghanistan and further announcement of their subsequent withdrawal have further generated a debate on the evolving pattern of Afghan polity and its prospective implication on the regional and international strategic environment. In recent years there has been growing calls for regional actor whether individual countries or regional organizations to engage more fully with Afghanistan. After the Western troop drawdown in 2014, now there are more space for regional involvement in the country. This study focuses on various initiatives taken by international community and particularly India to make Afghanistan a secure and stable country.⁶

The incident of 9/11 provided an opportunity to India to make inroads in Afghanistan particularly after the Bonn Agreement 2001. Since then, India has followed a policy of high-level engagement with Afghanistan. Presently, India is one of the primary donors towards Afghanistan's reconstruction.

Afghanistan is a landlocked multi-ethnic society located in the heart of South-Central Asia. And connecting the important trade routes Southern and Eastern Asia to Europe and the Middle East. And the prominent ethnic groups such as Pushtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmens, Hazaras and Baloachs with links to co-ethnics across the borders. Ethnic diversity poses a serious challenge to the process of nation-building and state-formation. It has serious implications across the borders for Pakistan, Iran, China and Central Asian States.⁷

The Soviet Union invaded in 1979 to support the weak Afghan Communist regime, sparking a long and destructive war. The USSR withdrew in 1989 under persistent pressure from internationally supported anti-Communist mujahedin rebels. After a subsequent series of civil wars, in 1996 Kabul fell to the Taliban, a hard-line Pakistani-sponsored movement that emerged in 1994 to end the country's civil war and anarchy. Following the September 11 2001, terrorist attacks, a US Allied, and anti-Taliban Northern Alliance military action toppled the Taliban for sheltering Osama Bin Laden. The UN-sponsored Bonn Conference in 2001 established a process for political reconstruction that included the adoption of a new constitution.

In December 2004, Hamid Karzai became the first democratically elected president of Afghanistan. After winning a second term in 2009, Karzai's presidency came to an end in 2014. The Afghanistan presidential election of 2014 was controversial, and despite UN supervision there were many allegations of fraud. After a second round of voting, the two frontrunners, Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai and Abdullah Abdullah, came to a power-sharing agreement. Ashraf Ghani serves as the President. Despite gains toward building a stable central government, a resurgent Taliban and continuing provincial instability particularly in the south and the east remain serious challenges for the government of Afghanistan.

Bilateral relation between the Republic of India and the Islamic State of Afghanistan has been traditionally strong and friendly. India considers Afghanistan to be its neighbor as the Gilgit-Baltistan region of Kashmir which borders Wakhan, although under Pakistan control, is claimed by India as a border between the nations. India's engagement in the country remains crucial more because there is a gradual acceptability by the international community for a role that India is playing as a provider of regional stability. On the other hand, Pakistan is concerned that India's economic and political linkages are building up India capacity to destabilize Pakistan.⁸

7. Strategic and Economic Importance of Afghanistan for India

Afghanistan is well endowed with natural resources. Surveys conducted by the Russians during the 1980s and further refined by the US Geological Survey (USGS) post 2000 have conclusively established the presence of large deposits of minerals in Afghanistan. The minerals include iron ore (2,200 million tons), copper (60 million tons), cobalt, lithium (substantially high deposits), niobium, uranium, chromites, granite, marble and other metallic and non-metallic minerals. Afghanistan is also blessed with 444 billion cubic meters of natural gas, 3.4 billion barrels of crude oil and 562 million barrels of natural gas deposits a significant quantity of deposits. The deposits also include precious gems and stones like emeralds, rubies and the largest deposit of lapis lazuli. The estimated value of these natural resources at \$1-3 trillion would completely alter the economic and social profile of Afghanistan. This can assist Afghanistan to achieve fiscal stability by adding considerable revenue to the economy, substantially lower its dependence on foreign aid, improve the balance of payment position due to increase in exports, and attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into the economy.⁹

The development assistance India provides to Afghanistan increasingly has an underlying goal of facilitating India's access to the natural resources within Afghanistan and through Afghanistan in Central Asia. For example, India's support for hydroelectricity generation and power transmission in Afghanistan's Herat province has largely benefitted the local Afghan population. However, a secure source of electricity in Herat, along with India's investment in the Iranian port and container terminal at Chabahar, investments in the Delaram-Zarang highway connecting Iranian roads from Chabahar port across the border with Herat and other major cities in Afghanistan through the ring road, and proposed investments in a railway linking Chabahar with Iranian-Afghan border and

into Afghanistan, all help India in accessing land-locked Afghanistan. India is also working to connect Iran and Afghanistan with Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries via these roads, thereby increasing regional trade as well as creating a route for India to access the rich gas and oil reserves of Central Asia.

All these infrastructural development will provide Indian private and state-owned companies, like the Indian consortium has the majority rights to mine the Hajigak iron-ore mines in Bamiyan province, with a route for exporting this natural resource from Afghanistan through Iran back to India. These resources of course also represent huge potential income for Afghanistan. Finally, this infrastructure provides India with a route for Indian exports (and continued aid) to Afghanistan. This sea and land route to and from Afghanistan through Iran is all the more important to India given the continued intransigence of Pakistani government in not allowing India access to the quicker and cheaper land route across their country, even for the transport of humanitarian goods.¹⁰

India's investment in Afghanistan has many economic and strategic benefits because development cooperation with Afghanistan increasingly has a second goal of economic diplomacy. Indian companies and services are significantly cheaper than their western counterparts and entry into the Afghan market thus offers opportunities for the Indian private sector. For example, India has provided significant development assistance in the field of health care: India funded the construction and upgrading of Afghanistan's only children's hospital, and supplied the hospital's infrastructure and training of its medical personnel along with a telemedicine project that links it with Indian hospitals. The government's development assistance has helped pave the way for India's private sector to find a market for its goods and services in Afghanistan. As Afghanistan seeks to shift the foundation of its economy from aid to trade, this economic diplomacy angle of India's development cooperation will further increase in significance. To this end India has tried to use its development projects to support the capacity of the Afghan government and its democratic institutions through significant allocations to a training program in India for Afghan bureaucrats and by financing the construction of Afghanistan's parliament. Indian development assistance is also used to tie Afghanistan closer into the economy of Iran and the neighboring Central Asian republics in the hopes that this will provide greater economic integration and prospects for the Afghan government beyond 2014.¹¹

India is the fifth largest investor in Afghanistan's stability and quest for economic and social development. Some of the important projects of India, by cost, are:

- Supply of 250,000 tons of wheat.
- Construction of the Parliament building (\$ 178 million).
- Construction of the Pul-i-Khumri to Kabul power line (\$120 million).
- Salma Dam power project (\$ 130 million).
- Construction of the Delaram-Zaranj road (\$ 150 million).

- Food assistance to primary school children, and construction and rehabilitation of schools (\$ 321 million).¹²

8. Chabahar as a Game Changer

Three nations, India, Iran, and Afghanistan, signed the historic Trilateral Agreement on Transit and Trade during the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Iran from May 22-23, 2016. The presence of three heads of state at Chabahar on May 23, 2016, signifies the importance of a non-descript coastal town of Iran that is being mentioned as a game changer for the three countries. Chabahar is located in south Iran in its Sistan Baluchistan region, along the Makran coast in the Gulf of Oman. It is the only Iranian port that providing direct access into the Indian Ocean. More significantly, Chabahar is located only 72 km west of Gwadar port in Pakistan, which is being developed jointly by Pakistan and China as part of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The current major port of Iran, Bandar Abbas, is located at the South of the Strait of Hormuz and within close proximity to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman, which is heavily patrolled by various nations to protect the sea-lanes transporting precious oil from the Middle East to various countries around the globe. Significance for India the Chabahar port, once fully developed, will give India a strategic foothold and make easy direct access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, completely bypassing the need for the land route through Pakistan.¹³

The true potential of the Zaranj-Delaram road built by India was realized once the project is completed and connected by road to Afghanistan. Indian State made it possible at a significant cost and grave risk, and further connects it to the 1,300-mile-long Afghan ring road. It is also envisaged to link the port by the rail network from Chabahar to Zahedan and on to Afghanistan to fully exploit the mineral wealth of Hajigak where India has successfully bid to mine iron ore in three blocks. From the military and Strategic point of view, the significance of the project is its ability to further the Indian ambition of developing blue water Navy by enhancing its hold in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Oman. Afghanistan was benefited by the development of Chabahar it will enhance its trade with India and significantly reduce Pakistan's hold over Afghanistan.¹⁴

Beyond expanding its hold in its immediate neighbourhood, Iran is also looking for an economic new beginning, having been isolated for close to a decade. Chabahar provides it an opening to expand southwards since the development of the port will ease its reliance on exporting oil through the Strait of Hormuz which has seen continued tensions due to the changing dynamics of intra-religious conflicts and hostilities with its immediate neighbours in the Gulf. Iran is also out to challenge the Saudi hegemony and its brand of Islam. The recent instability in the Arab world and Middle East is an outcome of this rivalry, which is unlikely to decline in the near future. Any opportunity to economically consolidate its position and come out of isolation will be lapped up by Iran at the first opportunity.¹⁵

Chabahar will also provide an opportunity to continue development of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), crucial to India-Central Asia trade, which had not seen any progress due to the inability to develop land connectivity and progress on development of the sea route as a result of the economic sanctions against Iran. Development of Chabahar port and further rail and road networks will rise economic development of the region and facilitate better connectivity. In particular, it will see significant gains for Afghanistan as a transit country for the goods originating in Central Asia and vice versa, as stated by former Afghan President Karzai it is a win-win situation for all the stakeholders Afghanistan, India, Iran, and the Central Asian countries.¹⁶

Zranj Delaram road connecting landlocked Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Chabahar was already completed. The road reduces Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan, providing a potential alternative route connecting Central Asia. However, optimal utilisation of this road would require greater security mechanisms. In addition to these developmental activities, India had also quietly sought to bolster Afghanistan's security capabilities.¹⁷

And another positive sign for India is, US President Donald Trump finally unveiled his strategy to win a war which has stretched over 16 years. U.S. Trump has sanctioned 4,000 more troops to join the 8,400 soldiers already stationed in Afghanistan. Targeting Pakistan for its safe harbour to terrorism over the years, and appreciated India's contribution to stability in Afghanistan and describing India as a critical part of the South Asia strategy. India has to increase its assistance to Afghanistan.¹⁸

All the regional neighbours and the international community to further enhance their efforts towards Afghanistan reconstruction and economic development. It is also important that India and Pakistan to discuss their suspicions at the official level so as to ally each other's apprehensions and to work together for peace and stability.¹⁹

9. Indo-Pakistan Strategic Competition and Rivalry

Afghanistan is not just the frontline State in US fight against the Taliban, but also a battleground for proxy war between India and Pakistan from last three decades. The Pakistan military remains obsessed with the idea of gaining 'Strategic Depth' against India in Afghanistan. Pakistan claims India is using Afghan territory and India established their consulates in Afghanistan to create trouble in Pakistan, especially in the provinces of Baluchistan. Pakistan and Afghanistan despite sharing hundreds of miles of unguarded border and a bulk of population of the same Pashtun ethnically which comprises the major ethnic group here in Afghanistan and second in Pakistan have witnessed Souring diplomatic relations, thanks to the Durand Line, throughout the history since the inception of the later one. The Pukhtunistan issue had been an apple of discord between these two countries. Afghanistan government never accepted the Durrand Line. The Af-Pak bilateral ties, last time, was badly hurt on the assassination of Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani on September 20, 2011 for which Kabul blamed Pakistan-based militants. The relations was further driven to the lowest ebb

when the US military targeted the Pakistani border check post on November 26, 2012 killing at least 24 border security guards which consequently resulted in halting the NATO supply route and more strained relations between the trilateral partners in the war on terror.²⁰

However during the trilateral summit (Afghanistan-Pakistan-Iran) in February 2012 on regional cooperation, Afghanistan former President Karzai's meeting with Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani saying that two sides restate their commitment to work together for restoring peace and stability in Afghanistan and later Hamid Karzai termed Pakistan's support as critical to the success of Afghan owned and Afghan-led peace process and reconciliation in the country. And further added that Pakistan and Afghanistan were twin brothers and therefore should cooperate in the same spirit for the cause of peace and stability in both countries. With the resurgence of Taliban on both sides of the Durand line, Pakistan is eroding its sovereignty in Taliban Areas.

The two states have also made a provisional commitment to the TAPI gas pipeline project. Pakistan has offered 1,000 scholarships, subsequently doubled in March 2010, to Afghan students, 60 percent of all Afghan students who study abroad attend educational institutions in Pakistan. More than 1.7 million Afghan refugees continue to live in Pakistan. But inspite of economic support, Pakistan is not popular in Afghanistan. In one of the survey conducted by GALLUP regarding the role of NATO and regional players in Afghanistan in 2009, 33 percent Afghan said that Pakistan is supporting the Taliban leadership and only 30 percent people said that Pakistan's role is constructive. For India, 56 percent people supported India's role in reconstruction.²¹

Besides being an important land bridge for Indian access to Central and West Asia, Afghanistan represents a confluence of India's vital strategic, economic, security and energy security needs. India seeks to project itself as a regional power beyond the confines of South Asia and sees the building of stable, long-term relations with the Central Asian Republics (CARs) and Afghanistan as crucial to its economic, trade and security interests.²²

10. Conclusion

No doubt, India and Afghanistan have maintained close and cordial relations excluding the Taliban era. After 9/11, India, through its diplomatic ties got an opportunity to make inroads in Afghanistan particularly after the Bonn Agreement 2001. Since then, India has followed a policy of high-level engagement with Afghanistan. Presently, India is one of the primary donors towards Afghanistan's reconstruction process. Apart from providing aircraft to Afghan Ariana Airlines, India has been quite active in building roads, schools, hospitals, power and communication networks, besides training Afghan's military and police personnel. All these initiatives taken in the recent past reflect India's dream to get access to the Central Asian market through Afghanistan route. For India, Afghanistan can provide a potential route to get access to Central Asian energy reserves. India is looking Afghanistan as a base to counter China's growing influence in Central Asian economic

and energy sectors. India is building a port in Chabahar (Iran), which will give access to the Iranian hinterland, and thereby making transportation of Indian goods to Afghanistan possible and bypassing Pakistan completely. Also, Afghanistan can provide a potential market for Indian goods and services thereby boosting our Export. Afghanistan, today stand at a crucial stage. The country needs massive international assistance to recover from its losses. However some progress

has already been made. Political progress in Afghanistan had occurred at a faster rate than expected but a balanced progress is only possible with inclusion of Taliban in negotiation process. Various efforts has been taken place in this direction. Only a careful balanced formula of reconstruction, political institutional building and economic recovery can bring about peace, stability and progress to this war-ravaged and devastated country.

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