

An Analysis of India-Afghanistan Relations

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Abstract

Based on historical and cultural links, India and Afghanistan have a close friendship. The relationship is founded on past encounters and interactions between the citizens and is not limited to the governments in New Delhi and Kabul. The Strategic Partnership Agreement signed by the two countries in 2011 has improved immensely Indo-Afghan ties. As Afghanistan went through three simultaneous political, defence, and economic transformations in 2016, India assuaged its worries about the country's future by promising a long-term commitment to the country's security and growth. India with the PM Modi Government focusing more on Afghanistan to achieve its constructive initiatives.

Keywords: Reconstruction in Afghanistan, Taliban, India's effort in Afghanistan, India-Afghan Partnership

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Introduction:

The political and popular camaraderie that characterizes Indo-Afghan relations is a product of more than just contemporary geopolitics; it is also a testament to the historico-cultural ties that have existed between Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent since ancient times. In strong contrast to India, Pakistan's relations with Kabul have been clouded by resentment and a profound sense of mistrust for much of its history, including geographical proximity, religious and ethnic congruence. Because of their historical and cultural links, India and Afghanistan have long had a close relationship. Both the Government of India and the Royal Government of Afghanistan had signed a Treaty of Friendship in the post-independence era.¹ Since 2001, in post Taliban Afghanistan, India has even shown deeper interest in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Afghanistan despite heavy costs and threat to the lives of people involved in carrying out such responsibilities. It is also involved in many a multi lateral initiatives for ensuring regional stability so that Afghanistan again becomes a stable and progressive nation in the near future. These concerns and contribution were very strongly recognized in the Strategic Partnership Agreement that was signed between Afghanistan and India in October 2011 during the then Afghan President Hamid Karzai's visit to India. The signing of this agreement not only reaffirmed the importance of strong, vibrant and multi-faceted relations between the two countries but also laid down a framework for cooperation in several areas, viz., political, development, economic, trade, scientific, technological, cultural and other fields in the years ahead.²

¹ Agreement on Strategic Partnership between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Republic of India, Available at <http://mfa.gov.af/content/files/agreement%20on%20strategic%20partnership%20between%20afghanistan%20and%20india%20-%20english.pdf>, Accessed on 25th March 2021.

² Ibid.

Foreign policy analysts often describe India's strategic environment in terms of the entire Indian Ocean basin. Such persons explain that India's strategic neighborhood stretches to the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf in the west; some will even claim the eastern coast of Africa as the western-most border of this strategic space. To the east, it includes the Strait of Malacca and extends up to the South China Sea. To the north, it is comprised of Central Asia, and to the south, it reaches out to Antarctica.³

The doyen of South Asian security, Raja Mohan, explains in comparable terms that India's grand strategy-

*"divides the world into three concentric circles. In the first, which encompasses the immediate neighborhood, India has sought primacy and a veto over the actions of outside powers. In the second, which encompasses the so-called extended neighborhood stretching across Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral, India has sought to balance the influence of other powers and prevent them from undercutting its interests. In the third, which includes the entire global stage, India has tried to take its place as one of the great powers, a key player in international peace and security."*⁴

Within this extended neighborhood, India has a number of strategic interests. First and foremost, it seeks to be the preeminent power within the Indian Ocean basin. Second, New Delhi believes that it has a natural role in shaping regional security arrangements to foster stability throughout the Indian Ocean basin. Third, India is willing to be proactive to prevent developments that are fundamentally inimical to its interests. "Proactive" does not mean preemption in the sense promulgated by the U.S. President George W. Bush. Rather, India seeks to achieve these objectives and project power throughout this expansive neighborhood using two instruments of soft power: economic and political influences. These individuals expanded upon the utilization of these instruments by explaining that India seeks to promote itself as role model for economic and political development.

India also has a very sophisticated greater Middle East policy that includes Israel, Iran, and several Arab states. In addition, India is continuing its efforts to consolidate its strategic footing in Central Asia and in Afghanistan, for which Iran and Russia have had tremendous import.⁵ Thus, in many regards, India's interests in Afghanistan can be seen as merely one element within India's larger desire to be able to protect its interests well beyond South Asia. To achieve India's interests in Afghanistan, it has cultivated important ties with Iran. Notably, Iran and India share several concerns in Afghanistan.

In a letter to the Afghan President, delivered in Kabul just a day before the Khalilzad-Baradar February 2020 pact, which would be the basis of the US withdrawal as well as the future road-map of international outlook for and about Afghanistan, India's Prime Minister, reiterating his government's continued commitment to a seamless, time-tested relations, said, "We also remain committed to our principled po For many years of Afghan political instability covering the tenures of several consecutive governments, this has been the ethics of the Indo-Afghan relationship."⁶

Political Relationship

Afghanistan's stance on the question of the creation of Pakhtunistan, its 1948 vote opposing Pakistan's entry into the United Nations - making it the only country to do so - and its refusal to toe Pakistan's line on the question of

³ Juli MacDonald, Indo-U.S. Military Relationship: Expectations and Perceptions (Falls Church: Booze Allen Hamilton, 2002).

⁴ C. Raja Mohan, "India and the Balance of Power," Foreign Affairs 85, No. 4, (2006), pp. 17-34.

⁵ Meena Singh Roy, "India's Interests in Central Asia," Strategic Analysis 24, No. 12 (2001): 2273-89; Stephen Blank, "The Indian-Iranian Connection and Its Importance for Central Asia," Eurasianet.org, March 11, 2003, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/business/articles/eav031203.shtml>

⁶ Purushottam Jha, "The upcoming Afghanistan: India may have to look beyond History", The Times of India, August 03, 2021, Available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/beyond-the-fact/the-upcoming-afghanistan-india-may-have-to-look-beyond-history/>

Kashmir laid the foundations for forging close links quite early on with the new Republic of India that took over the reins of power from the British. India's gradual drift towards Moscow and Kabul's increasing dependence on the Soviets for aid further complemented India-Afghanistan bilateral ties. Relations between the two states remained warm and both sides maintained deep cultural and modest economic links. The first formidable challenge to India's Afghan policy came in the wake of the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979 to help prop up a pro-Soviet Communist regime that has usurped power through a bloody coup christened as the Saur Revolution. The challenge at hand for New Delhi became more pronounced in light of its proclaimed policy of non-alignment. The then Prime Minister Chaudhary Charan Singh categorically opposed Soviet intervention and called for an immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops. However this stand was short lived and was reversed when Indira Gandhi made a dramatic political comeback and was re-elected to office in January 1980.⁷ However despite its discomfort with Soviet military presence in its neighbourhood, India while steering clear from an unequivocal endorsement of Soviet military intervention, consistently chose to abstain on key UN resolutions calling for Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.⁸

New Delhi's deep antipathy towards the Taliban brought it onto a common platform with Tehran and Moscow - all of whom supported the predominantly Tajik Northern Alliance whose control over Afghanistan was reduced to a mere 10% of the territory in the extreme north. Indian support to the opposition was routed through its base in Farakhor in Tajikistan. The events that ensued in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks was principally responsible in tilting the scales in favour of the opposition Northern Alliance and unseating the Taliban from power within a matter of weeks. As Ramachandran noted, "in Afghanistan, Pakistan's loss is India's gain".⁹

Today, India is recognized as a key regional player in efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and for the first time there is a broad congruity of Indian and US interests in Afghanistan: both wish to see a stable, democratic and multi-ethnic political solution take root in the country. India moved swiftly to deepen its footprint in Afghanistan by opening its embassy in Kabul and four other consulates in Jalalabad (Eastern Afghanistan), Herat (Northern Afghanistan), Kandahar (Southern Afghanistan) and Mazar-e-Sharif (Western Afghanistan). In addition, India also unveiled a \$1.2 billion aid programme- a substantial amount for a traditionally non-donor country - making it the largest regional and fifth largest international donor. Indian aid projects spawn across various sectors ranging from offering 500 annual scholarships for Afghan students, provision of vocational training activities for women, construction of roads, dams, transmission lines, and telecom networks to the construction of the new Afghan Parliament building.¹⁰

The Modi government ensured the completion of significant delayed projects such as the parliament and the Salma Dam after assuming office in 2014, both of which Prime Minister (PM) Modi jointly opened with President Ghani during his travels to Afghanistan in 2015 and 2016. Visas for Afghan businesspeople and visitors have been liberalised further; 500 scholarships have been announced for the children of Afghan security forces dead; and the restoration of the Stor Palace has been completed. India pledged an additional \$1 billion in aid to Afghanistan in 2016. The India-Afghanistan Air Freight Corridor, which began shipping agricultural commodities, pharmaceuticals, and medical equipment in June 2017, was established to overcome Pakistan's land border barrier. In addition, India has been constantly engaging with regional countries to improve Afghanistan's connectivity in order to promote trade and products flow. India, Iran, and Afghanistan signed the Trilateral Agreement on the Establishment of an International Transport and Transit Corridor (the Chabahar Agreement) in 2016, and India will begin shipping 35,000 containers of wheat to Afghanistan through Iran's Chabahar port by September 2017.

⁷ S. Muni, "India's Afghan Policy Emerging from the Cold", in K. Warikoo (Ed), *The Afghanistan Crisis: Issues and Perspectives*, New Delhi: Bhavana Books, 2002, p.335.

⁸ I. Kiesow and N. Norling, 'The Rise of India: Problems and Opportunities', *Silk Road Papers*, January 2007, p.86.

⁹ S. Ramachandran, 'In Afghanistan, Pakistan's loss is India's gain', *Asia Times*, 01 February 2002.

¹⁰ For a more detailed overview of the Indian assistance programme in Afghanistan, see MEA, *India and Afghanistan: A Development Partnership*, New Delhi: External Publicity Division, Ministry of External Affairs, 2009.

Other high-level visits include those of Afghan Second Vice President Mohammad Danish Sarwar (December 2017), former President Hamid Karzai (December 2017 and August 2019); Foreign Secretary to Kabul (February 28-29, 2020), (February 27-28, 2018), and September 11, 2018; Deputy National Security Advisor Shri Rajinder Khanna to Kabul (May 29-31, 2018); and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah (December 2017 and August 2019). (23 February 2019). Dr. Anup Wadhavan, Secretary of Commerce, visited Kabul on 25-26 October 2018 for the Joint Working Group on Trade, Commerce, and Investment; and Secretary (Economic Relations), MEA, visited Kabul on 08-09 August 2018 for the Joint Working Group on Development Cooperation.¹¹

Cultural Relationship

The historical and cultural connections between India and Afghanistan are deep. The connection has been fueled by past encounters and interactions between the citizens, and it is not limited to the governments of New Delhi and Kabul. The Strategic Cooperation Agreement negotiated between the two countries in 2011 has helped to improve Indo-Afghan ties in the recent past. As Afghanistan prepares for three simultaneous political, military, and economic transformations in 2014, India has tried to allay potential concerns by committing to the country's security and prosperity for the long term. The Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) between the two sides, *inter alia*, provides for assistance to help rebuild Afghanistan's infrastructure and institutions, education and technical assistance to re-build indigenous Afghan capacity in different areas, encouraging investment in Afghanistan's natural resources, providing duty free access to the Indian market for Afghanistan's export products, support for an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, broad-based and inclusive process of peace and reconciliation, and advocating the need for a sustained and long-term commitment to Afghanistan by the international community. As the lead country for Trade, Commerce and Investment CBM of Heart of Asia Process, India hosted Senior Officials Meeting of the Heart of Asia countries in New Delhi in January 2014.¹²

President Hamid Karzai's visit to India in May 2013 followed closely on the heels of his state visit to India in November 2012, during which he delivered the prestigious Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Memorial lecture, held extensive discussions with political and business leaders, and witnessed the signing of four Memorandums of Understanding with India. A high-level delegation comprising of Dr. Zalmay Rassoul, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Anwar-ul-Haq Ahady, Minister of Commerce and Industry, Mr. Omar Zakhilwal, the then Minister of Mines, Mr. Wahidullah Shahrani and Mr. Asef Rahimi, Minister of Agriculture was in Delhi on June 28, 2012 for the Delhi Investment Summit on Afghanistan. The then Foreign Minister Zalmay Rassoul also co-chaired the first Partnership Council meeting on May 1, 2012, while the Minister of Mines and the Finance Minister were in Hyderabad in January 2012 for the CII Partnership Summit. India also hosted the Upper House of the Afghan Parliament, Meshrano Jirga, for a study visit from 11-18 February, 2013. President Hamid Karzai visited India to attend the swearing in ceremony of the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi in May 2014.¹³

India has contributed significantly to Afghanistan's rebuilding and stabilization on a bilateral level. During this crucial time of security and governance transformation, India's comprehensive developmental assistance program, which now amounts about US \$2 billion, is a clear indication of its unwavering dedication to peace, stability, and growth in Afghanistan. As a result, India is one of the most important donors to Afghanistan, and the largest among the regional countries. India claims that Afghanistan's long-term growth needs long-term investments to help it leverage its natural resource resources. As a result, India is at the frontline of encouraging foreign investment in Afghanistan, and a group of public and private Indian firms has been chosen to make one of the nation's largest mining ventures, in the Hajigak iron ore deposits.¹⁴

11 Embassy of India Kabul, Afghanistan, "India-Afghanistan Relations", available at <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0354?000>

12 Noor Rehman Tahiri, "Afghanistan and China Trade Relationship", MPRA, No. 82098, 06 August 2017.

13 Ibid.

14 Sayed Nasrat, "Role of Civil Society in Provincial Budgeting", Integrity Watch Afghanistan, March 2015.

Commercial Relationship

India also understands that Afghanistan's security, development, and prosperity can only be achieved if all of the major players and countries are invested in it. Through pioneering events like the Delhi Investment Summit on Afghanistan in June 2012, India has been at the forefront of efforts to draw international and trans-regional investment into Afghanistan that provides a viable alternative to the prevailing narrative of extremism and offers job opportunities to the country's population. Recognizing that the country holds the key to stability in Afghanistan, India is leading the charge for commercial confidence-building initiatives in the region under the Heart of Asia Process. Multilaterally, it assisted in the initiation of a dialogue on Afghanistan through forums such as the Afghanistan-India-US trilateral and the Afghanistan-India-Iran trilateral, which strive to put together international partners with divergent worldviews in search of the shared purpose of ensuring stability and development in Afghanistan. At the United Nations and at numerous international conferences focused on Afghanistan's future, including the seminal Tokyo Transformative Conference in July 2012, India expressed its support for international collaboration on Afghanistan.

For 3000 years, India has recognized Afghanistan's preeminence as a crossroads of trading routes connecting central, south, and west Asia. According to the real possible trade, the bilateral trade in 2012-13 was just \$588.3 million (US\$ 472.5 million export and US\$ 115.8 million import by India; 19 percent of Afghanistan's exports). In March 2003, India and Afghanistan signed a Preferential Trade Agreement under which India permitted significant duty concessions to certain categories (38 items) of Afghan dry fruits, ranging from 50 percent to 100 percent. India abolished basic customs duties on all Afghan goods (except alcohol and tobacco) in November 2011, allowing them duty-free access to the Indian market. India is one of Afghanistan's most important export destinations. By providing a new transit route for Afghan trade with India and the rest of the world, the Chabahar port in Iran could dramatically increase Afghanistan's exports.¹⁵

In addition, India is making investments in Afghanistan. AFISCO, a seven-company public-private group of Indian iron ore mining and steel firms led by SAIL, won the tender for the Hajigak iron ore deposits in December 2011, with plans to construct a 3-6 million tons steel plant. After the beginning of 2013, business delegations have been visiting Afghanistan on a daily basis. On June 28, 2012, India hosted the Delhi Investment Summit on Afghanistan to help forge cross-country alliances for investment in Afghanistan and to provide a counter narrative of Afghanistan's economic prospects.

Apart from over 100 business delegates from Afghanistan and about 160 from India, the event drew about 80 delegates from the country and beyond, including China, Pakistan, and Iran. The summit was attended by Afghan ministers of foreign affairs, banking, mining, trade and commerce, and agriculture. The aim of this summit was to entice foreign investment into Afghanistan in light of new opportunities that have arisen in different sectors. The Summit included presentations by the Afghan government and others on Afghanistan's investment environment and prospects, as well as panel discussions on cross-cutting challenges and sector-specific topics. The Summit was in keeping with India's long-term commitment to assisting Afghanistan's citizens and government in their efforts to establish a stable, pluralistic, democratic, and prosperous nation. The Summit produced a series of guidelines for maximizing Afghanistan's economic capacity and attracting foreign investment.¹⁶

The extradition treaty, the agreement on civil and economic cooperation, and the memorandum of understanding on cooperation in peaceful uses of outer space were all signed in September 2016 between India and Afghanistan. India has also declared that Afghanistan's ongoing education, capacity-building, skills, and human resource

¹⁵ AICS Policy brief, Coordination and Cooperation between CSOs and the Government of Afghanistan, August 2017.

¹⁶ Ashley J. Tellis, "South Asia: U.S. Policy Choices," in *Taking Charge: A Bipartisan Report to the President-Elect on Foreign Policy and National Security—Discussion Papers*, ed. Frank Carlucci, Robert E. Hunter, and Zalmay Khalilzad (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), 88, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1306.1/MR1306.1.sec3.pdf

development programmes, which are among the world's largest, will be extended for another five years from 2017 to 2022.

Conclusion

The future of India Afghanistan Cooperation is appears to be more eventful as the present Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the Indian Prime Minister who has visited Afghanistan with a vision and mission. The repeat visit is demonstrative of both close Afghan-India friendship and also an indication of the fact of India's continued support and partnership for reconstruction and development of Afghanistan. To quote MEA Spokesperson Vikas Swarup, "The real image that India has in Afghanistan is as a partner which has stood by through its difficult times, a partner which has contributed immensely to Afghanistan's development, unlike some partners who have contributed to instability and terrorism". Withdrawal of America from Afghanistan will leave a space in Afghanistan. India needs to be geo-strategically and geo-politically aware about the impact of America's withdrawal from Afghanistan. India needs to fill that space to counter any of its opponent in future.

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