

India-Afghanistan Relations Post-2014: A way forward

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Abstract

India and Afghanistan historically have shared close political and cultural ties. India-Afghanistan relations have improved considerably under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. Initially Ghani's moves were seeking closer ties with Pakistan with the hope that it will bring Taliban to the negotiating table, but these failed because of Taliban's attack on Kabul. Since then the relations between the two have improved. India is playing a larger role in development work and reconstruction of Afghanistan. As peace talks have been taking place between US and Taliban, the Modi government continues to reiterate its support for a negotiated political reconciliation that is Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled. This paper examines the relation between two countries post 2014, analysing Pakistan as a factor in Indo-Afghan ties, assessing the economic and humanitarian assistance provided by India to Afghanistan and a possible way forward for India and Afghanistan to strengthen their relations in the changing environment of US withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.

Keywords: India-Afghanistan relations, Taliban, Peace talks, Drawdown, Humanitarian Assistance, Economy, Negotiation and Investment.

Introduction

Afghanistan is a land locked country situated at the crossroads of Central, South and West Asia. It is primarily due to geo-strategic location that Afghanistan has remained at the forefront of global power politics since early 19th century. The geographical location makes Afghanistan prominent in the region as well as the world. In this backdrop, it is quite obvious to understand India's active involvement in Afghanistan. In order to understand India's current relations with Afghanistan it is vital to have some knowledge of the earlier ties which these two countries shared. India and Afghanistan have shared a strong relationship based on cultural, political, economic and social ties. Post independence, India and Afghanistan have shared very close ties. Given the hostile relations between India and Pakistan, Afghanistan was always perceived as an ally. India-Afghanistan relations can be studied through certain phases. The first phase began with India's independence in 1947 and lasted till the end of the Cold War. Afghanistan-Pakistan territorial disputes, in particular involving Pashtunistan and the Durand Line, brought India and Afghanistan closer. The second phase began with the end of the Cold War in 1991 and lasted till the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001. India had troubled ties with Afghanistan in this phase marked by civil war, Islamic extremism and Taliban's coming of

power in 1996. The third phase began with the toppling of the Taliban regime in 2001. This phase has seen India rebuilding its bilateral ties with and regaining influence in Afghanistan. India has emerged as the most important regional power, investing in institution building in Afghanistan. Since 2001, New Delhi has provided \$2 billion in economic aid and has pledged another \$1 billion over the next few years for Kabul. As Afghanistan's stability is considered important for India's own security, it has been supportive of the spread of democratic institutions in Afghanistan as well as involved in providing the assistance to Afghanistan for reconstruction. As US pulled out most of its troops from Afghanistan in 2014 and the change in governments in both countries in 2014. This paper examines the relationship between India and Afghanistan post 2014.

India-Afghanistan relations Post- 2014

India and Afghanistan have a strong relationship based on political ties. India started active involvement in Afghanistan right after its independence. From the Indian perspective, the most important factor in its Afghan ties is Pakistan which frames any kind of Indian involvement in Afghanistan as a threat.¹ India shared cordial relations with Afghanistan from the very beginning because of Afghanistan and Pakistan's hostile relations with each other. India's support to soviet invasion and backing the soviet installed government in Afghanistan adversely affected its image among the Afghans. The relationship between India and Afghanistan deteriorated during the soviet invasion and after their withdrawal as well because after soviet withdrawal Afghanistan was caught in civil war, Islamic fundamentalism. India's relationship with Afghanistan further deteriorated when the Taliban came to power. During this time, India started helping Northern Alliance. However, after the 9/11 attacks and subsequent US led war on Taliban, India found its way back into Afghanistan.² India has emerged as the most important regional power, investing in institution building in Afghanistan. India's relations with Afghanistan have improved significantly since the Taliban regime was toppled by international forces led by US in 2001.³ Since 2001, New Delhi has provided \$2 billion in economic aid and has pledged another \$1 billion over the next few years for Kabul. As Afghanistan's stability is considered important for India's own security, New Delhi has been supportive of the spread of democratic institutions in Afghanistan, which is battered by decades of conflict and instability. India-Afghanistan relations have been very cordial from 2001 to 2012. India-Afghanistan's relations were further strengthened by the Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between the two countries in 2011. Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh once stated, "Our cooperation with Afghanistan is an open book. We have civilization links, and we are both here to stay".⁴ As Afghanistan was preparing itself for three simultaneous political, security and economic transitions in 2014, India had allayed its fears about its future by making a long-term commitment to the security and development of Afghanistan. In 2014, after 13 years of invasion,

¹ India-Afghanistan relations in the Modi-Ghani Era, Vinay Kaura Indian Journal of Asian Affairs, Vol. 30, No. 1/2 (June-December 2017), pp. 29-46.

² India in Afghanistan after the Soviet Withdrawal, Avinandan Choudhury, May 14, 2019.

³ India's policy toward Afghanistan: Implications to the regional security governance, Wang Jin, Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 17 July, 2018.

⁴ Ministry of External Affairs of India, "Statement to the media by PM Manmohan Singh during visit of President Karzai, speeches/statements," October 4, 2011, <http://mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=530118346>.

US president Barrack Obama declared the drawdown of US army from Afghanistan.⁵ While the US forces were not completely withdrawn from Afghanistan, the OEF was changed to Operation Freedom's Sentinel. The drawdown of troops began in 2012 and at the end of December, 2014 United States withdrew most of its troops from Afghanistan. The presence of US troops as well as NATO forces in the post –December 2104 period was to be decided by the signing of a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between the United States and Afghanistan. The BSA was signed on 30 September, 2014, a day after President Ghani took office. The BSA came into force on 1 January 2015 and will remain in force ‘until the end of 2024 and beyond’ unless terminated by either side on two years notice.⁶ US kept only 9800 troops in Afghanistan with a purpose of training the Afghan security forces and countering the remnants of Al-Qaeda. The change of government in Afghanistan after the 2014 Presidential elections was marked by certain changes in Kabul’s policy towards countries in the region, including India. India’s engagement in the post-Taliban Afghanistan had taken a new turn immediately after the National Unity Government came to power. President Ghani assumed power at a time when the ISAFs combat operation was approaching the December 2014 date for withdrawal. Newly created ANSF was still not equipped to be a replacement for the ISAF forces creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and thereby making him believe that only option for durable peace and stability in Afghanistan was negotiations with Taliban. Therefore, it appears that President Ghani considered Pakistan as key to restart the stalled peace process with Taliban. This had an effect on its India policy pursued since 2002.⁷ The result of the policy shift was reflected in the Afghan government suspended a request for heavy weaponry from India that was originally made by Ashraf Ghani’s predecessor, Hamid Karzai.⁸ President Ghani’s proactive engagement with Pakistan to revive peace process failed due to bombings in Kabul by Taliban.⁹ Post bombings in Kabul President Ghani expressed his anger by saying that, “Pakistan still remains the venue and ground for gatherings from which mercenaries send us a message of war.”¹⁰

Since May 2014, several high-level visits have taken place between the Indian and Afghan governments. Chief Executive Officer of Afghanistan, Abdullah Abdullah, made a visit to India in March 2015 where he also participated in a conference organized by India Today. Abdullah while acknowledging India as being Afghanistan’s most generous supporter said that “India ought to look at Afghanistan as a permanent friend.” While reacting to Indian concerns on the increasing warmth between Kabul and Islamabad under the Ghani administration, Abdullah insisted that Afghanistan’s engagement with Pakistan must never suggest that relations with India would ever be sacrificed.¹¹ Afghanistan’s President Ashraf Ghani visited

⁵ Thomas, C. (2019). Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy in Brief. *Congressional Research Service*.

⁶ Post-2014 Drawdown and Afghanistan’s transition Challenges http://sam.gov.tr>08_-ZulfqarPDF.

⁷ Afghanistans Relations with India and Iran: An assessment of Ghani Period by Dr. Nihar Ranjan Das, July 2016, Indian Council of world Affairs, Sapru House, New Delhi.

⁸ Ankit Panda, “Why did Afghanistan just suspend a request for heavy Weaponry from India? The Diplomat, February 13, 2015.

⁹ Afghanistan’s Relations with India and Iran: An assessment of Ghani Period by Dr. Nihar Ranjan Das, July 2016, Indian Council of world Affairs, Sapru House, New Delhi.

¹⁰ Toto News, August 10, 2015.

¹¹ Asit Jolly and MG Arun, “We need realistic dialogue with Pakistan: Dr Abdullah Abdullah,” India Today, March 13, 2015.

India came in April 2015 on his first official visit which was mainly centred on strengthening trade ties and partnering to fight terrorism. Ghani said during this visit that “We want to assure you that if you invest in Afghanistan, nobody is going to shake you down”.¹² The visit assumed greater significance since Ghani came to India after his visit to China in October 2014, and to Pakistan in November 2014, and then to the United States in March 2015. This delay was speculated to not only indicate a reprioritization in Afghanistan’s foreign policy calculus towards India, but also marked a sharp contrast to warmness that Karzai displayed towards India.¹³ The visit was a good first step in establishing an important relationship. During the visit, President Ghani interacted with the Indian leadership, with discussion on cooperation and assistance in various sectors including the education, health, agriculture, disaster management, power sector and electoral management.¹⁴ In December 2015, India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid visit to Kabul in. This was his first visit to Afghanistan after becoming Prime Minister. During his visit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Ghani jointly inaugurated the Afghan Parliament building that was constructed by India at a cost of USD 90 million and the handing over ceremony for four Mi-25 attack helicopters.¹⁵ It was a shift from India’s earlier hesitation on only giving non-lethal assistance like transport vehicles and training to Afghanistan.¹⁶ It was during this visit that a decision to conduct the first Strategic Partnership Council meeting headed by the Foreign Ministers in early 2016 along with four joint working group meetings was taken.¹⁷ This visit further strengthened India’s relations with Afghanistan and reaffirmed New Delhi’s commitment for rebuilding the war-torn country.¹⁸ Abdullah Abdullah, Afghan CEO, visited India again from January 31 to February 4, 2016, and held discussions on bilateral, regional and global issues including the security situation and reconciliation process in Afghanistan. In an interview during this visit he said that we are updating India on “each and every development” in the ongoing Taliban reconciliation and peace process.¹⁹ Indian Prime Minister’s Afghanistan visit on 4th June to inaugurate Dam built with the financial support of India will strengthen relations further. Both leaders jointly inaugurated the Afghan-India Friendship Dam, earlier known as the Salma Dam. Stressing India’s commitment to Afghan peace and development, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, “India will not forget you or turn away... Your friendship is our honour; your dreams are our duty.”²⁰ Rechristened as ‘Afghan-India Friendship Dam’, Salma Dam is a \$300 million hydroelectric and irrigation

¹² With Trade and Terrorism in Mind, Ghani visits India, Jack Detsh, *The Diplomat*, April 30, 2015.

¹³ India-Afghanistan relations in the Modi-Ghani Era, Vinay Kaura *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, Vol. 30, No. 1/2, June-December 2017.

¹⁴ India-Afghanistan relations in the Modi-Ghani Era, Vinay Kaura, *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, Vol. 30, No. 1/2, June-December 2017.

¹⁵ Modi inaugurates new Afghan Parliament built by India in Kabul, *Agencies*, Kabul, December 25, 2015, *Hindustan Times*.

¹⁶ Suhasini Haidar, “Modi reaches Kabul,” *The Hindu*, December 25, 2015.

¹⁷ Joint Statement between India and Afghanistan,” Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, December 25, 2015.

¹⁸ Afghanistan’s Relations with India and Iran: An assessment of Ghani Period) by Dr. Nihar Ranjan Das, July 2016, Indian Council of world Affairs, Sapru House, New Delhi.

¹⁹ Suhasini Haidar, “India in the loop on Taliban talks: Abdullah,” *The Hindu*, February 4, 2016.

²⁰ Praveen Swami, “At Afghan dam inauguration, PM promises: India will not forget you,” *The Hindu*, June 5, 2016.

project constructed on Hari Rud River in Chisht-e-Sharif District of the Herat province.²¹ Moreover the Indian Prime Minister Modi was conferred by Afghan President with ‘Amir Amanullah Khan Award’, which is Afghanistan’s highest civilian honour.²² India supplied 1, 70,000 tonnes of wheat was dispatched through Chabahar port to Afghanistan to meet urgent needs in October 2017. This shipment was highlighted by Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj as “a gift from the people of India to our Afghan brethren” as well as the “the starting point of our journey to realize the full spectrum of connectivity from culture to commerce, from traditions to technology, from investments to Information Technology, from services to strategy and from people to politics.”²³

India’s growing interest and influence in Afghanistan was reflected in Modi’s announcement of providing Kabul with \$1 billion in economic aid, when President Ghani held talks with him in New Delhi in September 2016. To address the security and political challenges in Afghanistan after 2014, from the security dimension, India further improves its security cooperation with regional and international states. On one hand, India has established close military and intelligence relations with Afghanistan’s neighbouring states, especially the Central Asian States. On the other hand, India also strengthens its military ties with Afghanistan through deepening the defence cooperation from training Afghan military personnel to intelligence-sharing and supplying military equipment to Afghan security forces.²⁴ India’s concerns about terrorism emanating from the extremely volatile Pakistan-Afghanistan border spilling into its territory are real and imminent.²⁵ One of the notable aspects of India-Afghanistan relations has been the deepening of defence cooperation that was earlier confined to only training Afghan military personnel, as India was hesitant to supply military hardware to Afghanistan. However post 2014, a shift was seen in the bilateral relations between the two countries. Afghan National Security Advisor Hanif Atmar and Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai’s to New Delhi in November 2015 convinced India to donate four Mi-25 attack helicopters to Afghanistan.²⁶ In December 2016, at the “Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process” conference on Afghanistan in Amritsar, Prime Minister Modi and President Ghani jointly hit out at Pakistan for providing safe heaven to the terrorists. Prime Minister Modi while inaugurating the meeting emphasized that “Terrorism and externally induced instability pose the gravest threat to Afghanistan’s peace, stability and prosperity. The growing arc of terrorist violence endangers our entire region. As such support for voices of peace in Afghanistan alone is not enough. It should be backed by resolute action. Not just against forces of terrorism, but also against those

²¹ How Salma Dam progress has secured India’s interest in Afghanistan’, *The Economic Times*, July 30, 2015.

²² PM Narendra Modi conferred with the Highest Civilian Honour of Afghanistan”, *Press Information Bureau, Government of India*, June 5, 2016.

²³ Joint Statement between India and Afghanistan (December 25, 2015). *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*.

²⁴ India’s policy toward Afghanistan: Implications to the regional security governance, Wang Jin, *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 17 July, 2018.

²⁵ Shanthie Mariet D’Souza, “India-Afghanistan strategic Partnership: Beyond 2014”, *Institute of South Asian Studies Insights*, No. 142, October 24, 2011 p.2

²⁶ Mi 25 attack helicopter gifted by India to Afghanistan reaches Kabul, 3 more to follow”, *The Economic Times*, December 22, 2015.

who support, shelter, train and finance them.”²⁷ In his visit to India in April 2017, Afghanistan’s ambassador to India, Shaida Mohammad Abdali pointed out that India is the biggest regional donor to Afghanistan and fifth largest donor globally with over \$3 billion in assistance. India has been central to Trumps Afghanistan strategy in 2017 when US President acknowledged India’s role in Afghanistan and said that India has a greater role to play in Afghanistan, but became marginal when Trump made a shift from his earlier policy and said that the remaining troops will be withdrawn from Afghanistan and also started peace talks with Taliban in 2018. India’s relevance increased again when these talks were cancelled. Although post 2017 the relations between India and Afghanistan haven’t been that strong because of ongoing Peace talks between US and Taliban which India sees as antithetical to its interests in Afghanistan. But many Indian scholars and policy makers are of the opinion that rather than being a peripheral bystander, India should actively involve itself in Afghanistan and ensure that the terms of peace talks are not manipulated by Pakistan which can undermine Indian interests.²⁸ Afghan President Ghani visited India on September 19, 2018 at the invitation of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Both leaders expressed determination to reinforce connectivity, including through Chabahar Port and Air-Freight Corridor. President Ghani also briefed Indian Prime Minister on initiatives by his government towards peace and reconciliation and also in confronting the challenges of terrorism and extremism imposed on Afghanistan and its people. He further reiterated India’s support to an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace and reconciliation process.²⁹

Pakistan factor in India-Afghanistan relations

Pakistan is the most important external actor in Afghanistan, Like all regional stakeholders, Pakistan has also hedged its interest in Afghanistan.³⁰ In Indo-Afghan relations, Pakistan has been a central factor. As India and Pakistan share hostile relations right from the beginning, both are trying to actively involve each other to protect their interests in Afghanistan. India shared cordial relations with Afghanistan till Taliban came to power when the relationship saw a decline and Afghanistan-Pakistan relations started improving. However, post 9/11 and the subsequent overthrow of Taliban in 2001, New Delhi reached out to renew ties with Kabul. India-Afghanistan relations further received a boost from the fact that many current leaders, including President Hamid Karzai, studied at Indian Universities.³¹ India’s influence in Afghanistan increased during this time. Relations between India and Afghanistan received a major boost in 2011 with the signing of a Strategic Partnership Agreement. ³² The President Karzai’s regime was seen by Pakistan’s security establishment as anti-Pakistan and pro-India. After Ashraf Ghani became Afghan president in 2014, a significant change was seen in Afghanistan’s policy towards Pakistan. There was an intent and determination

²⁷ Nayanima Basu, “India, Afghanistan berate Pak on terror at Heart of Asia meet,” Hindu Business Line, December 4, 2016; Suhasini Haidar, “India, Afghanistan corner Pak. on terror at Amritsar,” The Hindu, December 4, 2016.

²⁸ The ‘Indian Question’ in Afghanistan, Avinash Paliwal, Foreign policy essay, lawfare, October, 2019.

²⁹ Visit of President of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to India, September 19, 2018. <http://www.mea.gov.in>press-rele>

³⁰ The Pakistan Factor in India’s Afghanistan Policy, Monish Gulati, May 28, 2013.

³¹ India-Afghanistan Relations, Jayshree Bajoria, Huly 22, 2009, Council on Foreign Relations.

³² India, Russia and China in Race to Expand Influence over Afghanistan; Preventing Re-Talibanization After 2014”. The World Reporter. Retrieved 30 March 2013.

from President Ghani's side to facilitate reconciliation between Afghanistan and Pakistan.³³ President Ghani was of the view that India's role in Afghanistan is of an aid-provider and not in the sphere of security, which was a shift from Hamid Karzai policy who always considered India as a critical security partner.³⁴

As the US has withdrawn most of its troops from Afghanistan, India has been worried about the possible Taliban's coming of power in Afghanistan post US drawdown, as Taliban has gained lot of strength from past few years. On the other hand, Pakistan sees American drawdown as an opportunity to further its influence in Afghanistan which had diminished since 2001 and till Karzai's tenure. Contrary to what many in India would like to believe, it is very likely that the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and the consequent reduction of US influence in the region will take away even the economic cooperation plank from the Indo-Afghan relationship. Pakistan, on the other hand, has doubly hedged its bets against Indian role in Afghanistan by reinforcing the perception that its support for the Afghan Taliban is a reaction to Indian assertiveness in Afghanistan.³⁵ As the President Ghani's proactive engagement with Pakistan to revive peace process failed due to bombings in Kabul by Taliban.³⁶ The bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan started getting bitter. President Ghani expressed his disappointment over Pakistan's failure to bring the Afghan Taliban on the negotiating table. Post bombings in Kabul President Ghani in August 2015 expressed his anger by saying that, "Pakistan still remains the venue and ground for gatherings from which mercenaries send us a message of war."³⁷ In response to Taliban's brutal assault on Kabul in which more than 60 people were killed, President Ghani called on Pakistan to battle the Taliban rather than try to bring them into peace talks. He said that the Taliban leaders finding shelter in Peshawar and Quetta were "enemies of Afghanistan who shed the blood of their countrymen."³⁸ In December 2016, at the "Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process" conference on Afghanistan in Amritsar, Prime Minister Modi and President Ghani jointly hit out at Pakistan for providing sanctuaries to the terrorists.³⁹ As US has withdrawn most of its troops from Afghanistan in 2014, India is worried about the possible impact the drawdown of troops can have and because of Pakistan's close proximity with Taliban. India has several concerns with US drawdown with Afghanistan, as peace with Taliban has not been acquired and US withdrawal is leading to unattended business. An increase in Taliban's influence of Afghanistan with US gone can increase terrorism and could affect the security at Kashmir in India. Taliban can lead to insurgency in Kashmir, thus creating unwanted circumstances for India. The security of India's consulates in Afghanistan also becomes a matter of concern.⁴⁰ India was reliant on US to ensure better stability in Afghanistan, but with its withdrawal, the policy initiated by India, Indian Afghan policy, will undergo

³³ Afghanistans Relations with India and Iran: An assessment of Ghani Period by Dr. Nihar Ranjan Das, July 2016, Indian Council of world Affairs, Sapru House, New Delhi.

³⁴ Charu Sudan Kasturi, "Secret meeting to play catch-up on Kabul," The Telegraph, March 5, 2015.

³⁵ The Pakistan Factor in India's Afghanistan Policy, Monish Gulati, May 28, 2013

³⁶ Afghanistan's Relations with India and Iran: an assessment of Ghani Period by Dr. Nihar Ranjan Das, July 2016, Indian Council of world Affairs, Sapru House, New Delhi.

³⁷ Toto News, August 10, 2015.

³⁸ Afghan president calls on Pakistan to battle Taliban", Dawn, April 25, 2016.

³⁹ Ghani, Modi lash out at Pakistan on terrorism at Heart of Asia moot in Amritsar, Dawn, December 4, 2016.

⁴⁰ Pant, H. V. & Kaura, V. (2018, December 28). India Faces a New Reality in Afghanistan. The Diplomat. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/india-faces-a-new-reality-in-afghanistan/>.

unwanted challenges and concerns. The main purpose of the Indian Afghan policy is to minimize Islamabad's take over Kabul and avoid Pakistan to plot against the interests of India. The policy also assists India to gain a better position in the energy market of Asia. To strengthen the relations and this policy, India has supported Ashraf Ghani and his government to promote the peace process where Afghan should have the first place of negotiation. However, without NATO forces or military power of US, initiating peace and keeping the Taliban's out would be rather difficult due to the geopolitical distance from India, and so, affecting the policy and its intended impact. Pakistan has hedged its bets against Indian role in Afghanistan by reinforcing the perception that its support for the Afghan Taliban is a reaction to Indian assertiveness in Afghanistan. This ensures that any Pakistani assistance in promoting Afghan reconciliation that involves Taliban's cooperation comes with the underlying precondition of keep India out of the picture.⁴¹

Assistance for Afghanistan

India is providing economic as well as humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan's reconstruction. During visit to Afghanistan in December 25, 2015 Prime Minister Modi inaugurated a new parliament complex for the Afghan government that was constructed at a cost of USD 90 million. This building was inaugurated on 25 December 2015.⁴² India signed a deal with Iran and Afghanistan in May 2016, to develop the Chabahar port and build two corridors namely transport and trade through Afghanistan which will reduce the time and cost of doing trade with Europe.⁴³ The Chabahar Trilateral Transit Agreement was described by Indian Prime Minister as 'creation of history'.⁴⁴ The Indian government is investing more than US\$100 million in the expansion of chabahar port. India supplied 1, 70,000 tonnes of wheat was dispatched through Chabahar port to Afghanistan to meet urgent needs in October 2017.⁴⁵ It helped Afghans in the reconstruction of Salma Dam in the Herat province. Besides producing 42 MW power, this Indo-Afghan friendship dam provides irrigation for 75000 hectares of farmland in Chisti Sharif District. The assistance to Afghanistan also includes investing in health and education sectors, rebuilding of air links, power plants and. India helps train Afghan civil servants, diplomats and police personnel.⁴⁶ The dam was opened on 4 June 2016 by Indian prime Minister Narendra Modi along with Afghan president Ashraf Ghani. The assistance programme also includes human resource development and capacity building initiatives. On an average, more than 3500 Afghan nationals undergo training/education in India every year. A special scholarship scheme of 1000 scholarships per annum to Afghan Nationals. To promote food security, mainly children during the times of draught, India has distributed 2000 tonnes of pulses to Afghanistan in 2018. Moreover a medical diagnostic centre in Kabul

⁴¹ The Pakistan Factor in India's Afghanistan Policy, Monish Gulati, May 28, 2013, Vivekananda International Foundation

⁴² Modi inaugurates new Afghan Parliament built by India in Kabul, Hindustan Times. 25 December 2015.

⁴³ India, Iran and Afghanistan sign Chabahar port agreement," Hindustan Times, May 24, 2016

⁴⁴ Remarks by Prime Minister at Chabahar connectivity event, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, May 23, 2016.

⁴⁵ Joint Statement between India and Afghanistan (December 25, 2015). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.

⁴⁶ India-Afghanistan relations in the Modi-Ghani Era, Vinay Kaura, Indian Journal of Asian Affairs, Vol. 30, No. 1/2, June-December 2017.

was set up in 2015.⁴⁷ India has completed a number of medium and large infrastructure projects in its assistance programme in Afghanistan. Some of these include; 218 km road from Zaranj to Delaram for facilitating movement of goods and services to the Iranian border; construction of 220kv transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul, upgrading of telephone exchangers in 11 provinces; expansion of national TV Network by providing an uplink from Kabul and downlinks in all 34 provincial capitals for greater integration of the country.⁴⁸ India's bilateral trade with Afghanistan stood at \$648.47 million in 2014-2015, an increase of 0.20 percent over \$683.10 million. The trade relations can realise its full potential if the Wagah-Attari route is opened for bilateral trade with Afghanistan. In order to expand trade to India, the Afghan government in collaboration with Government of India launched a dedicated Air Freight Corridor on 19 June 2017. Since its inauguration in 2017, India-Afghanistan Air Freight Corridor has witnessed close to a 1000 flights, carrying goods valued at over USD 216 million.⁴⁹

Way Forward

India and Afghanistan have enjoyed cordial relations through most of the time except for the period from 1996 to 2001 during Taliban's rule. After Ashraf Ghani assumed power in Afghanistan in 2014, the relations between India and Afghanistan initially saw a decline because of Ghani's tilt towards Pakistan with the hope that Pakistan will bring Taliban to the negotiating table. But after Taliban's deadly attacks in Kabul, President Ghani started focussing on improving relations with India as well. After that India has been seen actively involving itself with mostly providing assistance to Afghanistan and its reconstruction. As Afghanistan provides the pathway to Central Asian States, it is of great importance to India to ensure better relations with Afghanistan. India needs to scale up its operations especially in the economic, industrial, communications, information technology, human capital development, construction and military fields. India's strength resides in having goodwill of Afghans over the years by remaining engaged with the political dispensation in Afghanistan. As India is the largest regional contributor to Afghan reconstruction having provided an assistance of nearly US \$ 3 billion. India should maximise its development work in Afghanistan in addition to providing of humanitarian assistance to Afghans when needed. The vacuum created by NATO troops drawdown should not be permitted to be exploited by other regional players, especially china and Pakistan. Considering the possibility of militant attacks by Pakistan's proxy groups, efforts need to be undertaken to have a robust, well integrated, counter terrorism infrastructure to restore balance.

The current state of Afghan-Pakistan relations provides an opportunity for Afghanistan and India to augment their bilateral engagement. Facilitating trade and development related activities can help in achieving a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. India-Afghanistan can use Projects like TAPI gas pipeline and Chabahar project to strengthen their ties. As the US drawdown has tilted things in favour of Pakistan, India should identify the areas where it can engage itself in Afghanistan. It should also try to engage itself with Taliban which has gained strength in Afghanistan and approve the peace talks going on between US and Taliban. It is

⁴⁷ Indo-Afghanistan relations, Embassy of Kabul) <http://eoi.gov.in/kabul/0354>

⁴⁸ Afghanistans Relations with India and Iran: An assessment of Ghani Period by Dr. Nihar Ranjan Das, July 2016, Indian Council of world Affairs, Sapru House, New Delhi.

⁴⁹ Indo-Afghanistan relations, Embassy of Kabul) <http://eoi.gov.in/kabul/0354>.

imperative for India that rather than being a peripheral bystander, it should actively involve itself in Afghanistan and ensure that the terms of peace talks are not manipulated by Pakistan which can undermine Indian interests.

The national security establishments in India should be vigilant of the changing environment in Afghanistan post 2014 drawdown of US troops. If possible, keeping lines of communication with the Taliban open will be advantageous because in long run India can't afford to avoid Taliban in Afghanistan where it seems that in future power sharing, Taliban will also have a good share. Meanwhile, strengthening the Afghan government amid democratic processes must remain the cornerstone of the Indian Policy. Even though the current situation is favourable to Pakistan, India should not stop its development work in Afghanistan rather maximise it in addition to providing of humanitarian assistance to Afghans when needed. To strengthen their ties, both India and Afghanistan need to identify the areas of cooperation and work on them.

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