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India-Afghanistan Relations: Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract:

British India shared a long border with Afghanistan. Partition ended that proximity. However, the centuries old historical, cultural and civilizational ties still attest to the warmth between the two countries. Both Afghanistan and India enjoy each other's friendship which has only grown over centuries. As the saying goes, you can change your friend, but you cannot change your neighbor. In this case, Pakistan just did the opposite. It separated the two neighbours and, to borrow from Chanakya's political wisdom, ended up making them friends. But in the process, the twins themselves became rivals. With the birth of Pakistan, also rose a whole range of issues which remain contentious between the two countries. This article attempts to explore the areas of cooperation between India and Afghanistan, strengthen the bilateral relations and play an effective role to maintain peace and stability in Afghanistan and in the larger South Asian region including Pakistan.

Keywords: Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, India-Afghanistan relations, security, energy, regional cooperation, bilateral relations, business and trade.

Indo-Afghan historical linkages

Before Partition did them apart, India and Afghanistan were direct neighbours and friendly countries which enjoyed historical, traditional and cultural closeness. Although Partition disconnected them geographically, their friendship not only continues but has strengthened through diplomatic, political, security, strategic and other ties and, trade and business relations. From Amir Abdur Rahman (1880-1901) to King Zahir Shah (1933-73) to the Sovietization of Afghanistan (1979-89), India kept up a cordial relation with Afghanistan and maintained the *status quo* till the 21st century except for a brief period beginning with the Taliban regime in 1996.

The chaos created by the Taliban left Afghanistan in ruins. War and conflict was not new to the Afghans, but the rise of the Taliban brought serious destruction and shattered the country's social fabric. Taliban's giving refuge to Al-Qaeda's chief Osama bin Laden drew the attention of global powers to Afghanistan. In this 'war on terror', the country's infrastructure got devastated. The USA, which was spearheading this war, pledged to rebuild the country and, thus many external players were brought in to Afghanistan.

Among all the external players, the role of the regional players is most significant for various reasons which this paper will not dwell on for want of space and for the fact that this paper does

not deal with that. Rather, it will focus on Afghanistan's bilateral relations with India and, or vice versa.

Irrespective of the order of importance, some of the regional players with crucial role in Afghanistan's peace, progress and stability are Pakistan, Iran, India, Central Asian Republics, Saudi Arabia, Russia, China, Turkey. The list is not comprehensive, but formidable, given the fact that these countries have either some plans for or stakes in Afghanistan. UK, Japan and Germany's role as the second, third and fourth largest donors respectively and the overarching role of the United States of America in both the destruction and rebuilding of Afghanistan cannot be denied. Thus, one way of looking at the problem and addressing it could be through a multilateral approach including all regional and external actors.

However, since this paper focuses on India-Afghanistan relations, it will therefore look at the areas of cooperation and avenues of opportunities for better relations between the two countries. Let us first locate the India-Afghanistan bilateral relations historically to see what promises and possibilities the two countries have.

Although India, post-Partition, does not share border with Afghanistan, the historical linkages and cultural ties between the two countries are centuries old. This "shared-history" derives the two countries' engagement with each other in many areas of "shared-interest".

While examining the strategic relationship between Afghanistan and India during a two-day international conference on "Indo-Afghan Relations: Evaluating the Development and Strategic Partnership" on 21-22 March, 2017 held at Jamia Millia Islamia, Shah Mahmood Miakhel, Director of the United States Institute of Peace, Kabul maintained that the partnership between the two countries is on broader development policies and the Indian aid is mainly used in three activities: Line of credits, capacity building activities and Grants Assistance projects, all of which had certain political influence as well certain economic, diplomatic and strategic objectives.

Timeless Friendship, a 2004 documentary directed by senior journalist A. K. Kidwai under the auspices of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, records that "Relations between India and Afghanistan are steeped in myth, shared heritage and shared ideal and shared dreams of history and pre-history".

This understanding also flows from the fact that an Undivided India shared direct border with Afghanistan. In ancient times Afghanistan was known as Aryana, India as Aryavarta. It was a world without borders.

The centuries old level of understanding has continued till the present century. The two countries have enjoyed fruitful constructive relations with India providing sustained support to Afghanistan during the country's most challenging circumstances.

India-Afghanistan relations in the backdrop of post-Cold war events faced three challenges which India had to address. The first challenge began with the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, the second was related to dealing with the post-Soviet withdrawal regime and the political stability in that period and the third one arose with the rise of the Taliban after 1996.

On all these occasions, India's role has been supportive to the Afghan cause. Haroun Mir writes that, "Afghanistan and India have always enjoyed fruitful constructive relations. History has seen India's sustained support of the Afghan government during challenging circumstances. The only time India did not recognize the regime in Kabul was during the Taliban era, when that regime adopted a hostile policy toward New Delhi." ⁱ

Avenues of cooperation

Since the last quarter of the 20th century, the demand for energy has been a constantly growing. Security, one of the important bases for most international relations, is now seen as security in terms of energy. This changed phenomenon has re-drawn the world's attention to Afghanistan which sits at the crossroads of some of the most energy-rich nations.

Afghanistan itself is viewed with interest besides its geostrategic location, also because of its new found sources of energy. Flashing these points political analyst Ahmed Abbas writes that "The hunt for energy resources has assumed a preeminent position on the global chessboard of power and politics. The quest for energy resources has compelled countries to foster regional cooperation in the energy sector." ⁱⁱ

Thus, the one sector where regional collaborations can be sought and forged is the energy sector where among other regional actors, India can look for better prospects of peace and security in Afghanistan through bilateral agreements and joint projects.

Besides energy, India's support in traditional security sector can be pivotal. India has emerged as a great regional power which can alter the existing traditional balance of power in South Asia. With international forces pulling off since 2014, India along with Turkey and other countries in the larger Southwest Asian region can play a vital role in the security needs of Afghanistan. In this context, the recent Agreement of Strategic Partnership between India and Afghanistan ⁱⁱⁱ has great possibilities of addressing the security requirements of Afghanistan as Gareth Price points out that:

The main driver of Indian policy has shifted from an anti Pakistan strategy towards a desire for stability in Afghanistan. ... recently, and in particular since an Indian consortium won the Hajigak mining rights, Afghanistan could become a means of creating confidence between India and Pakistan. Were Pakistan to agree to the transit of iron ore, all three countries would benefit financially. ^{iv}

The agreement between India and Afghanistan in fact is a re-assertion of the fundamental and lasting spirit of the Treaty of Friendship signed between the two countries in January 1950 to maintain and strengthen the cordial relations.

Pakistan, however, despite failure to provide the required assistance to Afghanistan, does not very much like this relationship to grow stronger. However, this collaboration is of utmost importance and should be welcomed both by Pakistan and Afghanistan as Afghan Ambassador to India Shaida Mohammad Abdali writes that “The key to unlock the current regional impasse derives from cooperation between the regions two strategic rivals: India and Pakistan.”^v

Even in the past, India’s Afghanistan policy has been not to derive any mileage vis-à-vis Pakistan. Shanthie D’Souza notes about the Nehruvian policy that “the Nehruvian tradition in New Delhi has underlined the need to engage Pakistan rather than pursuing a strategy that isolates the country.”^{vi}

The third sector where the two countries hold promise is business and trade. This is where a new approach can also be brought in to address the situations in Afghanistan which so far has been addressed mostly with geo-strategic angle.

Geostrategically, Afghanistan’s location provides both opportunity and obstacle to both the rival neighbours. But it is left to these two nuclear powers to make better choices for their own good and for the good of Afghanistan. For Harpviken and Tadjbakhsh “Afghanistan is both a source of conflict with potentially contagious effects and a possible focus for neighbourly cooperation...Cooperation would not only curb the destructive behavior of non-state actors, but could also lead to positive externalities, such as economic dividends...”^{vii}

The Pakistan factor

As noted earlier, Pakistan does not like the Indo-Afghanistan relationship to grow strong. Pakistan’s fear for India’s growing interest in Afghanistan emerges from the traditional rivalry as also from India’s engagement in the 1971 war, while India’s ostensible desire to engage in Afghanistan, as claimed time and again by the Indian government, is not to encircle Pakistan, but to help stabilize Afghanistan’s economy. The main driver of Indian policy has shifted from an anti-Pakistan strategy to a desire for stability in Afghanistan. According to D’Souza, India’s wide-ranging assistance programme, provided directly to the Afghan government and locals, is designed to build on the Afghan state institutions and at the same time maximize Afghan participation both at the government and community levels.^{viii}

However, India also needs to change its Afghanistan approach in view of its security calculations with Pakistan. In a brilliant article published in Urdu daily *Roznama Sahara* (Delhi, 2 May, 2015), journalist Hasan Kamal states that while analyzing the Afghan situations Indian observers have made two grave mistakes: One, the Soviet support in Kabul was taken as Afghans being mesmerized by Communism. This was proved wrong. Two, our policy analysts and decision-

makers had no clue that the militant Taliban, with the help of US weapons received through Pakistan, would make life difficult for the Soviets and thus become a factor for the Soviet's downfall.^{ix}

Kamal further says our [India's] whole attention has been in finding ways to break the Pakistani influence in Afghanistan and therefore we weighed and measured Afghanistan on the parameter of its relations with Pakistan. If Afghanistan distanced itself from Pakistan, we befriended it as was the case in Hamid Karzai's time and, if it went close to Pakistan, we took it as a rival as was seen during the Taliban's time. We never tried to understand Afghanistan without the Pakistan angle. While the fact is that India-Afghan relations were established before Pakistan's existence.

In fact, a trilateral approach is what could help the three countries gain maximum by cooperating with each other than by looking at one another as rivals. Abdali precisely points to that when he says that "The three countries have an unprecedented level of stakes in each other's stability, ranging from the economic sphere to the ones of politics and security."^x

Multi-sectoral assistance for capacity-building

As India grows in strength from a regional power to an important global player in international affairs, it is likely that its relations with its neighbours will undergo substantial changes. India's engagement in Afghanistan is not security-centric, it is one part of it though. Its outreach covers such areas as education, health, infrastructural development, etc.

According to Government of India, President Hamid Karzai's Strategic Partnership Agreement with India during his 2011 visits comprised of "Political & security cooperation; trade & economic cooperation; capacity development and education; and social, cultural, civil society & people-to-people relations."^{xi} and "Within this framework India has pledged just under \$2 billion to Afghanistan, and spent around \$1 billion, making it the fifth largest bilateral donor... Most Indian assistance fits into three broad categories: humanitarian assistance (such as food aid), infrastructure projects and capacity building."^{xii}

It is also likely that this nascent scenario will affect India's relations with such big powers as the US, Russia and China and each of them is likely to impact the shape of things to come.

India, however, would be trying to cement its ties with and strengthen its security, trade and diplomatic relations with most of the countries of South, Central and West Asia including Afghanistan to maintain its growing global image or to check competition from the other two major regional powers vis-à-vis China and Russia. And, that is where lies the real challenge.

Conclusion

Relations between India and Afghanistan are rooted in history. And, history has been witness to the constant strengthening of this relationship despite odds at different levels: from changing

global political scenario to the on-and-off relations between India and Pakistan. However, the two countries have withstood all odds and upheavals and remained friends in good and bad times.

Pakistan views India's growing friendship with Afghanistan skeptically as it considers it a means of encirclement of its western border, whereas India's engagement in Afghanistan is to help Afghanistan develop in areas of education, infrastructure and help it be self-sufficient and capable to deal with its own security challenges arising out of new circumstances and changing security environments.

India seeks to forge better business and trade relations with Afghanistan by helping it build roads, railway tracts, schools, health facilities and it wishes to make it a sustainable economy. It also aims to help Afghanistan extract its vast untapped resources. Thus India wants to see Afghanistan grow in crucial energy sector, security sector and business and trade.

As three decades of war and conflict has destabilized Afghan economy and made the country weak, fragile and unstable, India's outreach to Afghanistan flows from its policy of having better relations with its neighbors and providing them assistance as and when needed. This should be welcomed both by Afghanistan and Pakistan which has been suffering from serious internal security challenges, rather than viewing it as a means of strategic encirclement and security threat which has not been India's aim.

With geo-strategic attempts having failed to bear any good outcomes, the economic motivation can serve as the best guide for both India and Pakistan to cooperate with each other in the development of Afghanistan rather than question each other's intention to secure strategic leverage. Referring to this Tadjbakhsh writes that: A final element of strategic interest of both countries in Afghanistan is economic dividends. Both countries' ambition of benefiting from projects worth millions of dollars by providing transit services to Central Asian states through Afghanistan cannot be fully accomplished unless peace is established in Afghanistan.^{xiii}

Ignoring this can jeopardize all the efforts of development and stability in the country. And that is what Tadjbakhsh regrets that "Yet, instead of cooperating together on economic projects that have benefits for all three countries, rivalry between India and Pakistan, as well as larger geopolitical impediments hamper the realization of the potential cooperation."^{xiv}

That India has been given opportunities in Afghanistan's markets and connectivity with the markets of Central Asia underscores the significance of India-Afghanistan's deep relations which will go a long way to strengthen their ties further.

(Manzar Imam wrote his M Phil dissertation on Afghanistan and is pursuing Ph. D. on *The Imperative of Cooperation in Southwest Asia: Peace and Stability in Afghanistan* from the Academy of International Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia).

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ⁱ Haroun Mir "Is Regional Consensus on Afghanistan Possible?" in Shanthie Mariet D'Souza (ed.) *Afghanistan in Transition Beyond 2014?*, (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012), p. 134.

ⁱⁱ Ahmed Abbas, "Daulatabad-Gwadar Gas Pipeline Agreement" in Musa Khan Jalalzai (ed.) *The Pipeline War In Afghanistan: Oil, Gas and the New Energy Great Game in Central Asia*, (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2003), p.179.

ⁱⁱⁱ The agreement signed on 4 October, 2011 at New Delhi between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Hamid Karzai focuses on political and security cooperation, trade and economic cooperation, capacity development and education, and, to strengthen social, cultural, civil society and people-to-people relations.

^{iv} Gareth Price "India's Policy Towards Afghanistan", Chatham House, p.3, URL: http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Asia/0813pp_indiaafghanistan.pdf, (accessed on 4 April, 2015).

^v Abdali, Shaida Mohammad (2016), *Afghanistan-Pakistan-India: A Paradigm Shift*: New Delhi, Pentagon Press, p.11.

^{vi} Shanthie Mariet D'Souza (2013), "India's Evolving Policy Contours towards post-2014 Afghanistan", *Journal of South Asian Development*, p.195.

^{vii} Kristian Beg Harpviken and Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh (2016), *A Rock Between Hard Places: Afghanistan as an Arena of Regional Insecurity*: London, Hurst & Company, p.2.

^{viii} D'Souza (2013), "India's Evolving Policy Contours towards post-2014 Afghanistan", *Journal of South Asian Development*, pp.189-190.

^{ix} Hasan Kamal, “India-Afghanistan relations: Need for change of Perspective”, *Roznama Rashtriya Sahara (Urdu daily, Rashtriya Sahara)*, New Delhi, 2 May, 2015.

^x Abdali, Shaida Mohammad (2016), *Afghanistan-Pakistan-India: A Paradigm Shift*, p.13.

^{xi} Government of India, Lok Sabha, Unstarred question number 596, answered 27 February 2013, <http://meanindia.nic.in/mystar.php?id=500410153>, also available at URL <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/afghanistan-aug-2012.pdf>, accessed on 25 May, 2017.

^{xii} Gareth Price “India’s Policy Towards Afghanistan”, Chatham House, p.5, URL: http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Asia/0813pp_indiaafghanistan.pdf, (accessed on 4 April, 2015).

^{xiii} Tadjbakhsh, Shahrbanou (2011), “South Asia and Afghanistan: The Robust India-Pakistan Rivalry”, Paper 2, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), Oslo, Norway, p.45 URL: [http://file.prio.no/Publication_files/Prio/Tadjbakhsh,%20S%20\(2011\)%20South%20Asia%20and%20Afghanistan%20\(PRIO%20Paper\).pdf](http://file.prio.no/Publication_files/Prio/Tadjbakhsh,%20S%20(2011)%20South%20Asia%20and%20Afghanistan%20(PRIO%20Paper).pdf), (accessed on 29 August, 2013).

^{xiv} *Ibid*, p.45