

Indo-Afghan Relations: Turning a new page under Modi?

Praagya Singh



Source: The Diplomat, 2016

Afghanistan is one of the immediate neighbours of India. India shares a long history of social and cultural ties with Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a war-torn country, suffers the heat of terrorism. Taliban has established its deep roots in Afghanistan with alleged support of Pakistan. Afghanistan's other immediate neighbor, Pakistan has neither fulfilled its promise of convincing Taliban on holding peace dialogue with the Afghan government nor has ceased to provide safe havens to Taliban. Therefore, the Ghani government has sought for a larger Indian role in reconstruction and capacity building in Afghanistan. India-Afghanistan relations have improved substantially under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.

Background

India Afghanistan relationship can be traced in four phases; *First phase*, unfolds from Indian Independence in 1947 to the end of cold war 1990. India enjoyed amicable relations with Afghanistan during the first phase except during the Soviet intervention (1979–89). India's special partnership with the Soviet Union and the logic of Cold War politics led India to take a neutral position on Soviet intervention, which adversely affected India's image among the Afghans.

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 jihadist terrorism. With the coming to power of the Pakistan-supported Taliban regime in 1996, India's influence in Afghanistan was eclipsed by Pakistan. This period also witnessed India providing support to the Northern Alliance, an anti-Taliban resistance group comprising mostly Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras.¹ During Taliban rule in Afghanistan India had no diplomatic ties with Kabul, this phase came to the lowest point in Indian-afghan relations.

The **third phase** commenced when Taliban government was overthrown in 2001. During this phase, India reemerged in Afghan's politics and was seen regaining influence in Afghanistan. The Indian-educated Hamid Karzai, a *popalzai* Pashtun, came to power first as head of interim government and was subsequently re-elected twice as President. Karzai adopted a policy of rekindling Kabul's close ties with India. India has, since then, emerged as the most important regional power, investing in institution building in Afghanistan. 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). Indian aid program, dubbed as a 'development partnership' pledged more than US \$ 2 billion - 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 1,000 annual scholarships for Afghan students, provision of vocational training activities for women, training of army cadets in India, provision of attack helicopters to the Afghan air force, construction of roads, dams, transmission lines, and telecom networks to the construction of the new Afghan Parliament building. New Delhi has pledged another \$1 billion over the next few years for Kabul. India has extended diplomatic support for Afghanistan at all regional and multilateral levels. Despite Pakistan's diplomatic reluctance, India helped Afghanistan become the latest member of the South Asia Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in New Delhi in 2007.

In 2011, India under Dr. Manmohan Singh signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) with Afghanistan. India being the first country to sign such an agreement took their bilateral relations to the next level and had implications for India's wider neighborhood policy. Through the agreement India agreed to assist Afghanistan in the "training, equipping and capacity building programmes for Afghan national security forces.



Going beyond the security dimension, the partnership arrangement also dwells on trade and economic cooperation, capacity development and education, social cultural & civil society and people to people relations. Through this agreement India Afghanistan expanded their Bilateral ties in many other areas. The strategic partnership laid considerable emphasis on people to people ties. The two countries agreed to simplify the rules to facilitate people to people exchange. Being the first strategic partnership agreement that India has signed with a South Asian country, it had implications for India's neighborhood policy. India appeared to be taking a cooperative security approach to deal with security issues, combining hard and soft power options. The **fourth phase**

started with Narendra Modi coming to power as Prime Minister of India and Ashraf Ghani becoming President of Afghanistan, steady till date.

India-Afghanistan's Relations since Modi Era



When Ashraf Ghani became Afghan president in 2014, Kabul took the bold step of altering its existing policies and ways of doing business with Pakistan. Ghani's policy shift after his overtures to Pakistan but dust, appeared to offer great hope for facilitating reconciliation between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Ghani's visit to the Pakistan in November 2014 was what surprised many in India. He also sought the support of China. During his visit to Beijing, Ghani indicated that he viewed India's role in Afghanistan as an *aid-provider*,³ but not in the sphere of security, marking a break from his predecessor Karzai who always considered India as a critical security partner. However, the prospects for reconciliation between Kabul and Islamabad were not bright because Pakistan army would demand absolute compliance from Afghan government on terms of political settlement with the Taliban. In August 2015, Ghani declared that "Pakistan still remains a venue and ground for gatherings from which mercenaries send us message of war..."⁴ Keeping in view Pakistan's sensitivity to India's direct involvement in Afghanistan, India clarified that it had no intention of committing its troops to Afghanistan. India felt that Indians in Afghanistan would become sitting ducks for battle, hardened and Pakistan-sponsored Taliban.

Abdullah Abdullah, Chief Executive of Afghanistan visited India in March 2015. Acknowledging India as Afghanistan's most generous supporter, he said that "India ought to look at Afghanistan as a *permanent friend*." Responding to Indian concerns on the growing 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. During Ghani's interactions with the Indian leadership, the discussion ranged from cooperation and assistance in various sectors including the health, education, agriculture, disaster management, power sector and electoral management. Moreover, both countries "expressed determination to work together, along with the international community, to combat and defeat the scourge of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. They called on the international community to severely deal with the safe havens for terrorists that continue to threaten regional and global security." The Afghan Embassy in Delhi proposed building sister-city relationship "between Delhi and Kabul, Mumbai and Kandahar, Ajmer

Sharif and Herat, Hyderabad and Jalalabad, Ahmedabad and Asadabad, as well as the State of Assam and the Province of Helmand”.

India has adopted a soft power approach in Afghanistan by taking responsibility for various reconstruction and developmental programs.

Under Modi’s leadership, India began to shed its earlier hesitation on only giving non-lethal assistance like transport vehicles and training to Afghanistan. PM Modi’s unannounced visit to Afghanistan in December 2015, unveiled India’s two of the most important initiatives in Afghanistan; the inauguration of the Afghan’s Parliament building and the handing over ceremony of four Mi-25 attack helicopters.

It also decided to conduct the first Strategic Partnership Council meeting headed by the Foreign Ministers in early 2016 along with four joint working group meetings.⁶

Later in 2016, Afghanistan’s CEO Abdullah Abdullah visited India 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. An Agreement on Exemption from Visa Requirement for Holders of Diplomatic Passports was signed between the two countries. In June 2016, PM Modi visited Herat and inaugurated, jointly with Ghani, the Afghan-India Friendship Dam, earlier known as the Salma Dam. Stressing on India’s commitment to Afghan’s peace and development, Modi said, “India will not forget you or turn away...Your friendship is our honor ; your dreams are our duty.”



Currently, New Delhi and Kabul are working on strengthening alternative routes, as Pakistan has not permitted any Indian goods to travel overland and plans including the air cargo corridor launched in June 2017, as well as the Chabahar Sea route. India’s first major shipment of 1,30,000 tons of wheat to Afghanistan through the Chabahar Port was dispatched from the western seaport of Kandla in October 2017, launching a trade route bypassing Pakistan. This project created a new transport corridor that ends Pakistan’s monopoly on seaborne transit trade to Afghanistan.

In May 2016, India signed a historic three-nation deal with Iran and Afghanistan to develop the Chabahar Port and build a transport-and-trade corridor through Afghanistan that could substantially reduce the time and cost of doing business with Europe.

India's growing interest and influence in Afghanistan was reflected in Modi's announcement of providing Kabul with \$1 billion in economic aid. The dialogue at the highest level between India and Afghanistan has been complemented by regular interactions between senior ministers, military officials and civil society representatives.

India's assistance to Afghanistan also extends to rebuilding of air links, power plants and investing in health and education sectors. India helps train Afghan civil servants, diplomats and police personnel. Building on strong historical links, India has been open to the Afghan people, facilitating cooperation in diverse fields. Thousands of Afghans visit India every year for tourism, medical care and education. India has allowed Afghan government telecommunication through Indian satellites. Although New Delhi maintains that economic assistance to Kabul is for infrastructural development and capacity building, it is mainly driven by India's geopolitical interests in Afghanistan. New Delhi's commitment for the development of Afghanistan has already crossed \$2 billion since 2001.⁸ India has also agreed "to extend further assistance for the Afghan national defense and security forces in fighting the scourge of terrorism, organized crime, trafficking of narcotics and money laundering."⁹ Further, Modi government has decided to take up to 116 high- impact community developmental projects in 31 Afghan provinces. These investments would be in the areas of education, health, agriculture, irrigation, drinking water, renewable energy, flood control, micro- hydro power, sports and administrative infrastructure.

India's agenda is to build the capacity of the Afghan state as well as of the Afghan security forces, enabling them to fight more effectively against the Afghan Taliban and ISIS. This is in tune with the requirements of the Afghan government as well as the international community.

Recently, in June 2018, during the Shanghai Cooperation Summit (SCO) PM Modi highlighted the issue of Afghanistan's struggle for peace. Modi in his speech stated, "SCO members will work together to fight terrorism, extremism and drug trade", further he commented, "Afghanistan is an unfortunate example of the effects of terrorism. I hope the brave steps towards peace taken by President Ghani will be respected by all in the region."

Conclusion and Recommendations

India's efforts to ensure peace and stability in Afghanistan have been constrained by the evolving regional geopolitics. The existential dependence of Ghani's administration on American finance and military support, the Afghan Taliban's increasing influence in Afghanistan, and Taliban's growing bonhomie with Russia and Iran, coupled with the rise of

ISIS in Afghanistan have severely complicated the political situation in Afghanistan. Pakistan, being the most prominent external actor in Afghan political affairs, has been a central factor in Indo-Afghan ties. Pakistan's firm belief about the intertwined nature of Afghan and Indian threats, and the ability of Afghanistan, whether on its own or with India's support, to undermine the Pakistani state, has been a constant threat to Pakistan's military discourse.

There is an urgent need for additional Indian investment that Afghans need and continues to request. India's investment in Afghanistan's economic growth, women empowerment and infrastructure development needs to be expanded. India should clearly map out its future posture in Afghanistan. Indo-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement should be implemented with renewed vigor as it provides a framework for future bilateral engagements. The Modi government needs to remind the international community of India's firm commitment to regional cooperation, especially with regard to its neighbourhood which includes Afghanistan.

Charcha

Bibliography and References:

1. Vinay Kaura, India-Afghanistan Relations in the Modi-Ghani Era, Page-30.
2. Raghav Sharma, India's relations with Afghanistan in David Scott ed.- Handbook of India's International Relations, Routledge, UK, 2011, Page-5
3. Charu Sudan Kasturi, "Secret meeting to play catch-up on Kabul," The Telegraph, March 5, 2015. ^[1]_[SEP]
4. Translation of Remarks by President Ashraf Ghani at Press Conference, August 10, 2015, <http://president.gov.af/en/news/translation-of-remarks-by-president-ashraf-ghani-at-press-conference> ^[1]_[SEP]
5. Asit Jolly and MG Arun, "We need realistic dialogue with Pakistan: Dr Abdullah Abdullah," India Today, March 13, 2015. ^[1]_[SEP]
6. "Joint Statement between India and Afghanistan," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, December 25, 2015. ^[1]_[SEP]
7. Praveen Swami, "At Afghan dam inauguration, PM promises: India will not forget you," The Hindu, June 5, 2016.
8. Vinay Kaura, India-Afghanistan Relations in the Modi-Ghani Era, Page-37.
9. Joint Statement on the 2nd Strategic Partnership Council Meeting between India and Afghanistan, New Delhi (September 11, 2017)," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, September 11, 2017, http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28936/Joint_Statement_on_the_2nd_Strategic_Partnership_Council_Meeting_between_India_and_Afghanistan_New_Delhi_September_11_2017