

# India-Afghanistan Relations – Post US Withdrawal

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**Abstract**— India although does not share border with Afghanistan yet being extended neighbourhood, its geo-strategic and geo-political dynamics has always remained the focus of Indian regional policy. After US withdrawal, the issues of terrorism, religious extremism, drug trafficking and human rights situation once again came to the forefront. It had a direct impact on Indian aspirations of securing a stable and democratic Afghanistan. India has been directly engaged in the activities of rehabilitation, infrastructure development, road connectivity, educational empowerment, health and social sectors. With the change of regime in Afghanistan. India evaluated its political, economic and strategic relations. With these and similar related questions in mind, the present paper made an analysis of Indo-Afghan relation after US withdrawal from Afghanistan. It attempts to conclude how India should be very cautious in its behaviour towards Afghanistan.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, Reconstruction, Taliban, India, Pakistani factor.

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## I. METHODOLOGY

The study is exclusively based on secondary data. This data has been collected from various published books, articles published in journals, newspapers, and through consulting Infilbnet N-List resources. Then, the collected data has been rearranged for systematic analysis.

## II. INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan has always been a top priority for India for geographical, historical, political, and cultural reasons. Afghanistan, which suffered from a power struggle following World War II, saw India as a natural ally because of its democratic values. Afghanistan has received particular attention and significance in India's post-cold war viewpoint because of the deteriorating relations with Pakistan and the rise of the fundamentalist "Taliban." US intervention in the wake of 9/11 led to the overthrow of the oppressive rule of the Taliban.

In February 2020, US made an agreement with the Taliban to withdraw from Afghanistan in 14 months in exchange for their nebulous commitment to a peace process. In the wake of the US withdrawal, the Taliban once again took control of Afghanistan in August 2021. During this phase, Afghanistan faced monumental challenges.<sup>[1]</sup> It compelled India to rethink its security and economic concerns. Afghanistan's strategic location, fragile political system and ethnic unrest had always the direct bearings on India's security and political setup.

The present paper attempts to discuss Indo-Afghan relations in the context of:

- Indian policy objectives in Afghanistan
- India's role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan & relations
- Pakistan factor in Indo-Afghan relations

## III. INDIAN OBJECTIVES IN AFGHANISTAN

More than four decades of military and armed conflict in Afghanistan has left the nation devastated. No sector of Afghan society had been spared by the consequences of conflict. The shadow of war and conflicts has eclipsed the whole country hardly leaving any place to escape.

Post-war reconstruction aimed to regain a sense of normalcy for the civilian populations affected by warfare. The dominant discourse for reconstruction has been the humanitarian assistance that promotes post-war social and economic transformations

for the civilian populations. According to Sarah Jane Mehraj, post-war reconstruction is our ability to assist the victims of conflict and to restore communities and arranging development activities.<sup>[2]</sup>

The one vision that international community share is the prospect of rebuilding the country, restore agricultural systems and creating opportunities for employment and reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan. The International community is seen as having an obligation to help the country rehabilitate by international corporation. So far as India is concerned it has always been in the forefront of development of Afghanistan. India's main interests in Afghanistan are:

- Restoration of humanitarian relief efforts.
- To prevent the establishment of another safe haven for Jihadi terrorist groups, as was in the case of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 under Taliban rule.
- To assess Central Asia and its energy. India's high growth rate and increasing energy demands of its industry and consumers can benefit from the rich oil reserves of Iran Afghanistan and Central Asian States.
- To curtail the growth of Afghanistan as a major illegal drug production centre as India is aware of the direct connection between illegal drug trade of financing of the terrorist groups.<sup>[3]</sup>

The principal objective of India is to build indigenous Afghan capacity and its institutions. India has actively contributed to Afghanistan's development because it recognizes that the country's social and economic progress is essential to maintaining regional security. India desires to see a stable and prosperous Afghanistan and is dedicated to the strengthening of humanitarianism.

#### **IV. INDIA'S ROLE IN THE RECONSTRUCTION OF AFGHANISTAN & RELATIONS**

Afghanistan has always remained the focus of Indian regional polity because of its geo-strategic location. India has made investments in infrastructure, the education sector, irrigation development, and energy production projects in an effort to strengthen its bonds with Afghanistan over time.

In 2020 US Department of Defence reported that India is the largest regional donor to Afghanistan with US \$ 3 billion since 2001 and this aid has focused on four main categories mainly humanitarian assistance; major infrastructure projects; small and communist based projects; and capacity development.<sup>[4]</sup>

On 31 August 2021 the US and her allies had withdrawn all troops from the soil of the Afghanistan. The change in system was a set back for India. After the US withdrawal, Afghanistan faced a collapsed economy and humanitarian crisis. Rising prices for food and fuel made it hard for Afghan people because US froze about \$ a billion in Afghan currency reserves, which cut the country from the global market place.

In October 2022 UNDP reported that almost all Afghans were living in poverty. The economy has shrunk by 30% since takeover. More than 90% of the population has been suffering from some form of food insecurity.<sup>[5]</sup> A stop in aid by some nations and international organizations, which had been the lifeblood of the public health sector and the economy, is making the problem severe.

The framework of India-Afghanistan relations is the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) that was signed between the two countries in 2011 between Hamid Karzai and Dr. Manmohan Singh. This partnership entailed domain of politics, security cooperation, trade and economic cooperation. Most important initiatives were taken under Manmohan Singh's government.<sup>[6]</sup>

In September 2017 the Second Strategic Partnership meet took place in Delhi and both sides agreed to initiate 'New Development Partnership'. India took up 116 High-Impact Community Development Projects in the areas of education, health, agriculture, micro hydropower and administrative infrastructure.

Taliban cast its net wide in the East and West. It was manifestly eager to have diverse relationships based on mutual interests. After the Taliban takeover and being denied widespread diplomatic recognition, the group has sought to foster international connections in a bid to cement control. A delegation of Indian foreign ministry officials visited Kabul with Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi declaring the visit a 'good beginning' in bilateral ties.<sup>[7]</sup>

The political instability in Afghanistan has important implications not only for Afghans but also for its neighbours and the region. India has urged for an "inclusive and representative" government in Afghanistan and emphasized the need to make sure that Afghan land does not become a haven for terrorism on a number of international forums.

Taliban seizure of Afghanistan has left India with tough strategic choices. On 31 August 2021, the Ambassador of India to Qatar, Deepak Mittal, met Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, the head of Taliban's Political Office in Doha. The meeting took place at the Embassy of India, Doha, on the request of the Taliban side. Ambassador Mittal raised India's concern that Afghanistan's soil should not be used for anti-Indian activities and terrorism in any manner.<sup>[8]</sup>

This meeting does not reflect a strategic victory for India or any sort of defeat but only an acceptance of ground reality in Afghanistan. India needs to be viewed as a natural actor ready to work for the development of Afghanistan.

The governor of Afghanistan's Central Bank, Abdul Qadir Idris, met with Bharat Kumar, the leader of the technical team of the Indian government, in October 2021 to talk about banking concerns, cooperative ventures between the two States, and Afghanistan's economic status. Indian government agreed to offer technical assistance to the Bank.<sup>[9]</sup>

For India opening a line of communication marks a significant change of policy. India had long been staunchly anti-Taliban, deeming the group to be Pakistan's proxy. Islamabad accused New Delhi of exploiting Afghan soil to promote Baloch separatist organizations that it believes benefits from India's support and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which plans attacks on Pakistan from within Afghanistan. From India's perspective, an Islamabad friendly Kabul would undermine its strategic interests in Afghanistan.

In a written reply to a question in Lok Sabha, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said that India's approach to Afghanistan continues to be guided by its historical relations, friendship with its people and relevant UN resolutions, including UN Security Council Resolution 2593, which emphasized the importance of protecting human rights in Afghanistan and called for the prohibition of terrorist activities on Afghan territory.<sup>[10]</sup> India's permanent representative to the UN, of course, is very supportive of the initiatives by member states that can bring stability to Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is regarded as a significant nation by India in terms of politics because of its close proximity to the Central Asian States. Over the past few decades, India's relations with these governments have improved in a number of sectors, including military technology, defence, counter-terrorism, and the economy. The need for India to strengthen its connections with Central Asia in light of the growing geopolitical, geostrategic, and geoeconomic problems has been emphasized by numerous Indian foreign policy specialists. India kept bringing up the subject of terrorism with these states in Central Asia. India has been vocal about human rights breaches in addition to terrorism. Afghanistan was urged to respect human rights, women's and children's rights, minorities' rights, and the freedom to travel by US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin, and Indian Foreign Minister Jayashankar and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh during a 2 + 2 minister dialogue on April 11, 2022.<sup>[11]</sup>

The Taliban Minister of Urban Development Hamdullah Norman met India's charge 'd' Affair to Kabul in December 2022. He said that in order to maintain and reconstruct Afghanistan's infrastructure, his nation needs Indian assistance. Acting deputy Foreign Minister of Afghanistan, thanked the Indian government for its humanitarian aid. Without a doubt, India's annual budget now includes a smaller portion of help for Afghanistan. Even then it passed budget of 26.7 million USD for 2022-23.<sup>[12]</sup>

Model of governance the Taliban are adhering to is inherently authoritarian and undemocratic, and theological in intent. But this Taliban government differs from that which ruled of Afghanistan in the 1990s. On 16th August 20 21 India presided over the Security Council Session on Afghanistan and noted the commitment of the Taliban not to allow the use of Afghan soil for terrorism under resolution 1267. (Pawan Mathur, P.131). India has emphasized that no country should be threatened or attacked, and that terrorists should not be housed or trained on Afghan land. India's collective approach has been articulated by UNSC Resolution 2593 adopted on 13th August 2021.<sup>[13]</sup>

The Taliban applauded India's move in June 2022 to maintain diplomatic ties with the Afghan people by sending diplomats and a technical team to the embassy in Kabul. The spokesman for the Taliban's foreign ministry said in a statement that it proves the

nation's security is established and that all political and diplomatic rights are upheld. Taliban pledged to maintain the security of their facilities in accordance with accepted international diplomatic norms.

In the wake of tragic earthquake that struck Afghanistan on June 22, 2022 causing massive destruction, Government of India dispatched 27 tons of emergency relief assistance which consists of essential items including family ridge tents, sleeping bags, blankets and sleeping mats. The Afghan Red Crescent Society and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in Kabul received the assistance shipment.<sup>[15]</sup>

While sending the first consignment the Ministry of External Affairs reiterated, “As always India stands in solidarity with the people of Afghanistan with whom we share centuries old ties and remains firmly committed to provide immediate relief assistance for the Afghan people.”

A group from the Ministry of External Affairs, headed by the Joint Secretary, visited Kabul to supervise the distribution of India's humanitarian supplies to the country. India had already sent 13 tons of medications, 5,000 doses of the COVID vaccination, and winter gear before to this visit. The UN specialized agencies and the Indira Gandhi Children Hospital in Kabul received these consignments. In continuation with our development partnership with Afghan brethren, we gifted one million doses of Indian-made COVAXIN to Afghan refugees in Iran. India also provided two tons of vital medications and around 60 million doses of the polio vaccination to UNICEF. Across every corner, Afghan society has shown gratitude for this help.<sup>[16]</sup>

When asked about army personnel to India for military training, Afghanistan's Defence Minister Mullah Mohammed Yakoob answered Yes. Yakoob remarked, “Afghan-India relations get strengthened and there will be no issues with it. We are an independent country, and our foreign policy is guided by our national interests.”<sup>[17]</sup>

In order to facilitate the reopening of the air corridor connecting Afghanistan and India, a commercial deal was also inked. Thanks to this deal, Afghan traders can still conduct business with India using the air corridor. The Indian government sent 47,500 mts of wheat to UNWFP centres in Afghanistan, in addition to medical assistance. India has received recognition from the UNWFP for its kind assistance.<sup>[18]</sup>

## V. PAKISTANI FACTOR

In the context of Indo-Afghan relations, Pakistan plays a very important role. “Afghanistan has been a prize that Pakistan and India have fought for over directly and indirectly for decades”, wrote Robert D. Kaplan of the Atlantic Monthly.<sup>[19]</sup>

It is known to all that Pakistan was born and bred in the hatred for India in the holocaust of partition. Moreover, the issue of Kashmir has always created bitterness in India-Pakistan relations. In the past, Pakistan had always tried to club issues of Kashmir into the Afghanistan problem.

To secure national interest has always been the main objective of every country's foreign policy. Afghanistan being neighbouring country of Pakistan understands its importance in bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan. It can't afford to be a battleground for proxy wars between India and Pakistan. Hamid Karzai once quoted that although India is the country's close friend but Pakistan is Afghanistan's twin brother. There is no separation, there can't be a separation.”<sup>[20]</sup>

Past experience shows that Pakistan had provided the Taliban financial resources, training, weapons, logistical support and, most important a safe haven to fight the government and the US forces in Afghanistan.

On February 26, 2022 wheat aid for Afghans reached Jalalabad by land via Pakistan. The route of this aid was a test case for Delhi which clearly forced the Taliban to push Pakistan to allow aid trucks to use the land route. The Taliban shared images of a welcome ceremony including the Indian and Taliban flags next to each other as soon as the aid arrived. The Indian establishment approved of this move; it was neither hasty nor opportunistic, imposed by the Taliban. This was a clear indication of India's engagement with the Taliban—an obvious demonstration of access, humanitarian collaboration, and organizational capacity.<sup>[21]</sup> The regional connection of Pakistan is also in jeopardy due to the security ramifications of the Afghan scenario and the increasing involvement of India with the Taliban. Growing connections between India and the Taliban have long caused concern in Pakistan,

which, given its own security concerns, did not want to see a Kabul that was friendly to New Delhi. After take over the Talibans have shown interests to strength relations with India, including defence ties.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Finally, it is assumed that India will need to navigate the intricate web of Afghan and subcontinental politics, enmeshed with the interests of extra-regional powers and actors; to pursue its strategic interests, India will have to keep its fingers crossed since Pakistan has its own agenda, The people of Afghanistan live dangerously against all odds - from the inhospitable snow-clad rugged mountains and barren deserts to warring ethnic groups and not so friendly neighbour. Amidst these complex settings, large sections of people do nurture a fervent hope for a better tomorrow,

A hurried US withdrawal, leaving behind a resurgent Taliban, will undoubtedly have a serious implication for India, facing the major brunt of the escalating terrorism. Nevertheless, after investing huge amount in reconstruction and humanitarian assistance, it would be suicidal for India to rollback its plans. As long as Afghanistan remains unstable and volatile and as long as India has unfriendly neighbours, it is in India's interest to be firmly in Afghanistan seeking greatest strategic depth for peace and stability to safeguard its own interests. India must address the shifting dynamics of power transfer in the area and adjust its politics toward Afghanistan.

While the US military presence kept a check on severely extremist elements and made it possible for India to thrive, there is no doubt that the US exit from Afghanistan presented issues for the Indian subcontinent. Once the US Secretary of State said, "Going forward, any engagement with a Taliban-led government in Kabul will be driven by one thing only; our vital national interests" should hold good for Delhi too.<sup>[22]</sup> Undoubtedly, India has a track record of establishing a strategic footprint in Afghanistan by supporting and participating in initiatives aimed at social and economic development. This time, the Taliban appear more pragmatic, which is facilitating their reproachment to India.

Taliban's capture of power was a big setback for India because it has been worried about the security consequences of the region. A flexible approach to foreign relations is a key element, as no one is permanent enemy or friend in international relations and foreign policy of a country. Our conversation with top Taliban leadership must be carried forward, and we should inject transparency into it with a sense of urgency so as to understand each other's intentions, expectations, and material developments thereof.

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