

## From Aid to Partnership: Understanding India's Growing Involvement in Afghanistan

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### Abstract

Since the defeat of Taliban in Afghanistan, India not only has drawn much closer to Afghanistan but has also provided over USD 3 billion of development assistance to Afghanistan since 2001. Although India's development partnership with Afghanistan dates back decades earlier and was built on longstanding historical, cultural and civilizational links prior to India's 1947 independence. Building on a long history of bilateral relations India continued its willingness to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan since 2001. The bilateral ties have particularly strengthened since the 2011 signing of India- Afghanistan strategic partnership agreement to reconstruct Afghanistan. India is largest regional and fifth largest donor country to Afghanistan. India's involvement in Afghanistan is not only for its strategic reason but to secure access to natural resources in competition with China and to push back Pakistani influence by containing Taliban influence in the country. In order to cement its strategy of regional collaboration and economic investment in Afghanistan India has also increased its engagement with some of Afghanistan's neighbours to counteract centrifugal militant and external forces. The historic documents of strategic partnership although a symbol of mutual trust and confidence between the two nations has also served to introduce a new turn and dimension to the already geo-political situation in the region, has added a new twist to the on-going conflict between India and Pakistan. The paper highlights the geo-strategic and geo-political importance of Afghanistan interms of regional security and examines India's role in Afghanistan's stability and constructions efforts. Furthermore the paper also high lights India-Afghanistan relation with a special focus on India's development cooperation.

### INDIA AND AFGHANISTAN: A LONG HISTORY OF BILATERAL RELATIONS

A landlocked mountainous country with plains in the north and southwest, Afghanistan is located within South Asia and Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> Historically the country has been a land bridge to India from the west and also has a common history, with several empires having encompassed areas of present day Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Though India has provided over USD 3 billion of development assistance to Afghanistan since 2001, but its development partnership with Afghanistan dates back decades earlier and was built on longstanding historical, cultural and civilizational links prior to India's 1947 independence. Both countries already had a close relationship during the anti-colonial movement of British India under Mahatma Ghandi and a similar nationalist Frontier Congress movement in Pashtun areas straddling what today is Afghanistan and Pakistan under Ab Ghaffar Khan, or "Frontier Ghandi".<sup>2</sup> Afghanistan's importance for India is clear from the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's statement about India's relations with Afghanistan:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wikipedia.org/wiki.afghanistan>

<sup>2</sup> Rani D Mullen, India in Afghanistan: Understanding development assistance by emerging donors to Conflict-Affected Countries, Stimson, August 2019

Ever since India's independence, we have grown closer to each other, for a variety of reason. The long memory of our past was there, and the moment it was possible to renew them, we renewed them. And then came mutual interest....which is powerful factor.<sup>3</sup>

Though India's independence and partition meant that India no longer shared a border with Afghanistan but the bilateral relations between the both countries remained cordial up to the 1970 Soviet invasion. During this period Indian development cooperation included technical assistance programs for training of Afghan bureaucrats as well as specific projects such as the Indra Ghandi Children's Hospital in Kabul built in 1966, the only hospital of its kind in the country at the time of construction. By the 1970s Afghanistan had become India's largest development partner within Indian aid program, Known at that time as the Indian Technical and economic Cooperation (ITEC) program.<sup>4</sup>

The 1988/89 eventual withdrawal of Soviet from Afghanistan led the US-supported militants to take the control. America's subsequent withdrawal from the region not only created a power vacuum but also allowed sectarian interests (the Taliban) to seize the control. With the abandonment and cessation of aid by the United States at a time when India was itself undergoing economic adjustments continued the pause in the bilateral development partnership. The rise of Taliban in the early 1990s who pursued their own agenda, with no interest in acting as buffer led India to engage with the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance and to withdraw its diplomatic representation from Kabul. India saw Taliban regime as fundamentally opposed to its regional security interests and linked its rise to the fundamentalist groups within Indian-administrated Kashmir. Instead, from the 1990s up until 2001 India provided development assistance to Afghanistan through funding for United Nations (UN) agencies providing humanitarian assistance in the country. During this period India also provided significant logistical, security and the humanitarian development assistance to Northern Alliance- the main anti-Taliban force<sup>5</sup>.

### **INDIA'S REENGAGEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN SINCE 2001 OUSTER OF TALIBAN**

The September 11 attacks on the US brought a paradigm shift in the political affairs of the world. The United States responded by launching a war on terror and told the world community in general and Pakistan in particular that there could not be any neutral in the war against terrorism. India without any delay agreed with the US demands and unconditionally offered its intelligence data on terrorism along with the military bases against al-Qaeda and Taliban<sup>6</sup>. After the ouster of Taliban which was a strategic debacle for Pakistan, India was able to build on its established links with the Northern Alliance and reengage politically and through development assistance with the new government in Kabul. The new leaders of the Afghan after the fall of Taliban were considered by Pakistan's ISI as pro-India. After the fall of Taliban India-Afghan relations continued to improve and with the short period of time dignitaries from Afghan visited India. India's reengagement with the Afghanistan since 2001 should be understood against the historical context as well as India's changing regional and global economic and geopolitical perceptions and needs.

India is one of the most important donors to Afghanistan and by 2010 India had become fifth largest bilateral donor country to Afghanistan in terms of development assistance provider after the United States, The United Kingdom, Japan and Germany and the largest regional donor. The history of friendly

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<sup>3</sup> Dr Hanifur Rehman and Faheem Ullah Khan, Indo-Pakistan Zero –Sum Rivalry and Afghanistan, Journal of Contemporary studies, Vol. III, No.2, Winter 2014

<sup>4</sup> Op.cit, No.2, p. 4

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Rani D Mullen, India-Afghanistan partnership, Policy Brief, Centre for Research Policy, May 16, 2013

<sup>6</sup> Op.cit., No 3, p.32

relations between the two countries has undoubtedly contributed to India's readiness to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan since 2001. India's most assistance fits into four broad categories: Humanitarian assistance (such as food aid), Infrastructure projects, small and Community-based Development Projects and Education and Capacity development.

### **HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE**

India currently supports a daily supply of high-protein biscuits to nearly 2 million Afghan children under a School Feeding Programme administered through the World Food Programme. Gift of 250,000 metric tonnes of wheat were announced in January 2009 to help Afghanistan tide over its food crisis, to be shipped immediately, subject to transit and transportation arrangements being finalised. India's humanitarian assistance also includes free medical consultation and medicines through Indian Medical Missions in five Afghan cities to over 30,000 Afghans monthly and the reconstruction of Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health in Kabul. India also provided 400 buses and 200 mini-buses for mass urban transportation, 105 utility vehicles for municipalities, 285 military vehicles for the Afghan National Army, and 10 ambulances for public hospitals in five cities and also constructed five toilet-cum-public sanitation complexes in Kabul.<sup>7</sup> India has transferred a total of eight Mi-35 helicopters to the Afghan Air Force, four during 2015/2016 and four more during 2018.

### **MAJOR INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS**

While the humanitarian assistance has formed a continuous part of India's development engagement with Afghanistan, the vast majority of India's development financing in Afghanistan is committed to infrastructure projects. Some high profile projects are construction of 218 km road from Zaranj to Delaram to facilitate movement of goods and services from Afghanistan to the Iranian border and, onward, to the Chahbahar Port, the Construction of 220kV DC transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul and a 220/110/20 kV sub-station at Chimtala to bring additional power from the northern grid to Kabul, construction and commissioning of Salma Dam power project (42 MW) in Herat province, Construction of the Afghan Parliament, restoration of telecommunication infrastructure in 11 provinces, expansion of national TV network by providing an uplink from Kabul and downlinks in all 34 provincial capitals for promoting greater integration across the country.<sup>8</sup>

### **SMALL AND COMMUNITY-BASED DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS**

Small and community based development projects in vulnerable border areas, with focus on local ownership and management in the agriculture, rural development, education, health, vocational training, and solar energy. These have a direct, immediate and visible impact on community life. The objective of these small and community based development projects is to create a sense of partnership and ownership in the local communities, particularly in the vulnerable border districts in the southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan, to help and bring visible benefits to the local community.

### **EDUCATION AND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT**

The efforts in the education domain have included reconstruction of Habibia School, reconstruction of the Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health, provision of 500 annual long-term university scholarships relations for under-graduate and postgraduate studies for Afghan students in India, deputation of 20 Indian civil servants as coaches and mentors under Capacity for Afghan Public Administration (CAP) programme supported by UNDP and the Governments of Afghanistan and India, provision of 500

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<sup>7</sup> India And Afghanistan: A Development Partnership, External Publicity Division, Ministry of External affairs Government of India

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 10

training scholarships to Afghan public servants and deputation of 20 Indian public servants to provide training and mentorship, vocational training for training of Afghan women (war-widows and orphans) in garment making, nursery plantation, food processing and marketing, executed by the well-known Indian NGO SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) and youth, and capacity building in media and information, civil aviation, agricultural research and education, health care and medicinal science, tourism, education, standardization, rural development, public administration, electoral management and administration, and local governance.<sup>9</sup>

In September 2016 in a meeting between the leaders of the two countries, the Prime Minister of India Mr Narendra Modi assured an additional \$1 billion with greater impetus to the small development projects that are characterized by local community engagement and execution. The Prime Minister Modi while travelling in 2016 personally to inaugurate the Indo-Afghan Friendship Dam in Western Afghanistan stated at the inauguration ceremony "we will be with you every step of the way". The continued steady engagement and commitment to aiding Afghanistan paid off. The speaker of the Afghanistan's Upper House of the National Assembly Fazl Hadi Muslimyar while emphasising the close Indo-Afghan ties in 2016, stated that Afghanistan wanted "further ties and friendship with India". Within a couple of years of the politically momentous year 2014, Indo-Afghan development partnership not only remained close, but also took on a heightened importance as western aid decreased through 2017.<sup>10</sup> India desires a stable Afghanistan that does not harbour terrorists who could target Indian interests and is likely to continue supporting Afghanistan with its financial and other assistance despite the US troop withdrawal to limit the Taliban, Pakistani and Chinese influence.<sup>11</sup>

## STRATEGIC FACTORS UNDERGIRDING INDIA'S PARTNERSHIP WITH AFGHANISTAN

India's growing involvement in development cooperation with Afghanistan reveals its increasing regional and global ambitions. In addition to the significant humanitarian assistance India has provided to Afghanistan, Indian development cooperation has several basic goals that are in line with India's dictum of development cooperation as mutually beneficial partnership.

Afghanistan, the land locked country is well endowed with natural resources. As per various Studies conducted by the Russians during the 1980s and further refined by the US Geological Survey (USGS) post 2000 have conclusively established that Afghanistan has significant deposits of minerals which include iron ore (2,200 million tons), copper (60 million tons), cobalt, lithium (substantially high deposits), niobium, uranium, chromite, granite, marble and other metallic and non-metallic minerals. Afghanistan is also blessed with 444 billion cubic metres of natural gas deposits, 3.4 billion barrels of crude oil and 562 million barrels of natural gas deposits- a significant quantity of deposits by any yardstick. The deposits also include precious gems and stones like emeralds, rubies and the largest deposit of lapis lazuli. The estimated value of these natural resources at \$1-3 trillion is supposed to alter completely the economic and social profile of Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup>

The development assistance India provides to Afghanistan increasingly has an underlying goal of facilitating India's access to these natural resources within Afghanistan and through Afghanistan in Central Asia. For example, India's support for hydroelectricity generation and power transmission in Afghanistan's Herat province has largely benefitted the local Afghan population. However, a secure

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<sup>9</sup> Nandita Palrecha and Monish Tourangbam, Development Aid to Afghanistan: Does Afghanistan Need What India Gives?, The Diplomat, November 24, 2018

<sup>10</sup> Op.cit, No.2, p. 9

<sup>11</sup> India likely to continue supporting Afghanistan despite US drawdown: Pentagon - The Economic Times, Jul 13, 2019

<sup>12</sup> Kirit K Nair, India's Role in Afghanistan Post 2014 Strategy, Policy and Implementation, Manekshaw Paper No. 55, 2015

source of electricity in Herat, along with India's investment in the Iranian port and container terminal at Chabahar, investments in the Delaram-Zarang highway connecting Iranian roads from Chabahar port across the border with Herat and other major cities in Afghanistan through the A01 ring road, and proposed investments in a railway linking Chabahar with Bam on the Iranian-Afghan border and into Afghanistan, all help India in accessing land-locked Afghanistan. India is also working to connect Iran and Afghanistan with Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries via these roads, thereby increasing regional trade as well as creating a route for India to access the rich gas and oil reserves of Central Asia.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore this infrastructure will provide Indian private and state-owned companies, like the Indian consortium that has the majority rights to mine the Hajigak iron-ore mines in Bamiyan province, with a route for exporting this natural resource from Afghanistan through Iran back to India. These resources of course also represent huge potential income for Afghanistan. Finally, this infrastructure provides India with a route for Indian exports (and continued aid) to Afghanistan. This sea and land route to and from Afghanistan through Iran is all the more important to India given the continued intransigence of Pakistani government in not allowing India access to the quicker and cheaper land route across their country, even for the transport of humanitarian goods.<sup>14</sup>

The development cooperation of India with Afghanistan has also goal of economic diplomacy. Indian companies and services compared to western companies are significantly cheaper and their entry into the Afghan market thus offers various opportunities for the Indian private sector. The government's development assistance has helped to pave the way for India's private sector to find a market for its goods and services in Afghanistan. As Afghanistan seeks to shift the foundation of its economy from aid to trade, this economic diplomacy angle of India's development cooperation will further increase in significance.

In Afghanistan, India's humanitarian engagement is an integral part of its soft power strategy. The strategy's central aim is to push back Pakistani influence and secure access to natural resources in competition with China. India also has a vital interest in containing Taliban influence in Afghanistan. If the Taliban were to resume power in Kabul, India would experience two devastating effects. First, the Taliban wing in Pakistan would be strengthened, posing a direct security threat to India. Second, India's development investments since 2001 would have been in vain. For India the strategic partnership agreement signed on October 04, 2001 is more than just that as it aims to drive the relationship beyond a mere aid-donor equation to a much higher plane with the training of the Afghan National Security Forces and Afghan National Police included as an important integral part of the agreement. India see a strong, independent, stable, prosperous and democratic Afghanistan as being critical to her security interests and for over all stability of the region in the evolving geo-political and geo-strategic scenarios. Building up and sustaining the capability of the government of Afghanistan through external assistance to provide for her own security is therefore an important step in the pursuit of this objective.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover the geographical significance of Afghanistan is important for India's vital goals as Afghanistan is a gateway for improving energy and economic collaboration between South and Central Asia. India struggles to continue good relations with Afghanistan in order to advance greater regional stability in its favour and aspires to use Afghanistan as a 'gateway' in the development of a viable network of supply routes with the Central Asian markets. Central Asia's importance to India goes beyond the past touching contemporary security complexity, and geopolitical and economic parameters. Interconnected factors like

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<sup>13</sup> Op.cit, No.5, p.4

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p..4

<sup>15</sup> Yow P. Ralpheia, India-Afghanistan strategic partnership: An analysis of India, Afghanistan and Pakistan perspective , International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications, Volume 3, Issue 4, April 2013

the critical setting of the region, the need for energy resources, and the vying for pipeline routes are ample justification for India to take particular note of the region and cautiously craft its policy. India sufficiently tries to exploit Central Asian energy reserves and to balance or curtail Pakistani and Chinese influence in Afghanistan and in Central Asia. Any planned oil and gas pipeline from Central Asia to South Asia must go through Afghanistan which 'further emphasizes the geostrategic centrality of Afghanistan for India' and high stakes involved in Afghanistan's stability. In order to minimize its dependency on Pakistan and China, in what Stephen Blank characterizes as a 'great game' strategy, India aspires to build alternative overland pathways to maritime ports for Central Asian resources by denying both China and Pakistan the ability to pressure Indian assets in the region.<sup>16</sup>

With its growing economy, its population and soft and hard power assets, India is gradually inching towards realising its ambition of being recognised as a global power or as a distinguished power in the regional context. India's size, human resources pool and economic growth, complemented by a robust military capability, qualify it for the status of a regional power.

It is amongst the largest troop contributing nations in the UN peace-keeping operations. The Indian Navy has deployed and assisted in anti-piracy operations off the Somalia coast. Besides the air base and military hospital it operated at Farkhor and Ayni in Tajikistan during the Afghan War, it has demonstrated substantial airlift capability by transporting relief and construction material and other goods into Afghanistan since Pakistan blocked transit facilities for Indian transport. The Indian Air Force has conducted some of the biggest humanitarian disaster relief operations domestically and internationally on numerous occasions, proving its credible strategic airlift capability.<sup>17</sup>

However despite this obvious interest driven engagement, India follows principled approach as India does not discriminate between areas with traditionally closer ties to India (the north) and areas with Pashtu majorities, with whom India has fewer contacts.

## CONCLUSION

Since the defeat of Taliban in Afghanistan, India not only has drawn much closer to Afghanistan but has also provided over USD 3 billion of development assistance to Afghanistan since 2001. India has a longstanding historical, cultural, economic and military association with Afghanistan prior to India's 1947 independence. The history of friendly relations between the two countries has undoubtedly contributed to India's readiness to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan since 2001. India's most assistance fits into four broad categories: Humanitarian assistance (such as food aid), Infrastructure projects, small and Community-based Development Projects and Education and capacity development. In view of tangible measures taken by the Indian government in various fields of trade and culture, which have a substantial contribution to any ordinary Afghan citizen, India is viewed very positively in Afghanistan. In India's multi-layered relationship with Afghanistan there is clearly a military and security angle under which India aspires for stability in Afghanistan and hanging over which is the shadow of its relationship with Pakistan. India is largest regional and fifth largest donor country to Afghanistan. India's involvement in Afghanistan is not only for its strategic reason but to secure access to natural resources in competition with China and to push back Pakistani influence by containing Taliban influence in the country. In order to cement its strategy of regional collaboration and economic investment in Afghanistan India has also increased its engagement with some of Afghanistan's neighbours to counteract centrifugal militant and external forces. However despite this obvious interest driven engagement, India follows

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<sup>16</sup> Aasia Ahmad, India's interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia - Daily Times, OCTOBER 24, 2019

<sup>17</sup> Op.cit, No.12, p.no 11

principled approach as India does not discriminate between areas with traditionally closer ties to India (the north) and areas with Pashtu majorities, with whom India has fewer contacts.