



# CENTRE FOR A NEW SOUTH ASIA

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### INDIA-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS: A HISTORICAL BLEND OF FRIENDSHIP AND COOPERATION

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# India-Afghanistan Relations: A Historical Blend of Friendship and Cooperation

~Aarush Joshi

## INTRODUCTION

India and Afghanistan share close cultural and political ties, which are deeply embedded in the history of their relationship. (Embassy of India Kabul, 2020) India was among the first non-communist states to accord recognition to the government installed by the Soviet Union after its invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. (Bajoria, 2009) Successive governments in Kabul were recognized by New Delhi until the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s. However, India never officially recognized the Taliban's rule over Kabul in 1996.

India has played a vital role in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Afghanistan. Despite geographical distances, the two countries share a warm and robust relationship, marked by mutual respect and cooperation along multiple fronts such as economic development, cultural exchanges, and strategic partnerships.

One of the principal objectives of India's partnership is to assist in building institutions to ensure that the development initiatives touch all the regions of Afghanistan, including all sectors of development while capitalizing on their indigenous. New Delhi's assistance is around \$2 billion, making it the 5th largest bilateral donor to Afghanistan. All the projects initiated on Afghan soil have been executed in collaboration with the Afghan government in congruity with the Afghan National Developmental Strategy.

India's programs in Afghanistan cover four broad areas:

- 1) Infrastructure projects
- 2) Humanitarian assistance
- 3) Small and community-based development projects
- 4) Education and capacity development

In 2009, the then Afghan President and India's External Affairs Minister inaugurated a 218-kilometre road project, running from Zaranj to Delaram in Southwestern Afghanistan to facilitate the movement of goods to the Iranian border and onwards, to the Chabahar port. Earlier, India had set up a 202-kilometre-long 220kCV transmission line that stretched from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul and a 22/110/20kV sub-station at Chitkala, to ensure a continuous supply of Uzbek electricity and lighting up Kabul throughout the year. (Rebuilding Afghanistan, 2005) Some of the other major infrastructure projects include the construction of the Afghani Parliament in Kabul and the construction of the Salma Dam power project, both of which were completed in 2012.

India also committed to delivering 50,000 metric tons of wheat to Afghanistan in 2020, as the world grappled with the onslaught of the Covid19 pandemic. India also assisted the landlocked nation on supplying 5 lakh tablets of Hydroxy-Chloroquine, 1 lakh tablets of Paracetamol and around 50,000 pairs of surgical gloves to the Government of Afghanistan in 2020. As part of a food assistance provision, 11 lakh tons of wheat, as grains and biscuits both were distributed to approximately 1.5 million school children. (Shishir Gupta, 2020)

India singularly shipped 2000 tons of pulses to Afghanistan in 2018, for the promotion of food security for children, particularly during times of drought. Adding to its humanitarian assistance, a Medical Diagnostic Centre was set up in Kabul in 2015, assisting citizens by providing them with the latest diagnostic facilities, particularly for children. This gesture generated considerable goodwill for India.

Another very crucial aspect of this relationship is security cooperation, gaining more prominence considering the security landscape of South Asia. A common concern that dominates talks between the two nations is that of terrorism and extremism. The two countries have collaborated very closely in addressing these common challenges, with India being a key contributor to Afghanistan's Security Forces, providing them with vital training and equipment to combat their security challenges. Additionally, intelligence sharing and coordination between the two nations have played a pivotal role in combating terrorism in the region.

India's investment in various sectors in Afghanistan is driven by a combination of strategic, economic and humanitarian considerations, underlining the rationale behind India's interests. The rationale behind India's interests in Afghanistan ranges from strategic interests to economic connectivity to regional stability. India seeks to enhance its influence and presence in the region. Economic connectivity in the region is enhanced with the help of roads, dams and buildings to facilitate better trade, potentially opening new markets for Indian goods and services. Another critical rationale relates to regional stability. Improved infrastructure contributes to the overall stability and economic development of Afghanistan, which helps reduce the threat of extremism and terrorism that can affect regional security, including India's own security.

### **INDIA'S RELATIONS WITH THE TALIBAN**

India has been cautious in navigating its relationship with the Taliban, owing to its concerns about the security threats emerging from Afghanistan and the Taliban leadership's connections with the Pakistani establishment. (Shreyas Shende, 2023)

It was initially believed that a proxy of Pakistan, dominated by Islamic fundamentalists would be inimical to India's geopolitical interests in the region. However, the tables have turned the other way. The emergence of the Taliban has been creating a new wave of tensions in Pakistan. There has been an unprecedented increase in the number of attacks on Pakistani soil, giving light to the notion that Pakistan's "strategic depth" is turning against them.

In this kind of situation, India must exercise its might in the region by leveraging the animosity between the Taliban and Pakistan's security establishment by broadening its diplomatic engagement with the Taliban. It is harder to rationalize the shortcomings of the Indian government towards Afghan citizens since the Taliban takeover. These issues include problems around visa issuance, renewal of visas for Afghan students and the challenges faced by Afghan citizens in India.

Economic cooperation forms another crucial pillar of the relationship between the two. India has significantly invested in Afghanistan's infrastructure development, focusing on certain crucial sectors such as education, healthcare, and agriculture. The construction of the Afghanistan-India Friendship Highway, connecting the Iranian border to major cities in Afghanistan is a testimony of this long-lasting friendship between the two countries. Trade relations have been progressing exponentially. India has been a major importer of Afghan goods, particularly agricultural products such as dry fruits and medicinal herbs. India has also been actively involved in capacity-building programs and skill-development initiatives to empower the Afghan workforce.

Another important facet in the relationship is that of regional cooperation. Afghanistan joined the SAARC grouping at the 14th SAARC Summit held in Delhi in April 2007. This was done to open the possibilities of Afghanistan becoming a trade, transportation and energy hub, thereby linking together countries from Central to South Asia. New Delhi has also encouraged Afghan efforts by supporting regional initiatives, some of which include the Istanbul Process and RECCA that seek to assist Afghanistan's development through cooperation in various sectors of the economy. (Ayjaz Wani, 2021)

## **POTENTIAL CHALLENGES TO THE RELATIONSHIP**

Some of India's initiatives are met with immediate hurdles given the Taliban's affiliation to the Sharia law and restrictions on the movement of women. This presents a serious threat to enacting some of the projects. However, it is useful to highlight a few factors that might influence India's approach.

India has been consistent in emphasizing strong people-to-people ties between Afghanistan and India. India has also benefited from its ties with Afghan elites, and the considerable goodwill that exists towards India among Afghan citizens.

However, India's closure of the border for Afghan citizens during a serious humanitarian crisis will continue to make the relationship uncomfortable at times. The Taliban's appeal for better ties must be met with the Indian government leveraging its position to reinstitute ways of greater people-to-people ties.

International recognition of the Taliban government is significantly limited, restricting the scope and effectiveness of regional cooperation with India. Recognition is limited owing to multiple sanctions and restrictions, and a plethora of issues stemming from legitimacy issues. The unstable environment in Afghanistan, providing a safe haven to terrorists remains a major irritant in the eyes of the international community. Diplomatic, security, economic, developmental and human rights concerns collectively create a complex environment that hinders sustained and meaningful engagement

## **CONCLUSION**

It can be concluded by saying that the Indo-Afghan relationship is multifaceted. Despite challenges, both countries have demonstrated the resilience and will to foster a strong and enduring partnership. India remains a key partner of Afghanistan on the path of stability and development. The values and aspirations shared by the two countries provide further impetus to deepening their bilateral ties in the years to come. However, a challenge in the relationship stems from Afghanistan shutting down its embassy in New Delhi as diplomats appointed by the civilian government, ousted by the Taliban regime failed to secure visa extensions from the Ministry of External Affairs. (Avinash Palwal, 2017)

The path towards a lasting all-weather relationship is going to be riddled with multiple complexities ranging from security to diplomatic issues. A Taliban-led Kabul would strive hard to receive global recognition and support and New Delhi will face the challenge of balancing the thin line of working with and recognizing the Taliban.

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