

TWENTY-ONE YEARS OF INDIA-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS

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Abstract

With passage of time, India have come out as an emerging power in the Asian region with its demand to have a fair place in the inter-state hierarchy. With the world's fifth largest armed spending, second largest armed force, sixth largest economy by insignificant charges and third major economy in terms of purchasing power, India is a regional impact, a nuclear power, an emerging global power and a budding superpower. India contains a growing international influence and a distinguished voice in world affairs. India is a progressing industrialized nation and always been known as a 'peace-loving country'. India being a large country shares a long border with its different neighbors and have traditional and ancient roots in some of them. India's policy towards its neighborhood is like the widening homocentric circles, around a central axis of historical and cultural commonalities. India has won a lot of allies than enemies due to its growing economy, strategic location, assortment of friendly and diplomatic policy and enormous and spirited diaspora. India has a developing international affluence and a prominent voice in Global businesses and diaspora. India-Afghanistan relations are existing since Indus valley civilizations and the latter enjoys a strategic location in South Asia and is particularly relevant to India as a geographical neighbor.

Introduction

India-Afghanistan relations dates back since the Mauryan Empire. During 10th century to 18th century, northern regions of India were invaded by Ghaznavids, Khilji's, Suri's, Mughals and Durani's who belonged to modern day Afghanistan. Mughal era (1526-1858) saw large number of immigration of Afghans to India due to political unrest in their regions. One of the prominent leaders of the independence movement was Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan who was an Afghanistani and was supported by Indian government in lobbying for greater Pashtun freedom in the NWFP. The Peshawar treaty between Afghanistan and India was signed as a mutual agreement back in 1855. The only South Asian country to recognize the Soviet-backed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan in the 1980s was India, though relations were diminished during the 1990s Afghan civil war and the Taliban government. India became the largest regional provider of humanitarian and reconstruction aid to the present-day Islamic

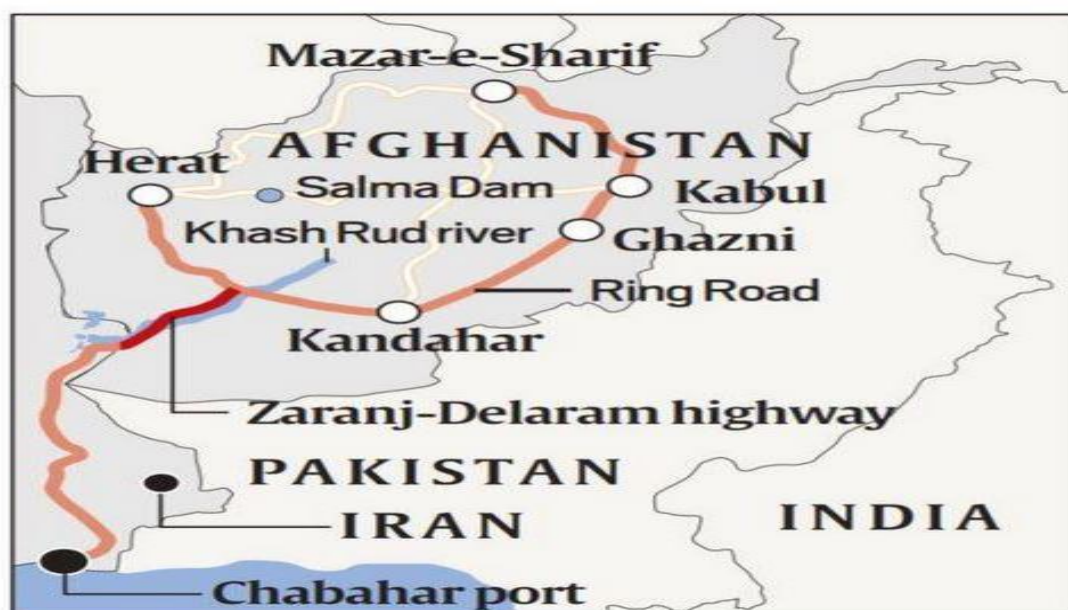
Republic of Afghanistan by aiding in overthrowing Taliban. India has always shared cordial relations with Kabul after the independence of the Sub-Continent except for the Taliban regime. The incident of 9/11 provided an opportunity for the Indian administration to come physically to Afghanistan. India made several efforts to justify its existence in Afghanistan to play a constructive part in the rehabilitation process.

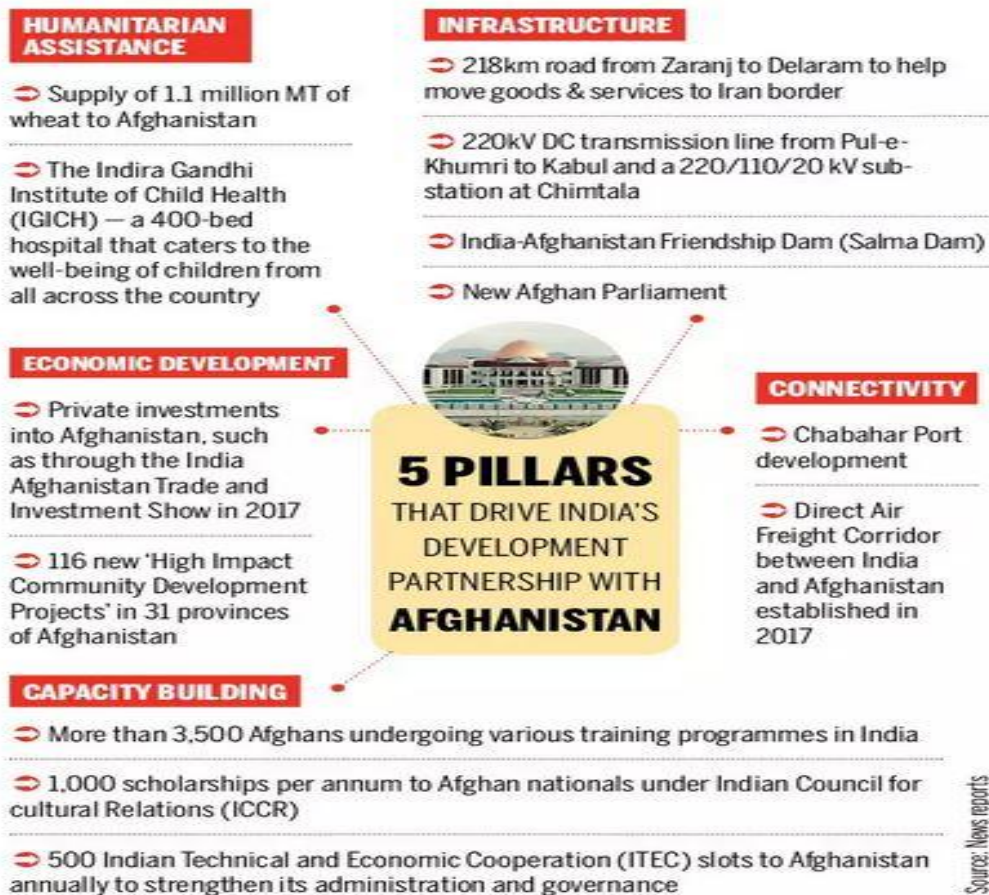
- **India Afghanistan Relations since 2001**

After the 9/11 attack in 2001, the US intervened militarily in the Afghanistan and removed the Taliban with a vow to support democracy and eliminate terrorism. During this US led invasion, providing intelligence and logistic support to the Allied forces as a part of the operation enduring freedom. The fall of Taliban's regime paved a way for India's diplomatic relations with the newly established civilian government and participated in relief and reconstruction efforts. By providing about \$650–750 million worth of humanitarian and economic aid to Afghanistan by India, it is the largest regional provider of aid for it. India's support and collaboration extends to rebuilding of air links, power plants and investing in health and education sectors as well as helping to train Afghan civil servants, diplomats and police. With such surge in relations with Afghanistan in terms of economic, strategy etc. it became an important epicenter hub for India. Afghanistan is a transit place for the energy resources coming from Iran and Turkmenistan to Pakistan, India, and even China.

India's investment in Afghanistan is more than \$3 billion and the countries' bilateral trade amounts to around \$1.5 billion. Afghanistan is the main route for India's large no of trade with commonwealth of Independent States nations in Central Asia , and India is among Afghanistan's top donors of foreign aid grants and being a least developed country and of SAARC, Afghanistan enjoys duty-free access to Indian market under the regulations of the South Asian Free Trade Area. In turn, it serves as an important market for Indian products, especially pharmaceutical products, tea, cement, and other construction materials. Zaranj-Delaram highway was built by BRO. The highway is a strategically important to New Delhi, as it gives an alternate access into the landlocked Afghanistan through Iran's Chabahar port. Another significant investment India always played a key role in the development of Afghanistan for its social and economic development which is crucial to its regional stability. In consonance with the Afghanistan National Development Strategy and the Afghan government, a partnership was made for all these projects. The four broad

area includes – infrastructure projects, humanitarian assistance, small and community-based development projects, and education and capacity development. The principal objective of India's development partnership is to assist Afghan capacity in indigenous building and institutions and to ensure that all the regions and sectors of Afghanistan reach development. India's proposal of SAARC membership to Afghanistan in 2005 was accepted and given to it in 2007, making it eighth country to have the membership. An agreement between Afghanistan and India was signed providing \$50 million to promote bilateral businesses, during Hamid Karzai's visit to India in April 2006. India's aid package to Afghanistan was raised \$150 million, to \$750 million during the same year. India seeks to expand its economic presence in Afghanistan to improve transport connectivity and economic collaboration with countries in Central and South Asia. India's some of the core investments are setting up Iron ore mines, a 6 MTPA steel plant (by SAIL—Steel Authority of India Limited), an 800 MW power plant, Hydro-electric power projects, transmission lines and roads . More than US\$100 million was invested by India in 2009 in the expansion of the Chabahar port in southeastern Iran for the transportation of transit Goods, also opening a new route for India, and the rest of the world, for trade with Central Asia which would offer a new transit route of Afghan products to India. The 2018 km was the rebuilding of 220 kV DC transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul. The project was the joint venture of the Afghan government, ADB and the World Bank, with inputs from USAID and international energy firms.





India also gifted the newly constructed Afghan parliament of \$90 million to Afghans in 2015. The Salal dam in the Herat province reconstructed by India in 2016 and it produces 42 MW of power in addition to providing irrigation for 75,000 hectares of farmland in the Chishti Sharif district. The Salma Dam was renamed as the Afghan-India Friendship Dam by Afghan cabinet in a move to strengthen relations between the two countries. India has an interest in Afghanistan due to its strategic location and its significant regional connectivity. This is why Afghanistan is central to India's New silk road, which is designed to connect trade, transit, and energy in the Central Asian region to South Asia, and especially India. In terms of defense, India donated three Mi-25 attack helicopters in 2015. The Air Cargo Corridor inauguration in 2017 between Kabul-Delhi and Kandahar-Delhi has provided a fresh impetus to bilateral trade ensuring free movement of freight despite the barriers put in place due to the denial of transit by Pakistan. Subsequently, the India-Afghanistan Trade and Investment Show was the platform to showcase trade and investment opportunities in Afghanistan which in turn brought forward the immense potential in the bilateral trade and further strengthened the relations between India and Afghanistan in terms of commerce. The various ongoing project includes an agreement for the construction of the Shahtoot dam in

Kabul district, which would provide safe drinking water to 2 million residents. Another investment was the India's pledge for \$1 million for another Aga Khan heritage project.

• India-Afghan Relations after Taliban Takeover

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

- The Zaranj-Delaram Highway project, estimated to cost US\$134 million, is possibly the most important for both India and Afghanistan

- Power transmission lines from the Uzbek border to Kabul over the Hindu Kush mountains. The lines are operated by the multi-country, multi-agency North East Power System (NEPS)



- Salma Dam, now called the **Afghan-India Friendship Dam**, on the Hari Rud that produces 42 MW of power and irrigates 75,000 hectares of land



One of the most important diplomatic challenges that India has been confronted with, in recent days is to deal with a Taliban ruled Afghanistan Government with devising viable policies. After the US and NATO military withdrawal from Afghanistan, India had joined the international community to back the democratically elected governments. In terms of dealing with the Taliban, even before the US invaded Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks, India, Iran and Russia, in turn, have a history of working together with the Central Asian Republics. Repeated requests for India to resume its economic assistance programme amounting to around \$3.5 billion have been made. The assistance by India to Afghanistan involved the long-distance power transmission lines construction, construction of a dam and bridges, and the strategic road connecting Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Chabahar and now the investments are in the clouds of ambiguity. Political instability in Afghanistan is one of the biggest security threats to India. This time Taliban have inherited a functional state including a parliament building made by India and a large US military arsenal which is being shared with Pakistan. Afghanistan being a country geopolitically and strategically significant has the Central Asian Republics to the North, Pakistan to its East, and through Iran and Pakistan the Indian Ocean deeper south. One of the challenging ambiguities for India is that its stark rival Pakistan can use Afghanistan to organize attacks on Indian-controlled

Kashmir and other parts of the country by aiding terrorist groups. Gaining access to Central Asia by building a port and railway line through Iran and Afghanistan remains a longstanding pipe dream for India. Large deposits of oil and natural gas are found in Central Asia. The key to achieve India's strategic objectives is the presence of Afghanistan as an energy bridge to it. A favorable Afghanistan is a sine-qua-non for accessing Central Asia and Eurasia by India through the Chabahar, which bypasses Pakistan. To counterbalance Pakistan and China, Afghanistan is a vital tool. Pakistan is denied of the opportunity of positioning additional military capabilities along its borders with India when The Pakistan-Afghanistan border remains active. Facing these challenges, India will likely have less resolve and fewer resources to contribute to facing the China threat.

- **Delhi Declaration**

Delhi declaration on Afghanistan is a joint statement in which eight countries comprising India, Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan participated, discussed the evolving Afghan situation, especially the global ramifications following the Taliban's takeover. One of the consistent policies of the Delhi Declaration that India has been espousing for long towards is bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan. "Reiterated strong support for a peaceful, secure and stable Afghanistan is one of the important aspects of the Delhi declaration and also while emphasizing the respect for sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity and non-interference in its internal affairs". This aspect needs to be highlighted in great detail because the trouble that Afghanistan is facing is largely due to the sinister move on the part of Pakistan and China to achieve their respective geopolitical objectives. While Afghanistan is an epicenter for Islamabad for securing "strategic depth" in Central Asia, for Beijing it is smooth operationalization of its OBOR project through Afghanistan and also capturing its rich mineral wealth. cooperation against the menace of radicalization, extremism, separatism and drug trafficking in the region are key objectives of the declaration. According to the UNODC Report 2021, "Afghanistan alone accounts for 85 per cent of the global total production" of opium. This report was published before the Taliban takeover of the power. But it is a well-known fact that the narcotics trade is the most funding interest of Taliban. Taking advantage of the hostile situation, the Taliban also legitimize the narcotic trade, as it has in the past. In this context, the Central Asian countries, Russia, Iran and India are also the worst victims of

narco-terror. The need for an “inclusive government” in Afghanistan by including all sections of the society and the the need for “ensuring that the fundamental rights of women, children and minority communities are not violated is one of the main emphases of Delhi Declaration. Similarly, the need for providing “humanitarian assistance” as mandated by the UN is also key point of the declaration .

Conclusion

From the top of discussion, we tend to conclude that India’s twenty year of healthy and cordial relations with Afghanistan are covered in midst of clouds of ambiguity. With a huge amount of investments in different sectors are now at the stake and will of Taliban regime. One of the threatening issues is constant security threats for India now. The civil and political rights of Afghan people are nearly diminished though the Taliban government is acting as a functional state but still certain section of society is deeply entrenched especially the rights of women. The sudden blow of Narco terrorism can affect badly the central Asian and south Asian regions. The road ahead lies full of difficulties and challenging situations for India on how it takes its stand in dealing with Taliban regime.

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