

India's Close Ties with Afghanistan: Crystal Gazing Into the Future

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¹In its report titled “Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan” to the Congress released on December 15, 2017, the Pentagon states, “India is Afghanistan’s most reliable regional partner and the largest contributor of development assistance in the region.” The report describes civil development projects undertaken by India (like the Afghanistan-India Friendship Dam and the Afghan Parliament building, the training of Afghan officers and enlisted personnel, some 130 Afghans travelling to India each year to attend various military and commissioning programmes, and limited security assistance, most notably four Mi-35 aircraft). The report draws attention to President Trump’s new Afghan and South Asia policy announced in August 2017, calling on India to provide more assistance to the international efforts in Afghanistan, saying the US welcomes additional Indian economic, medical, and civic support to Afghanistan. Referring to the US, the report says, “Our purpose in Afghanistan remains the same: preventing Afghanistan from again becoming a safe haven from which terrorist groups can plan and execute attacks on the US, or our allies and citizens abroad. To accomplish this, we continue to support our Afghan partners and train, advise, and assist its military and government institutions”. The report also describes the new US strategy focussed on continued US support to the Afghan government and security forces to fight the Taliban, Al Qaeda, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-Khorasan (ISIS-K) and other insurgent and terrorist

groups; strengthening the Afghan government and preventing reestablishment of safe havens for terrorist in Afghanistan; a shift from the time-based approach to a conditions-based one, with continued development of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF), provided that Afghanistan fulfills its obligations; and, instead of a return to US-led combat operations, improvement in the ANDSF capabilities, enabling them to lead the fight against the Taliban.

Security Situation

In August 2017, Trump accused Pakistan of harbouring “agents of chaos” and providing safe havens to militant groups waging an insurgency against a US-backed government in Kabul.² US officials had also expressed hope after a kidnapped US-Canadian couple and their three children were freed in Pakistan during October. But it emerged later that the abduction and release were masterminded by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). On November 29, 2017, Gen John Nicholson, Commander of US forces in Afghanistan, told reporters, “We have been very direct and very clear with the Pakistanis... we have not seen those changes implemented yet. We are hoping to see those changes, we are hoping to work together with the Pakistanis going forward to eliminate terrorists who are crossing the border”. He said he believed senior Taliban leaders were based in Pakistan, and he agreed with senior US officials that the ISI has ties to the Haqqani network. The US has sent more than 3,000 additional troops to Afghanistan. Nicholson said over 1,000 troops would be advising Afghan troops at the battalion level, putting them closer to the fighting and at greater risk.³ But, according to a US government watchdog report, the Taliban has increased the amount of territory it has influence over, or controls, in Afghanistan in the past six months.

Presently, fighting has gone up, with the US-Afghan forces also targeting the narcotics factories of the Taliban.⁴ US Marines have been using the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) against the Taliban stronghold in Helmand province, for supporting the ground operations of the ANDSF, targeting Taliban fighters, their Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) manufacture and drug processing facilities. As per a US Marines spokesman, “Our mission is to have all-weather, 24-hour artillery support capability. Since HIMARS is the only weapon system that can do this, it provides fire support for any ANDSF personnel who needs it. HIMARS is capable of ranges of 300 km... it provides commanders with surface-to-surface all-weather fire”. HIMARS will continue to be a vital support capability for the ANDSF as they work to further build their momentum against insurgency in Afghanistan.

US State department has reported serious management and performance challenges in Anti-Terrorism assistance from Pakistan.

The US State Department is working on new approaches with India and Pakistan for promoting stability and reconciliation in Afghanistan—with Pakistan, the focus being on denying safe havens for terrorist organisations.⁵ The main purpose of the new approach is to create conditions for reconciliation with the Taliban and a process that supports the Afghan government in providing security for the populace. But the US State Department report also points to serious management and performance challenges facing them such as: the ongoing difficulties in monitoring and overseeing anti-terrorism assistance programmes in Pakistan; difficulties in obtaining visas from Pakistan for monitoring and developing and implementing procedures to verify compliance with contract reporting requirements; the waiving of contract offers by the State Department without formally modifying the terms of the contract; and, the challenges associated with contingency environments not limited to those pertaining to contracts and grants. Meanwhile, Afghanistan has been facing a spate of terror attacks, including car, truck and suicide bombings, in addition to cross-border firing by Pakistan. According to a October 07, 2017 report, 2,400 families from eastern Nangarhar province had been displaced due to rocket shelling by Pakistan across the Durand Line. Pakistan aided terrorist groups have been targeting Shias in Afghanistan to create a sectarian rift.⁶ The deployment of US forces in Afghanistan is expected to rise to almost 16,000 during 2018. Some 15,000 US troops are already in Afghanistan, including 3,800 added during 2017. The Army's new security force assistance brigade is being built and trained at Fort Benning, Georgia, and will head to Afghanistan in early 2018. US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis had initially set a tentative cap of about 15,000 US troops in Afghanistan but had also made clear that he is committed to a force level based on military needs, not an arbitrary number.

Political Scene

The political future of Afghanistan is somewhat uncertain because of little progress toward the parliamentary elections scheduled for July 2018.⁷ The major reason is instability in the country, with fighting having gone up. Besides, with large tracts under the Taliban's control or influence, how effectively the parliamentary elections can be held throughout the country is questionable. However, the opposition and critics of President Ashraf Ghani are turning to public demonstrations, issuing ultimatums or threats, and joining in calls

for a nationwide, traditional referendum on his authority. Mohammed Umer Daudzai, a former Interior Minister, now part of one of the larger opposition groups, says lack of progress on the elections was a symptom of the government's shrinking political base, saying, "When he started as President, his political base was formed by 54

political groups that were meeting on a weekly basis to support the President. I doubt if three of the 54 are left with him. They have lost their political base, they have lost their political credibility, and that's very bad because this country is built on political consensus." The country's electoral commission was a focal point of accusations of fraud surrounding Ghani's election in 2014, but an overhaul and reconstitution of that panel remain incomplete: it lacks a leader and about 40 percent of its staff. Nationwide, the number of polling stations in every area—a politically and ethnically delicate issue without reliable census data—is yet to be finalised. A few opposition groups may join former President Hamid Karzai's call for a *Loya Jirga*. But rising factional animosity is not good in the middle of a raging war against the Taliban and Islamic State loyalists.

India needs to enunciate its Afghan Policy based on its national interests without any external pressures.

Chabahar and the India-Iran-Afghanistan Troika

The trilateral India-Iran-Afghanistan agreement inked in May 2016 led to expanded avenues of trade for India with Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Russia through the International North-South Transportation Corridor (INSTC). The first phase of the Chabahar port was inaugurated on December 03, 2017. India is also constructing a railway line linking Chahabar with Zahedan on the Iran-Afghanistan border, which, beyond Zahedan, will be linked to the Iranian Railway running west and then north, close to the Iran-Afghanistan border, enabling both India and Afghanistan to avoid Pakistan. India has also established a direct two-way air cargo corridor with Afghanistan during 2017. In 2000, India, Iran and Russia had inked the INSTC agreement to build a corridor to provide the shortest multi-modal transportation route linking the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran and St Petersburg. INSTC has made slow progress but now there are indications of it being operationalised soon, with the first consignment from India to Russia, possibly on January 15, 2018. It is expected to cut the time and cost for transportation by half, helping Indo-Russian trade to grow from the current US \$6 billion to US\$30 billion over the next 10 years. Significantly, the US has stated that India is a player in Afghanistan

and it supports New Delhi's move with regard to transit options to enhance its economic connectivity with war-torn Afghanistan. However, any Western effort to destabilise Iran could affect Chabahar operations. US-Iran tensions are increasing, with the US alleging that Iran is arming the Houthi rebels in Yemen. The India, Iran and Afghanistan talks have also taken cognisance of the scourge of terrorism and the proxy wars by Pakistan.

Great Game Af-Pak

The Great Game in Afghanistan is getting hotter by the day. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), of which the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the flagship project, aims at replacing the dollar with the yuan. In addition, Pakistan permitting setting up of PLA garrisons in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), with more in the offing, coupled with the PLA's future naval base at Gwadar, gives China direct access and capacity to influence the Indian Ocean. The new US strategy is to weaken the Taliban on the battleground so that the group could come to the negotiating table. In the past, the US did engage with the Taliban in direct talks through the latter's front office, established in Doha, Qatar. However, these negotiations for peace in Afghanistan could not make much headway. The Taliban are in no mood to come to the negotiating table because they are actively supported by Pakistan and China, with recent reports of Russia and Iran also doing so – the common aim being to force US forces out of the region.⁹ In October 2017, Russian President Putin's special envoy Zamir Kabulov visited Delhi to hold discussions on issues related to regional security, with special focus on the developing situation in Afghanistan and the role of Pakistan. Kabulov is responsible for Moscow's Afghanistan policy.¹⁰ Kubalov has now called upon Afghanistan to engage with the Taliban in a 'constructive' dialogue after Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai recently announced Kabul's plans to work out a roadmap for the launch of a peace dialogue with the Taliban. But the fact remains that both Kabul and the Afghanistan-US-Pakistan-China Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) have been trying to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table for the past many years, in addition to recent initiatives by China and Russia, without any headway – all because of Pakistan. Yet, Kubalov did not call upon Pakistan to stop supporting the Taliban, the Haqqanis and other Pakistan-based terror organisations.

During the 13 years of his presidency, former Afghan President Hamid Karzai kept repeating that peace cannot come to Afghanistan unless the US and Pakistan want it,¹¹ Visiting India recently, he expressed disappointment that America's South Asia policy is not backed with action against terrorist safe havens in Pakistan. This

phenomenon is observed in India too, because despite the US cautioning Pakistan time and again, action on the ground is missing, with no change in the Pakistani policy.¹² It has now emerged that the ISIS has over 10,000 fighters in Afghanistan, with more arriving from Syria and Iraq. As per Zamir Kubalov, they are strongest in north Afghanistan, bordering Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. As a result of this, Russia has had to increase its troop strength and induct tanks in Tajikistan under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) arrangement.¹³ Russia alleges that the US is establishing a “New Syrian Army” composed of ISIS terrorists, with instructors from the US Special Operations Command; it claims the US has been using a refugee camp close to al-Hasakah in Syria for over six months as a training base, with the camp hosting some 750 terrorists, including 400 from the ISIS.¹⁴ There were also reports that almost 4,000 ISIS terrorists and their families were allowed to escape from the ISIS stronghold of Raqqa after its fall under the very noses of the coalition forces.¹⁵ Some of these fighters may be diverted to Afghanistan—that’s how French fighters have appeared fighting in Afghanistan. Pakistan would be the obvious conduit for them to slip into Afghanistan.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Uzbek, Uighur, Kyrgyz, Tajik and Kazakh *jihadists*, who are fighting in the Middle East and Afghanistan have joined the *jihad* against the US, post President Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Obviously, the Great Game is getting more and more complex with the US, China, Pakistan and Russia all using irregular forces, and geopolitical power for supremacy—energy and minerals being the motivators.¹⁷ Incidentally, a US Congressional candidate is allegedly linked to a Pakistani terror group.

India in Afghanistan

In addition to its above mentioned assistance to Afghanistan, India has announced taking up 116 “high impact community developmental projects” in 31 provinces of Afghanistan, post President Trump seeking New Delhi’s help in the economic development of war-torn Afghanistan.¹⁸ Over and above these high impact projects, India has also offered assistance for six new projects. These include low-cost housing for the returning Afghan refugees, road connectivity, national park and economic development. A group of Afghan women officers undergoing military training in India was in the news recently. The problem in Afghanistan is that the Army is largely without armour and artillery and neither has support from the Air Force, which is required to keep the Taliban at bay. Moreover, the police is mostly uneducated, poorly-trained, ill-equipped and hopelessly stretched. The phenomenal rise of the ISIS has complicated the

situation even more and the run up to the 2018 parliamentary elections and 2019 presidential polls will likely see more violence. It is in this backdrop that India needs to chalk out its Afghan policy, based on its own national interests, deflecting pressures from external powers.

Perhaps, India could take the initiative by building on the India-Afghanistan-Iran troika to partner projects that would benefit all three countries and improve the economy of Afghanistan. For example, Afghanistan has vast reserves of lithium that can be extracted, refined and marketed.¹⁹ China is already outpacing the US and other countries in a global race to secure supplies of lithium, which is a core ingredient for 99 percent of electric vehicles. India must also optimise upon its Special Forces to reach out to amenable factions of the Taliban in conjunction with the Afghan Special Forces, while the US is softening the hardcore to bring them to the negotiating table. This would provide added protection to the Indian development projects in Afghanistan. We could learn from China, the only country extracting commercial oil and mining copper in Afghanistan since 2012. Lastly, the Chabahar project must be completed at the earliest. Iran has a narrow road link to Herat in Afghanistan. This should be widened and a rail link developed connecting Herat with the INSTC. The INSTC should be made more and more inclusive through India-Iran-Afghanistan-Russia diplomacy drawing in the Central Asian countries into it, along with European Union (EU) investments in the corridor that would enhance its security. It would then be a game changer in the true sense.

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Notes

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