

Indian Footprints in Afghanistan

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Economic, political, security and strategic reasons have shaped the pattern of India's footprints in the war-ravaged land of Afghanistan. The aims of rebuilding its devastated economy and the strengthening of political institutions to create and sustain viable administrative machinery exist simultaneously to the pursuit of India's own interests envisaged in the Afghan land. India in its policy orientations and approach focuses on preserving its friendship for the Afghan people and to this end has continued to offer humanitarian aid. A strong government utilising the country's resources to usher in a level of development and prosperity, is viewed as the best defence against the Taliban coming to power especially in the background of the post-2014 withdrawal of international coalition troops, and the lack of the military capacity of the incumbent regime and its security forces. The last is keenly desired by New Delhi because of repercussions of the same on the security of the nation.

India, owing to its standing in the Afghan scheme of things, has perceived itself to be well-placed to play a virtually indispensable role in the formation of a stable and secure Afghanistan away from the clutches of the Taliban. Afghanistan has been the second largest recipient of Indian development assistance after Bhutan, with the official Indian commitment valued at USD 2 billion. India is today the fifth largest provider of development assistance to Afghanistan with its total commitment for 2013/14 at approximately USD 120 million. The bilateral trade between the countries stood at USD 639 million in 2011-12. Indian investments, aid and involvement are visible in a plethora of sectors.

Humanitarian Assistance

- India actively aids in the provision of a daily distribution of high protein biscuits through school feeding programmes managed by the UN World Food Program for nearly two million Afghan children.
- It has periodically supplied emergency food assistance to overcome food shortages.

Medical Assistance

- The reconstruction of the Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health in Kabul was undertaken: India funded the construction and upgrading of Afghanistan's only children's hospital, and supplied the hospital's infrastructure and training of its medical personnel along with a telemedicine project that links it with Indian hospitals.
- Free medical consultation and services are being provided to over 30,000 Afghans monthly through Indian Medical Missions in five Afghan cities.
- India also provided ambulances to the Afghan Ministry of Public Health and built numerous basic health clinics in border areas.

Development Cooperation

- India has provided a number of grants across a number of sectors which has constituted the vast majority of New Delhi's commitments between 2002 and 2013. These sectors have been identified by the Afghan government and the Afghan National Development Strategy as priority areas and comprise the following-
 - Infrastructure- Some high-profile projects have included construction of the Afghan parliament building in Kabul, the Zaranj-Delaram road which links Iran's Chabahar port and roads to Afghanistan, a power transmission grid to bring additional electricity to Kabul, the power-generating Salma Dam in Herat, and telecommunications infrastructure in 11 Afghan provinces. India's support for hydroelectricity generation and power

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transmission in the Herat province has been of great benefit to the local Afghan population.

- Small and community-based development projects, focusing on socio-economic development in border areas.
- Education and capacity-building projects have included provision of 500 annual scholarships for Afghan students to study at universities in India, 500 annual scholarships for Afghan civil servants to receive training in India, and vocational training programmes in Afghanistan.

Assistance for building of democratic institutions

- Significant allocations to a training programme in India for Afghan bureaucrats have been made.
- Finances have been provided for the construction of Afghanistan's Parliament.

Security

In 2011, through the signing of a wide-ranging Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), India agreed to train and equip Afghan security forces. Small batches of Afghan soldiers are undergoing training at Indian military schools.

India views development cooperation as a mutually beneficial partnership and therefore the building of Afghanistan in economic terms, envisaging greater integration and prospects in this sphere, assumes significance in the Indian planning and provision of aid.

Securing Access to Energy and Natural Resources

"A secure 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." Indian attempts at connecting Central Asian countries via these roads with Iran and Afghanistan are aimed at increasing regional trade as well as opening up a route for itself to access the rich gas and oil reserves of Central Asia as well as securing evacuation routes for minerals in addition to the facilitation in the transit of aid and goods.

In November 2012, several mining and development deals were signed, which could lead to Afghanistan eventually becoming New Delhi's best

investment ever. In May 2013, the Indian government was reported to hold talks with a SAIL-led consortium of steel and mining companies to ease their entry into Afghanistan for the first-ever deal to develop four iron ore blocks and build a steel plant in Hajigak, west of Kabul in Bamiyan province, which is believed to hold 1.8 billion tonnes of high-grade iron ore. Afghanistan also issued a revised mining policy that is expected to help Indian investments in a big way.

Banking on the goodwill that India has generated in the country, Indian officials have been hopeful of getting some prospective oil blocks in Afghanistan without participating in the bidding process. Particular interest is being laid on the lie near the Turkmenistan border which is very close to the country's gas-rich region with possibility of extension to the Afghan side.

China has outdone India in terms of acquiring oil and gas assets, securing three energy blocks in the Amu Darya basin last year after promising to invest in a refinery there and has also invested \$ 3billion in copper mines at Mes Aynak, 40 kilometres southeast of Kabul. This project has suffered controversy and delays because of its being the site of an ancient Buddhist city. Further action by China is now incumbent on its assessment of the security situation following the drawdown.

Karzai's May Visit and Indian Concerns

On May 21, 2013, Afghan President Mr Hamid Karzai in his two-day visit to New Delhi praised India's role in rebuilding his war-torn homeland. He continued to seek Indian investments in areas such as healthcare, agribusiness, telecom and capacity building. He expressed his desire to enhance defence cooperation and to get a commitment for the supply of "lethal and non-lethal" weapons but declined the presence of Indian troops saying that it was not required. He asked for military equipment including 105 mm howitzer artillery, medium-lift aircraft, bridge-laying equipment, and trucks.

In answering materially to this request, however, India has to face a number of problems. India would have to cooperate with Moscow since some of the hardware — like Antonov An-32 aircraft — is manufactured in Russia, and would also have to negotiate with both Moscow and Tehran for transit routes in order to deliver the weapons as Afghanistan is landlocked. Russian and Iranian fears regarding the allowing of arms provision to a volatile country so close to home also cannot be neglected. Already, the state of the Afghan armed forces is thus that they cannot be entrusted with hardware sans their lack of training and

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capability for maintenance. The phenomena of 'Green-on-Blue' attacks only compound the problem further.

According to *The Hindu*, "While India works towards strengthening its strategic partnership with Afghanistan, there has been no clear policy as yet on dealing with increasing numbers of asylum-seekers from the war-torn nation..... An estimated 25,000 Afghans are believed to be living in India — a mix of traders, medical tourists, students and those fleeing threats to life and persecution (i.e. refugees). Asylum-seekers in India typically include people who face

threats from the Taliban, interpreters working for the international presence, journalists, single women, including activists and those facing forced marriage threats, former government officials, etc. According to UNHCR estimates, it has recognised close to 10,000 Afghans as refugees." India, therefore, needs to address this issue as well, as these numbers can swell in future.

Pakistan, particularly its military, will continue to see the growing Indian influence in Afghanistan unfavourably. This could also hamper the plans of its newly elected Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, to improving ties with India if he is keen on fulfilling this electoral promise. A pro-Indian government in Kabul has always been perceived by Pakistan as antithetical to its interests, and over time Islamabad has tried to dissuade the former from looking to New Delhi and veer towards its immediate neighbour beyond the Durand Line. However, Pakistan's continued favouring of terrorism and unending patronage of terrorist groups striking at will in different parts of Afghanistan has ensured that the Afghans would not fall for their overtures. Karzai has already stated that the Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan are the real source of trouble. Thereby, India needs to build on its economic relationship with Kabul to improve further the status quo in its favour and prevent Islamabad from playing a more intrusive role in Afghan affairs. Memories of the earlier Pak-sponsored Taliban regime to this day invoke only nightmares for the Indian people and security establishment alike.

The whole scenario, however, continues to be dominated by issues such as repercussions for Indian security were the Taliban to return in power to Kabul. The conversion of Afghan soil into a haven for jihadis one more time is not what India wishes to see again. It would, besides all other considerations,

be the complete undoing of all that India has built in Afghanistan, and least of all in economic terms. The situation as it stands cannot be swept under the carpet either. The Taliban to this day, remain an unbeaten foe. Their authority in large parts of southern and eastern Afghanistan is a reality. Even if they do accept peaceful terms and reconcile themselves to accepting political imperatives, it should not be expected that there would be an end to the violence. Owing to the very *raison d'être* of their founding and the legitimacy accorded to violent means in attaining their avowed goals, it is highly unlikely that the Taliban would convert themselves into upholders of peace at the cost of their jihadist aims. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), their counterpart across the border in Pakistan, has attained notoriety for unleashing bloodbaths after signing peace deals with the authorities. Also, as long as the Haqqanis continue to thrive at the ISI's behest, India will have its hands full.

Therefore, India needs to realise that engaging with the Taliban has to be a well thought-out process, securing and safeguarding Indian interests. The Taliban will never lose their danger portent, so India should contribute in a manner that strengthens the anti-Taliban forces. By building economic goodwill, India has aimed to take a step in the right direction. The support of the local, common Afghans and their perception of what India has done to improve their living conditions will go a long way in reining the Taliban or at least controlling their hostile actions towards India. As active military involvement in support of the Karzai government is currently not a policy option, the only recourse otherwise open to New Delhi is to rely on its economic clout. To this end, the Indian footprint till 2014 will, and should, only enlarge.

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