



## **Paper Title: Kabul-New Delhi Relations and the Future of Security in Afghanistan**

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## **Kabul-New Delhi Relations and the Future of Security in Afghanistan**

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Security in Afghanistan is getting worse steadily as terrorist groups are growing in numbers in the region. The growth of insurgent clusters is not only a threat to Afghanistan but also a menace for all countries in the region. However, security in Afghanistan is greatly affected by the strategies and policies of its neighbors and others in the regional sphere. India's policies as a friendly nation, both in the past and present, have had great impact on the security situation in Afghanistan, and India's political ties, financial investments and development activities in Afghanistan have grown in the recent years. In this backdrop, this essay explores the role India can play towards ensuring security in Afghanistan. To do so, this essay assesses India's role as a friendly country in the development sectors and helping the security process in Afghanistan; the impact of the contentious India-Pakistan bilateral ties on the security situation in Afghanistan; Afghanistan's measurable efforts towards inviting India's cooperation; India's views regarding peace and stability in Afghanistan; and India's constructive contributions towards achieving regional consensus on peace and stability in Afghanistan.

### **India-Afghanistan Engagement and Security Related Developments in Afghanistan**

To discuss India's role in ensuring security in Afghanistan, it is essential to trace the history of the Afghanistan-India relationship over the past decades. India has helped Afghanistan in different sectors and development projects

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1. Sughra Azizi worked as a Research and Administrative Assistant at Washington Ethical Consulting.

such as in industry, irrigation, hydroelectric projects as well as in defense and military support. India-Afghanistan relations have been friendly since the early years of Indian independence and the partition of British India into India and Pakistan. For instance, the bilateral “Friendship Treaty” was signed in 1950.<sup>2</sup> In the later years, India supported Afghanistan in its fight against the Taliban regime in the late 1990s. Anti-Taliban groups such as the Northern Alliance were reinforced by India to reduce Pakistan’s influence in the country. In the recent years, India has invested in developmental projects in Afghanistan, and has also indicated that it intends to increase its trainings for Afghan defense forces fighting insurgents.<sup>3</sup>

India has also invested in numerous developmental projects in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban regime and has pledged USD 3.1 billion in assistance between 2001 and 2017 for Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> The construction of Afghanistan’s parliament building in Kabul; the construction of Salma dam (now known as the Afghan-India Friendship Dam); the establishment of an electricity transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul; the construction of the Chimtala power substation in Kabul; and the donation of 285 military vehicles for the Afghan National Army are some examples of India’s engagement with Afghanistan since 2001.<sup>5</sup>

India’s developmental activities have helped Afghanistan improve its economy and contributed towards reduced dependence on its neighbors, especially Pakistan. For example, building dams on Kabul River opens the possibility for Afghanistan to use those waters to generate its own electricity. The effective use of dams not only benefits the country for its own use of water for hydro-electricity projects but also helps the economy by eventually exporting power to neighbors. Another example is India’s investment in Iran’s Chabahar Port, which has helped Afghanistan reduce its dependence on transit trade via Pakistan. As of February 2018, Afghanistan has redirected 80% of

2. Fair, C. Christine. “India in Afghanistan, Part I: Strategic Interests, Regional Concerns.” *Foreign Policy*, October 26, 2010. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/10/26/india-in-afghanistan-part-i-strategic-interests-regional-concerns/>

3. Roche, Elizabeth. “India to Help Afghanistan on Development Projects, Security.” *Livemint Newspaper*, September 12, 2017. <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/QOCF3XhuJ1GVkSEoVKTeAL/India-agrees-to-give-Afghanistan-more-defence-aid-to-in-war.html>

4. *Ibid.*

5. Iwanek, Krzysztof. “36 Things India Has Done for Afghanistan.” *The Diplomat*, January 08, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/36-things-india-has-done-for-afghanistan/>

its cargo traffic from the Karachi port to Iran's Chabahar and Bandar Abbas ports.<sup>6</sup>

## **India-Pakistan Relationship and the Security Situation in Afghanistan**

The contentious relationship between India and Pakistan is an important issue to consider while analyzing India's role in facilitating security in Afghanistan. Since Afghanistan shares cultural and political relationships with Pakistan and shares friendly and political ties with India, any development in the India-Pakistan relationship affects security in Afghanistan.

India has sought closer relations with Afghanistan since 2001 for several reasons. One such reason is its conflict with Pakistan. Most recently, a U.S. Congressional Report highlighted India's efforts towards strengthening its political relationships with Afghanistan and Central Asia is because of its conflict with Pakistan.<sup>7</sup> In addition, access to energy-rich Central Asia and broader commercial relations with that region serves as another reason why India pursues friendly ties with Afghanistan.

While the expansion of India's presence in Afghanistan benefits Afghanistan, it also raises serious concerns in Pakistan. Pakistan considers any Indian influence in Afghanistan as a threat to itself. In the past, India cooperated with Afghanistan on several occasions to limit Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> Investing in Iran's Chabahar Port to reduce Afghanistan's trade and commerce dependence on Pakistan is a major example. Meanwhile, Pakistan not only supports the Taliban in Afghanistan but has also trained some other terrorist groups such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen/Harkat-ul-Ansar, and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami in Afghanistan to fight against India.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, one should not turn a blind eye to the impact of the India-Pakistan contestation on security and peace in Afghanistan.

6. "Afghanistan looks to reduce dependence on Pakistan via Chabahar Port." Pakistan Today Profit, February 04, 2018. <https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2018/02/04/afghanistan-looks-to-reduce-dependence-on-pakistan-via-chabahar-port/>

7. "Pakistan may prefer weak and destabilised Afghanistan to a stronger and unified state: US Congressional report," Reportedly, January 19, 2019. <http://reportedly.net/latest-stories/pakistan-may-prefer-weak-and-destabilised-afghanistan-to-a-stronger-and-unified-state-us-congressional-report/>

8. Ibid.

9. Fair, C. Christine. "India in Afghanistan, Part I: Strategic Interests, Regional Concerns." Foreign Policy, October 26, 2010. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/10/26/india-in-afghanistan-part-i-strategic-interests-regional-concerns/>

Nonetheless, cultural, ethnic and religious relations connect Pakistan with Afghanistan. Hence, Pakistan is interested, more than any country, in strengthening its political relations with the Afghan government because of these commonalities, as well as to restrain India's presence in Afghanistan. For example, the construction of the Shahtoot dam on Kabul River by India can be a major driver of conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan because the dam may hinder Pakistan's access to transboundary rivers waters.<sup>10</sup> It is a huge concern for Pakistan as it has the potential to cause water shortage and harm Pakistan's economic development which is dependent on agriculture. Thus, the issue could spur water-related conflict/tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan if not addressed effectively. However, this issue could also be resolved by means of a fair distribution of water with Pakistan, without turning it into a zero sum game. However, this would require political wisdom and ethical leadership, both of which unfortunately seem to be in very short supply in Kabul as well as Islamabad.

### **India's Perspectives on Peace and Stability in Afghanistan**

Security and peace in Afghanistan can help security in the region as Afghanistan will cease to be a safe haven for terrorist groups. Moreover, security in Afghanistan provides opportunities for investment and commerce for India, and this can serve as an incentive for the latter to cooperate in this regard. According to Shaharзад Akbar, an adjunct professor at the American University in Afghanistan (AUAF), India is interested in peace and stability in Afghanistan because they do not want Afghanistan to be a safe haven for terrorists. She stated that since India has economic investments in Afghanistan, New Delhi seeks to develop a strong relationship with a stable state in Afghanistan so that it can benefit from this relationship economically in long term.<sup>11</sup> In terms of India's assessment of peace talks with the Taliban, Akbar added that for India, the biggest concern is that the Taliban are under Pakistan's influence, and that therefore they do not want to see another Taliban government in Afghanistan. India is concerned about Afghanistan being used as a safe haven for terrorists to operate and carry out attacks against India

10. Iwanek, Krzysztof. "36 Things India Has Done for Afghanistan." *The Diplomat*, January 08, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/36-things-india-has-done-for-afghanistan/>

11. Shaharзад Akbar, adjunct professor at the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF), interview by author. Kabul, Afghanistan. January 20, 2019.

and pose challenges to its security as has been witnessed several times in the past. However, there is no other way for India but to help bring Taliban to the negotiation table because advances of insurgents in Afghanistan also threaten India's security.

There are, however, indications<sup>12</sup> that the Taliban are interested in developing a good relationship with India, because the Taliban's leadership wish for the group to be recognized internationally, and not merely as being under the influence of Pakistan.<sup>13</sup>

### **India's Potential Role in Fostering Regional Consensus on Peace and Stability in Afghanistan**

As a commentary on *Hasht-e-Sobh* published on 23 January, 2019, highlighted, without a stable Afghanistan, economic growth in Central Asia and South Asian countries, including Pakistan, is not possible. Given how Afghanistan can be a good transit route between South and Central Asia countries, a stable Afghanistan is also in the interest of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project as well as Central Asia's development. With an unstable Afghanistan, economic development in the region and the improvement in the lives of people in these countries are not possible.<sup>14</sup> To help secure Afghanistan, India can play a crucial role to contribute towards regional consensus on security and peace in Afghanistan. One approach India can take towards contributing to facilitating regional consensus on the matter is to harness it ties with China. India can ask China to utilize its leverage with Pakistan and encourage Pakistan to deliver tangible results on peace and security in Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> India has showed interest in stabilizing Afghanistan several times and with effective strategies and the correct support-such as by means of helping empower the Afghan armed forces to become self-sufficient and reduce dependence on foreign support-it can do so.

12. Dubey, Pratyush. "Talking with the Enemy: Why India Needs to Engage the Taliban." *The Diplomat*, December 19, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/talking-with-the-enemy-why-india-needs-to-engage-the-taliban/>

13. *Ibid.*

14. "Pakistan Economic Growth without a Stable Afghanistan is not Possible(Persian)." *Hasht-e-Sobh Daily*, January 23, 2019. <https://8am.af/pakistani-economic-growth-is-unlikely-to-stabilize-afghanistan/>

15. Haidari, M. Ashraf, "How China and India can help secure peace in Afghanistan." *Observer Research Foundation*, August 8, 2018. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/43120-how-china-and-india-can-help-secure-peace-in-afghanistan/>

With its support and influence/power in the region, and as a member of several multilateral platforms, India can encourage countries in the Central Asia and South Asia region to cooperate with Afghanistan in this regard. There are three such platforms whose potential India and Afghanistan can harness to this effect. First, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) provides an effective platform for cooperation in this regard as its membership and associations comprise major players who have stakes in security in Afghanistan, including China, Pakistan, and Russia. Second, the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is another such platform that India can utilize towards facilitating a regional consensus on security and peace in Afghanistan. SAARC is important because it can provide a joint platform for Pakistan and India, the two major actors in the case of Afghanistan, with regard to Afghanistan's security. While the effectiveness of SAARC has been limited (largely also due to the tense New Delhi-Islamabad relationship), the platform does offer an alternative platform for India and Pakistan to engage on key issues in their bilateral. While the prospects of this platform's efficacy in addressing issues related to Afghanistan are low, the existence of the platform does offer an additional avenue for discussions. Third, the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation is another platform that primarily focuses on cooperation among participating countries, including Pakistan and India, for security and peace in Afghanistan.

Moreover, India can contribute to regional consensus on security and peace in Afghanistan by assuring Pakistan that India's presence in Afghanistan will not pose a threat to them. This can be done through engaging in talks with Pakistan on this topic, and providing viable guarantees in this regard. A trilateral forum of India, Pakistan and Afghanistan can be an effective step to this end. Pakistan feels threatened by India's growing presence in Afghanistan, and therefore, it focuses on limiting India's relationship with Afghanistan instead of contributing constructively to help stabilize Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> A trilateral format could prove useful to could thus help reduce mistrust, and for confidence building among the three countries.

Moreover, India can help Afghanistan ease the peace process by changing its policy and strategy towards Taliban. India views the Taliban through the

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16. Ibid.

lens of its rivalry with Pakistan, whereas there is a possibility for cooperation with the Taliban. As explained above, the Taliban is interested in developing a better relationship with India. India can make use of this opportunity and encourage the group to make peace with the Afghan government as it would benefit India and Afghanistan and can also secure India's development projects in the country.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

India has played a significant role in Afghanistan since 2001 through its economic support and development projects. India's projects, however, have been a source of concern for Pakistan, the former's regional rival with whom it has deep rooted conflictssuch as on Kashmir. This conflict between the two countries with whom Afghanistan has extensive relations, has affected security and peace in Afghanistan and continues to do so. However, there are possibilities for India's cooperation in Afghanistan's security and peace. As explained above, one such possibility could be through India providing viable assurances that its presence in Afghanistan remains benign and does not harm Pakistan. Moreover, there are multilateral platforms where which India is a member, which can serve as possible avenues for fostering cooperation aimed at regional consensus on security in Afghanistan. These platforms include the SCO, SAARC and the Kabul Process.

Via a clear and effective policy and strategy focused on preventing major powers from investing in proxy wars in Afghanistan and by handing over the leadership of the peace process to the Afghans, Afghanistan can lead regional efforts towards peace and stability. International military related support is not permanent; and therefore, Afghanistan needs to develop a strong military to secure itself. Meanwhile, India can be a good partner in propelling the country further on the path to economic growth and development because it has demonstrated its potential for making lasting investments in different sectors. Moreover, Afghanistan must demonstrate-perhaps through the clauses and/or terms of contracts signed-that India-Afghanistan relations do not harm Pakistan. Being pro-Indian or pro-Pakistan is not helpful for

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17. "India Criticises UN for Failing to Curtail Taliban in Afghanistan Reaffirms Support for Afghan-led and Owned Peace Process". Reporterly, December 08, 2018. <http://reporterly.net/latest-stories/india-criticises-un-for-failing-to-curtail-taliban-in-afghanistan-reaffirms-support-for-afghan-led-and-owned-peace-process/>



Afghanistan. Afghanistan needs to maintain a balance while engaging with the rival countries and developing good relations with the two so that it is not used as a tool by competitors. Afghan government officials have stated at different times that the conflict in Afghanistan is a result of regional conflicts and Afghanistan is being used as a battlefield.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, there is also a need for addressing the much wider regional and global factors instead of merely focusing on issues in bilateral and/or trilateral relations in silos.

### Policy Recommendations

- Over the past years, India has assisted Afghanistan in different sectors such as infrastructure, health, education, defense and military. However, India's willingness to strengthen its political and economic relations with Afghanistan is viewed with suspicion by Pakistan. Therefore, India should work towards helping Afghanistan with a focus on the bilateral economic benefits for Afghanistan and India.
- Since instability in Afghanistan is partly because of the Pakistan-India contestation, Afghanistan should maintain a balance in its relationships with India and Pakistan, by developing new balanced policies and strategies towards both countries, which are viewed neither as pro-India nor as pro-Pakistan.
- India can use its influence on other regional countries such as China to encourage Pakistan to apply pressure on the Taliban for direct talks with the Afghan government, and Afghanistan should support and use the available platforms to make this happen by convincing India to do so.

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18. "Daoudzai: Expecting Pakistan Help for Peace in Afghanistan is Wasting Time (Persian)." BBC Persian, December 04, 2014. [http://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan/2014/12/141204\\_k04\\_omar\\_daoudzai\\_speech?fbclid=IwAR2lM-MnmgEHsRqWnxCHj3oPKZVdCSps-RnCTH6\\_RnhsgI55P6eAoM84d1c](http://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan/2014/12/141204_k04_omar_daoudzai_speech?fbclid=IwAR2lM-MnmgEHsRqWnxCHj3oPKZVdCSps-RnCTH6_RnhsgI55P6eAoM84d1c)