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## **Assessing India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership in the Twenty First Century**

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**Abstract.** To comprehend the paradigm shift in the twenty first century, we need to understand the upsurge of India in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the consecutive emergence of China in the post-cold war era. This has led to the geopolitical shift in Asia and particularly in the littoral waters of Indian Ocean. The classical geopolitics of governing the nation is still evident in the international relations. The processes of regionalism, multilateralism has replaced the geopolitical phenomenon in many parts of the world but geoeconomics in IOR is yet to replace the geopolitics. The traditional theory of geopolitics such as Alfred Thayer Mahan, Halford J. Mackinder, Nicholas Spykman seems to be prevalent in the South and Central as well as mid-west Asia. The role and response of India with Afghanistan encompass the historical evolution with multidimensional deliberated collaboration, characterising the geopolitical and economic foundations. The India-Afghanistan strategic partnership started evolving with the fall of Taliban since post-9/11 period. Not only this, New Delhi has emerged as major player in the reconstruction and rebuilding Kabul in the twenty first century. It is in this very context, the study purports to enquire into the India-Afghanistan relations in the present century with certain roadblocks.

**Keywords.** Diplomatic Engagement, Economic Cooperation, Regional Power Dynamics, Strategic partnership

### **Introduction**

India and Afghanistan relations are closely associated with each through its historical evolution, cultural linkages, and civilizational context. After its independence, India has maintained its diplomatic engagements with Afghanistan by signing friendship treaty in 1950 and accomplished political and economic relations during in and after the post-cold war era (Ministry of External Affairs,1950). By maintaining a strategic partnership and balancing the relations between the two countries. Whereas, in the present century the strategic partnership has increased among India-

Afghanistan by way of contribution, rebuilding, and reconstruction of Afghanistan by New Delhi. It has gone through transformation. With the fall of Taliban, the Kabul has maintained and nurtured strong and meaningful bond between the two nations. The take-over of regime by President Hamid Karzai and Indias soft approach policy towards Afghanistan has brought peace and firmness in the region. Further, diplomatic exchanges and high officials

reiterated their mutual interests to build and develop strong strategic partnership in the present century Basu,2007:84-122). It was in the post-9/11 period during in Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai takeover, both the states started evolving strategic partnership based on the mutual understanding and trust to expand the relationship in terms of commerce-trade, education, security, and political context. It is against this background the present study the brief historical understanding of Indo-Afghan relations and focusing on the twenty first century relations. The relations between two countries have taken a new shape, since in the post-Taliban period in 2001 with changing geopolitical, economic landscape that altered the regional dynamics as well as relation among the two states.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To explore and study India-Afghanistan relations in the present century
2. To know and analyse India's contribution in the rebuilding and progress of Afghanistan through its strategic partnership.
3. To comprehend the varying dynamics of the Indian foreign policy in shifting of Regimes since 2014 among the two nations.

### **Methodology**

The proposed study is based on historical, descriptive, and analytical methods of research. It would be based on critical analysis of the text on India's link with Afghanistan. The study of historical linkage with Afghanistan is historical and descriptive in nature. Research will also adopt analytical method while dealing with the new great game in Afghanistan. The proposed research would be based on both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include various government documents, reports and researches undertaken by India and Afghanistan governments and international and regional resolutions, treaties, declarations and agreements, speeches, surveys, interviews, and empirical facts etc. The secondary sources include books, journals, articles, newspaper, magazine, and Internet materials available at website would be consulted for the study of India's interest in Afghanistan.

### **Theoretical Framework: Discussion and Findings**

#### ***Locating India-Afghanistan Relationship: Post-9/11***

With the America's new war on global terrorism, the US forces led by NATO launched a military operation enduring freedom against the Taliban in Afghanistan. New Delhi got a chance to welcome U.S. intervention in Afghanistan to defeat the Pakistan-Taliban nexus. However, India was not directly involved and refrained itself from any kind of military involvement in Afghanistan. Rather, it was keener in development and reconstruction within the presence of America in the region (Fateh, 2016:7-9). Afterwards, fall of Taliban and coming up of Hamid Karzai regime in Afghanistan, India became actively engaged and sooner upgraded India's representation in Afghanistan from Liaison office to full-sized embassy in 2002. Besides, the participation of India in the Bonn conference, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee declared a \$100 million line of credit to Afghanistan and promised one million tons of wheat for displaced Afghans and sent a team of doctors and technicians in December 2001, to create a camp of fixing artificial limbs for amputees. Not only this, External affair Minister Mr. Jaswant Singh attended the inaugural provisional authority under the chairmanship of President Karzai on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2001 (Fair, 2009:192). On a reciprocal basis, President Hamid Karzai visited India in March 2003 and met President APJ Abdul Kalam and Prime Minister Vajpayee, thanked for all its help to Afghanistan (Ministry of External Affairs, 2003-04).

Similarly, in a historical moment on the invitation of President Karzai, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made an official visit to Afghanistan in 2005 August. This visit was significant in reaffirming the old ties and progressing the partnership in the present century (Ministry of External Affairs,2020). Both the states signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on small development projects and cooperation in education, healthcare, and agriculture research. The foundation stone of Afghan parliament was also laid down during this visit and India restated its constant assurance to the rebuilding and economic progress of Afghanistan and pledged an additional \$50 million assistance with taking the tally to total assistance of \$ 550 million (Trivedi, 2008:77). The exchange of visits was quite clear from both sides, Afghan President Hamid Karzai made a follow up of four days official visit to India on 9<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> April 2006. This visit of Karzai was significant during in the wake of sharp violence in Afghanistan, the possibilities of Afghanistan. The Indian External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee during his visit to Afghanistan in January 2009 with President Hamid Karzai inaugurated 218 km. landmark Zarang–Delaram highway road, next to link–up with Iran border for facilitating the connectivity to Chabahar Port. The road was built by Indian Border Road Organization (BRO) and Indian Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) personnel provided the security for the workers engaged in construction of the road.

Throughout, the visit Pranab Mukherjee and his Afghan counterpart Dadfar Spanta emphasized on significance of strategic partnership, grounded on enduring historical and cultural bonds, articulated their approval on reconstruction projects, commitment to combat terrorism and revised the position of future programs on the bilateral and multilateral level ( The Embassy of India, Kabul, 2007).Further, the U.S. President Barack Obama’s speech at West point on December, 2009 and his aim to planned withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan gave India an opportunity to seek a greater role in Afghanistan (Reddy,2011).

It becomes pertinent to mention here that on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2011 India-Afghanistan signed a ‘Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) to advance their relationship during the visit of Karzai (Embassy of India-Kabul,2024). Both the states agreed to begin strategic dialogue to intensify peace, security in the region and to have joint measure to combat global terrorism etc. the strategic agreement aimed at creating suitable environment for trade and investment, custom and international trade to enable Afghanistan to have accesses and free linkages in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). By now, India has become the fifth largest global donor to Afghanistan. (Anwer,2014:7). Afterwards, India has always remained supported to, an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and Afghan-controlled political reconciliation process to see the peaceful and stable future of Afghanistan (Taneja,2017).

Further, Delhi Investment Summit on Afghanistan on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2012 was aimed of SPA, to support Afghanistan's emergence as a sovereign nation, capable of stand-up on its own feet with the support of alike partnerships with the international society. To raise bilateral relationship mainly from development support to a full-fledged and self-sufficient partnership, in which trade and investment play a key role. This occasion was a step in that direction (Ministry of External Affairs,2012).

### **Bilateral Relations: Shift of Regimes in 2014**

There was a change of government in Afghanistan after the presidential elections in Afghanistan in 2014. Within tussle between Ghani and Abdullah, US must intervene to form a new National Unity government (NUG), that came into existence in 2014 with a power sharing formula between the two. In a similar manner, Narendra Modi took over as Prime Minister of

India. Initially, with the formation of government in Afghanistan, there was a tilt towards Pakistan and China during in President Ghani's visits to both states and meeting with the counterparts in 2014 (Prasad,2021:3-20). Thereafter, it was in April 2015, Ghani made an official visit to India.

Keeping in view, the geopolitical environment in Afghanistan with the announcement of US withdrawal of troops in 2014 and to end the military presence by 2016. The western assistance and support became slightly murkier. Despite of all these developments and anxiety in relation, India's developmental support remained consistent and increased from \$1.5 billion in 2014 to \$2 billion by 2017 (Mullen,2017). During in Ghani's visit to India in April 2015, dialogues on various sectors were involved like health, education, agriculture, disaster management and electoral, power management etc. Besides this, both India-Afghanistan decided to cooperate on the issue of combatting terrorism globally and regionally with the assistance of global community. In addition to this, it was decided by Afghan embassy to construct a sister-city linking Ahmedabad-Asadabad, Hyderabad-Jalalabad, Ajmer Sharif-Herat, Mumbai-Kandahar, Delhi-Kabul and the state of Assam and the Province of Helmand (Kaura,2017:29-46). In September 2016 and October 2017, President Ghani visited again New Delhi marking a significant shift in its foreign policy towards India, as discussions were focused on increasing security cooperation and strengthening economic relations between the two nations in September 2016. Whereas, October 2017 visit focused on enhancing and reviewing the bilateral relations, regional security and to combat against terrorism etc. These visits gave emphasis to strategic partnership, security cooperation, economic development, and regional stability.

In a similar manner, during in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Afghanistan in December 2015 and June 2016, Narendra Modi alongside high level delegation made a visit to Afghanistan and met Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani, Chief Executive-Dr. Abdullah, and former President Karzai Hamid Karzai. During the visit in 2015, Narendra Modi inaugurated the newly constructed Afghanistan Parliament building, a testament to India's commitment to democratic infrastructure in Afghanistan and announced around 500 scholarships in school and colleges for the children of martyr of Afghan security forces in India and Afghanistan (Ministry of External Affairs,2020). Not only this, 04 Mi-25 Attack helicopters were gifted to Afghan Air Forces (Ibid). Similarly, during Narendra Modi's visit in 2016, along with Afghan President Ghani, Modi inaugurated the Salma Dam popularly known as 'Afghan-India friendship Dam' in Herat province that was funded and constructed by India aiming at irrigation, electricity, bolstering Afghanistan's agricultural and energy sectors (The New, Indian Express, 2016). Having said that, India and Afghanistan successfully held its meeting of the Strategic Partnership Council in September 2017 (already set under the guidance of SPA in 2011). Further, India and Afghanistan launched a 'New Development Partnership' under which India is agreed on to take up 116 high impact community developmental projects of various kinds in thirty-one provinces in Afghanistan (Ministry of External Affairs, 2017).

Furthermore, the SPA between the two nations encompasses wide range of issues from special training, equipping and capacity building of Afghan security forces to economic growth, education, people to people contact and critical security environmental issues in the region. Also to bridge the Central Asian Republics (CARs) bestowed with rich energy resources. There were few more significant developments in terms of relations as India and Afghanistan along with Iran have signed a strategically important trilateral "Trade and Transit Agreement" on Chabahar Port (Iran) in May 2016. The Chabahar Port will give India an access

via sea for trade with land-locked Afghanistan and Central Asia and will reduce India's dependency on land route through Islamabad (Das,2016).

The multifaceted and strategic cooperation between India-Afghanistan continued to grow mainly through the visits of CEO in June 2018 and September 2018 further strengthening diplomatic engagement between the two nations and met various India's official to discuss various aspects of bilateral relations including development cooperation, security, and regional issues etc. New Delhi has assured of assistance and cooperation in peace and reconciliation of the region. Afghan community fully supported India's efforts in rebuilding and reconciliation and Pakistan strictly opposed this.

### **Looking Forward: Taliban Takeover**

More than three years after America's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, has brought a new change for the global community as well as having impact on geopolitical, geostrategic, and regional dynamics. The Taliban has moved from an insurgent power group to a working government in Afghanistan. New Delhi's move towards Kabul remained to be directed by its historical relations, friendship with its people and relevant UN declarations. The India's personnel in embassy in Kabul came back and shut down in August 2021, in the aftermath of the takeover by the Taliban. Meanwhile, since June 2022, a technical team is in the Kabul embassy and is operating in respect of humanitarian assistance and other situations (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). Whereas, on its part Taliban diplomatically and economically isolated made a serious effort to engage with New Delhi to seek its continued support from India. Despite of this, India continues to support and assist Afghanistan by providing the aid approximately around US\$ 24 million for the year 2022-2023 (Shende,2023).

Although, certain previously ongoing reconstruction and rebuilding projects have been paused in the post-US withdrawal partly due to adverse security conditions. However, in a trilateral meeting held in May 2023 between Pakistan's Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari and Foreign Minister Qin Gang of China and Afghanistan's Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan at Islamabad. In this meeting, a decision was taken to encompass the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan and this could have stimulated the great strategic game among the major powers in the region (Mishra,2024). With effect from 23<sup>rd</sup> November,2023 the embassy of Afghanistan was shut down permanently and stopped functioning from 30<sup>th</sup> September and diplomatic staff left India (Bhattacharjee,2023).

While going through backdrop in 2021, India hosted a regional security conference on Afghanistan and Pakistan refused to attend the conference and China avoided the meeting. India chooses collective approach to deal with the issue of security and instability arising from Kabul. Further during in December 2022, India's National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval, hosted a special meeting with his counterparts in Central Asia. The security situation in Afghanistan was one among the crucial discussion in a meeting. In addition to this, a joint communiqué was issued on security issues, including Afghanistan and combatting terrorism. The second meeting was held in Kazakhstan in October 2023, and Afghanistan was one of the key issues discussed in the meeting (Chawla,2024).

A short time ago, an India's official delegation led by J.P. Singh, joint secretary the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) India, recently visited Afghanistan and met high officials including Taliban's acting defence minister Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob and deliberated ways to expand relations between the two sides. In his briefing, the MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal elaborated that J.P. Singh also met with its Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, discussing bilateral relations and reportedly requested visa facilitation for Afghan traders to

improve trade interactions with India. The delegation addressed humanitarian assistance as well as discussions were also held on Afghans using Chabahar port for its trade and commerce across the world (Seli,2024). Finally, in a connected meeting with former President Hamid Karzai, underscored the position of concentrating on education and training for Afghan youth, developing trade, and make things easier in travel among the two states. Although New Delhi has not formally recognised the Taliban regime. However, Indian embassy in Kabul remains operational with a technical team stationed there to assist humanitarian aid. New Delhi has been following cautious and strategic approach in dealing with Kabul after the takeover of Taliban in Afghanistan.

### **Concluding Remarks**

India-Afghanistan relations in the post-9/11 period, until the return of Taliban Regime 2.0 represent a mixture of hope and strategic challenges. India's constant efforts to foster peace, stability and development in Afghanistan reflects its commitment to foster the welfare of Afghan community and its desire to counter the threats posed by terrorism and instability. However, the evolving dynamics in the region and global geopolitics, especially the influence of Pakistan, China, US often constrained India's Strategic space. The Taliban's return to power stances a noteworthy issue to New Delhi for the future engagement with Afghanistan. However, India's historical linkages with Afghanistan coupled with its commitment to the Afghan people suggest that India shall continue to support Afghanistan stability and development through its recalibrated approach in the new geopolitical context.

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