

India - Afghanistan Relations in Post-Taliban Era

RAJAN JHA

Guest Faculty

ARSD College, University of Delhi, New Delhi (India)

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INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan-India relation is being studied by various people from various angles. The fall of Taliban and the Hamid Karzai taking over was a significant moment in the long history of Afghan-India engagements. In 2011, both countries signed the strategic deal. Against these backdrops, it is important to understand evolution of new-found confidence between both the countries.

Afghanistan-India relationship goes back to ancient times when neither India nor Afghanistan existed as nations. They shared close cultural, economic and political bonds. Afghanistan, known as Gandhara, has been mentioned in the Mahabharata. During the great Ashoka's reign, Afghanistan was the northern border of his empire. In the subsequent period Afghanistan remained the same till the advent of Islam and Arab and Persian Empire. Nevertheless, the cultural, economic and political exchanges remained as strong as before even during the medieval period.

A case in point is Gandhar form of art, which was commonly in fashion during the medieval period. In the subsequent period, aggressors to India came via Afghanistan and established their rule. This created an unbreakable bond between both the regions throughout the medieval period.

This was only disturbed when Afghanistan became a modern state in the eighteenth century when Afghanistan-India relationship became very hostile as British Empire and India and Russian Empire were at loggerheads. After three Anglo-Afghan wars, Afghanistan was recognized as an independent state in

1919.

The state to state relationship between Afghanistan and India started only after the Indian independence in 1947. During the British period Afghanistan was a close neighbour as they had common borders called Durand Line which was divided at the time of India's independence. It created hostility between Afghanistan and India with Pakistan being the provocateur. This also created a geographical distance between both the countries. Yet, Afghanistan tried to maintain its cordial relationship with India. It was not only opposed to Pakistan's membership of UN but also to its position on Kashmir from day one. In the beginning, the relationship was based on the principles of non-alignment and Panchsheel.

The first twenty years of Afghanistan-India relationship was one of cordiality and mutual trust, based on liberal and idealistic understandings of world politics and beyond any explicit immediate interest. The cultural and economic exchanges remained intact despite creation of Pakistan no longer allowing free exchange of people and goods between both the countries.

One major break in the relationship between both the countries was the 1978 invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. The establishment of pro-Soviet regime in the country was welcomed by Indian government but when the Soviet army moved in to support it against the domestic opposition then Indian position became little untenable. India still tried to maintain its diplomatic ties with the regime in Afghanistan and throughout the existence of the PDPA rule till 1992. However, due to internal instability in all these years Afghanistan and India

were not able to maintain any dynamism in their relationship all these years. When a new regime came to power in 1992 under Gulbudin Hikmatyar, it too maintained the formal diplomatic ties between both the countries.

It was only when the Taliban came to power in 1996 defeating forces of the Northern Alliance, that Afghanistan-India relationship was terminated. During the five years of Taliban rule, Afghanistan and India maintained no formal contacts and except for the 1999 Kandhar episode they had no interaction at all. This was the worst period of the Afghanistan-India relationship. The reason for the absence of relationship between both the countries was Taliban's fanatic beliefs, its hostility towards countries not ruled by non-Muslims and its closeness with Pakistan.

After September 2001 attacks on US by the terrorist forces sheltered in Afghanistan US waged a 'global war on terror.' With the help of Northern Alliance it was able to dethrone the Taliban in 2001 itself. A new regime under the leadership of Hamid Karzai was established. Karzai was considered close to India too and this led to the reestablishment of Afghanistan-India diplomatic ties in the same year. Afghanistan-India ties since 2001 have been very strong in political, economic and strategic fields. Both the countries have realised the potential of other countries in their political and economic survival and progress. The present study was an attempt to understand these three aspects of the Afghan-India relationship.

Afghanistan-India political relationships have flourished since 2001 despite the obvious opposition put by Pakistan and other geo-strategic constraints. Afghanistan is trying to recreate the old political understanding with India at international forums and therefore building a close political relationship with it. India sees Afghanistan as an important country in the region with which political relationship is required. Despite the constraints posed by geographical distance and ongoing internal instability in Afghanistan both the countries have established their diplomatic missions in each other and their leaders are paying visits to each other regularly. Both the countries have regular contacts and consultations on several internal and global issues as well. Afghanistan wants to adopt the political model of India and therefore it is learning the functioning and structure of Indian political system. India is helping in this endeavour. India has helped in the reconstruction of the Afghan Parliament and training the officials in the democratic process. India is one of the biggest donors to Afghanistan and it has

established five different consulates in five different regions of the country. Despite all the positives between both the countries there are some basic problems which need to be addressed. One of the most important problems is Afghanistan's inability to control the internal unrest in the country created by Taliban and other terrorist groups like Haqqani network. Until there is stability in Afghanistan there will always be a fear among the Indian diplomatic circles that Taliban or any such force can control the power tomorrow and create hurdles in the political ties between both the countries.

Afghanistan-India economic relation is growing rapidly. India is investing in the different sectors of Afghan economy and helping it to rebuild the infrastructure there. The recent discovery of deposits of various natural resources in the country has given more incentives to Indian business and industries to go and invest in Afghanistan. India has already become one of the biggest trade partners of Afghanistan. There are attempts to diversify the items in bilateral trade as till date the number of items is very limited. The trade between both the countries is restricted to few items like agricultural products and some basic consumer goods. There is a big scope for the diversification of the trade items between both the countries and India is trying to do that as well. Recently the TAPI project has commenced. This will be a very good opportunity to create a dynamic economic relationship between both the countries. Growing Indian economic strength and untapped natural resources of Afghanistan will be complementary to each other's economic development in future.

Afghanistan-India relationship has one major strategic aspect as well. The geostrategic location of Afghanistan has always attracted great powers in international politics. The Great Game of the last century between British Empire and Russian Empire and the New Great Game among different countries in world politics today including the US are examples of this. The reason for the great power's attraction toward Afghanistan is its centrality in location. Afghanistan was a buffer between Russian and British Empires in the last century and today it is located in the region where interests of Russia, China and US converge. Afghanistan today is the main source of terrorism in Central Asia. It's the main source of illegal Drug trade in the world and it has a large deposit of untapped natural resources. Besides all these Afghanistan neighbours countries such as Pakistan and Iran. All this is creating a race among the

great and even emerging powers in international politics to get maximum influence in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan-India strategic relationship too should be seen in the context of this competition. Afghanistan wants to have a strong reliable partner in international politics and sees India as one. India is worried about terrorism in its own Kashmir province and wants to stop any possible source of training and finance for them. Pakistan is competing to have greater influence in Afghanistan for opposite purposes. Hence, India is very seriously pursuing its strategic mission in Afghanistan. Both the countries have already signed a strategic treaty in 2011. They have identified numbers of subjects and issues for their strategic cooperation. Afghanistan and India are trying to find several regional partners in the pursuance of their mutual strategic interests. SCO has been seen as one such partner by both the countries. Since, US and ISAF will be most probably withdrawing from Afghanistan in 2014 it would be a great challenge for all the members of SCO to manage the stability of the country and prevent it to fall in the hands of insurgents or Taliban. That will ruin all the economic and strategic calculations of all the powers in the region including India. SCO is seen as an alternative force to prevent such eventuality.

Afghanistan-India relation since 2001 to 2011 is one of the most important political developments in international politics and in the Indian foreign policy. There are three arguments that can be put forward on the nature of Afghanistan-India relation. The first one is that “close historical and cultural ties have had great influence on Afghanistan-India relations”. The historical closeness between two countries created a faith among their decision makers about each other. It moved them to take initiatives for the restoration of relationships whenever it got disrupted due to some reason. The historical links have been quoted by various political commentators and scholars for the present state of relationship between Afghanistan and India. The level of trust and confidence is based on the historical linkages. Though realists would not agree with it, there are other schools of thought in international relations which agree that historical closeness makes relationships warm.

The second argument is that the “existing trade and investment potential between two countries has not yet been tapped to its full potential”. This is more than obvious after the study of the economic relationship between both the countries. India is one of the biggest economic powers

of the world today. It has a huge consumer base. Afghanistan is rich in natural resources and is located on the very crucial trade route. Still the overall trade between both the countries is negligible. India is the fourth largest destination of imports for Afghanistan and though India is the largest destination of Afghan export the volume of trade is very small. Indian investments in infrastructure building in Afghanistan is though large enough there is still a scope to increase it further. Indian companies are not able to compete with Chinese companies in crucial oil and gas exploration in the country.

Third argument talks about political aspect of the relationship. It argues that, “the post-Taliban regime in Afghanistan has intention to use its relations with India for its own legitimacy and survival”. Afghan government has expressed its intentions to follow the Indian model of democracy on more than one occasion. India is helping it to build various political institutions and training the personnel. Afghan policy makers are worried about the stability of their country as Taliban and other terrorist and insurgent groups are still strong. They have control over a substantial part of the country and posing challenges to the existing institutions and structures. In this context, Afghanistan has signed the strategic treaty with India in which India has promised to help and maintain the law and order in the country along with providing training of its armed and police forces. India is also building Afghan parliament. Hamid Karzai wants to see escalation in Indian engagement in Afghanistan. This Indian engagement in Afghanistan provides crucial leverage to Afghan administration vis-à-vis Pakistan’s intentions in the country. Pakistan is trying to help insurgents in Afghanistan so that a level of instability also remains there which can help it to further its own interests. Afghanistan is trying to counter the Pakistan strategy while getting India involved in the country. Hence, it can be seen from even the realist perspective that Afghanistan’s closeness with India is not only based on some historical links but there are concrete interests of both the countries involved.

Afghan-India relationship will be much better in future if both the countries try to show more confidence in each other. Afghanistan needs to see the potentiality of Indian economy and political might for its future. It should try to provide much more scope for Indian companies to come and invest in the country and control the anti-Indian elements from creating any hurdles. India needs to see the rationale in becoming more active in the country. It will not only give it the necessary leverage

vis-à-vis Pakistan it will also provide it enough power to influence the countries of the Central Asian region.

The Afghan-India relationship is a classic example of liberal understanding of the behaviours of states in international politics. The interests are the defining features of the relationship but that is not all. India wants a trade route and a Pakistan hostile state as a friend. It wants to use the untapped natural resources of the country for its growing needs and therefore it is investing heavily in the rebuilding of the country. The so-called philanthropy, argued by some idealists, is just a chimera to mislead or at best to create a favourable public opinion. The Indian aid to schools and hospitals are ways to further its basic interests in the country. That is to have a counter to Pakistan, to control the menace of terrorism and to get and transit route to Central Asia. Indian companies are seeing lucrative business in the rebuilding of the country. The liberal ideas of trade as a bridge between two countries can also be seen as explanatory enough to understand the relations between two countries in the context of SCO. Realist explanations based on total and brutal calculation of interest does not satisfactorily provide the answers to understand the Afghan-India relationship. At best it can be a helping tool.

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