

INDIA'S APPROACH TOWARDS AFGHANISTAN IN 21ST CENTURY: A GREAT THEATRE OF UPS AND DOWN

Dr. Ashok Kumar Atri

Associate Professor Political Sc
R.K.S.D. (P.G.) College, Kaithal, Haryana
Email-Id:

Abstract : This article examines India's policy challenges and interests in Afghanistan after the recent takeover by the Taliban. It provides a historical perspective of India-Afghanistan relations and the geo-strategic and geo-political implications of the current situation. It argues that India needs to adopt a proactive and pragmatic approach to safeguard its security and economic interests, as well as to support the Afghan people and regional stability.

Keywords: India, Afghanistan, Taliban, geo-strategy, geo-politics, security, economy, regional stability

1.0 Introduction

Recent takeover of Afghanistan by Taliban again has not surprised the entire World community but also created a paradox for the policy makers' to deal the emerging situation. India's policy orientation has also found a huge setback in Afghanistan; the former has some considerable interests due to variety of reasons. Pakistan's anti India posture, to protect economic initiatives taken in last few years, China's policy of encirclement are the key issues that reflect India's concerns in this changed scenario in Afghanistan. India's policy has found a huge jolt after this sudden and dramatic change in Afghanistan. The former has called back the entire official and closed its embassy in Kabul. All the ongoing activities have been stopped till then. Hence in this bizarre situation, policy makers' seems to be adopting wait and watch policy in making any final decision regarding India's Afghan policy. But question arises, for how much long time India will keep mum as a mere spectator as it has some considerable interests and stakes here. Most interesting fact that comes to forefront regarding India's position at Afghanistan's government level in this twenty first century that former considered as friend as well foe in a span of just few years.

1.1 Afghanistan's importance

Afghanistan importance has enhanced considerably, Due to its geo-strategic and geo-political implications for Indian security. The Afghanistan has the importance not only as a historical buffer zone but serve also as a convenient transit route connecting other major regions. Its location alone is a good indicator of its political and strategic significance. Due to its strategic location and demographic composition, Afghanistan has become vital for global politics in general and India in particular.ⁱ It remained arid shatter zone of endemic conflict in post second world war period. Ethnicity and its geo-strategic position are the key complexity in Afghanistanⁱⁱ. An understanding of these aspects is vital for its overriding impact on external policy of Afghanistan.

1.2 Historical Perspective

India has no direct border sharing with Afghanistan, yet both share common history and interests. Land-locked Afghanistan has always been the traditional invasion route to the Indian subcontinent. Its passes of Khyber and Bolan have remained the entry point of most of the invader i.e. Huns, Sakas, Mongols and Mughals to India. In British period, both have experienced same colonial rivalerly and its bitter taste.ⁱⁱⁱ They remained the great supporter of non-alignment movement in post-Second-World War period. India was the only South Asian country to recognize Afghanistan as a communist state after Soviet invasion. India provided strategic help to US led forces in dismantling 'Taliban' rule from Afghanistan. After that, India is becoming largest Asian country to provide reconstruction aid to this war-torn country. All these facts have contributed to understand India's stakes in Afghanistan in the twenty first century. In order to make an objective analysis of all these initiatives, it is better to start with brief acknowledgement of their relationship from cold war period.

Afghanistan had started to experience political instability at domestic front in the decade of 1970s. King Mohammed Zahir Shah was deposed by his cousin Daoud Khan who took control of the government. After that this power game

became more complicated as Mohammed Daoud Khan was also overthrown by Noor Mohammed Taraki in a coup and became President. Hafizullah Amin became the power centre under this regime. He tried to enforce total control over tribal society with a brutal and violent handed fashion. It gave birth to widespread revolt among the masses. Simultaneously, Soviet presence and influence had been growing in Afghanistan in this decade. The ongoing power struggle between Hafizullah Amin and Taraki-Babrak Karmal coalition paid the way to Soviet military invasion in 1979. Soviet Union imposed communist government in Afghanistan. It destroyed the traditional neutrality of Afghanistan. With the active participation of USA and its supported Pakistan's ISI, Afghanistan was transformed into hotbed of Jihad ideology after that. Afghanistan turned out to be a failed state from a buffer state in war like situation.^{iv}

On the other side, India was also passing through a phase of political instability in mid-seventy. State emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975 had created influx in political system. This situation gave birth to some serious questions about Indian domestic democratic set up. After her defeat in General election, new government headed by Morarji Desai has remained busy in internal politics. India was not in a position to play any role in Afghanistan to a great extent. The political regime could not give much attention to its foreign relations in its short term. India's policy towards Afghanistan either was influenced by its alienation towards Soviet Union or no policy prevailed at that time.^v

India was the only South Asian country to recognize communist government headed by Najibullah after the Soviet invasion of 1979. It fully supported and provided financial aid to Afghanistan government during this period. Although, India supported this government till the takeover of Afghanistan by Taliban, yet India could not do much more in bilateral relations. It was not in a position to play any role there due to economic and strategic constraints. Indian leadership also showed some reluctant approach towards Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan. It took the stand of neutrality and gave emphasis on the recall of Soviet Army from Afghanistan without any delay. It was understood that the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi wanted to retain its non-Align posture in third world countries and wanted to maintain some distance towards Soviet Union. It created some confusion in the policy orientation towards Afghanistan. Besides, situation in Afghanistan worsen day by day with the direct confrontation between Soviet Guard and Afghan Mujahideen aided by foreign powers. The rapid politicization of Islam and emergence of a militant Islamic fundamentalist movement took place in this country after that. India's relations remained in a situation of adjournment with Afghanistan in this hostile scenario.

2.0 The emergence of Taliban

The conflict situation in this country has taken a new turn following the Soviet demise. Afghanistan has continued to be remaining epicentre of massive military confrontations after that. Struggle among different ethnic and tribal groups starts primarily in order to win control over the central power. Religious extremist forces led by Burahnuydin Rabbani supported by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and UAE seized power there. But this area remained hotspot of ethnic conflict and rivalry in this war-ravaged Afghanistan.

The phenomenon of 'Taliban' came to fore-front in Afghanistan in the year of 1994. The continuous bleeding and war like situation ultimately led to a crippled and seriously injured economy and political system. India foreign policy had no space in this bizarre and changed situation due to emerging role of Pakistan. 'Taliban' and 'Al Qaida' supported by Pakistan took over the reins of Afghanistan. It brought complete breakdown in Indian presence there. India lost all political and diplomatic links with Afghanistan. The destruction of the 'Bamiyan Buddha Monuments' and hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight 814 and its landing in Kandahar had reflected the nefarious design of hostile 'Taliban' towards India. It led to outrage and furious response from Indian side as it became key supporter of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance and provided economic and strategic aid. India also offered its all type of strategic support for the US led coalition forces in the war against Taliban in 2001 in the light of 9/11 tragedy. It led to overthrow the oppressive rule of Taliban from Afghanistan.^{vi}

3.0 Indian dilemma

In post-cold war period, Afghanistan draws special attention and importance in Indian perspective in the light of its deteriorating relations with Pakistan on the one hand and the emergence of fundamentalist 'Taliban' on the other hand. These new emerging trends in this region are remained bone of contention and going to provide problems for India's security. Besides, Afghanistan's importance in Indian perspective is also perceived due to its role as a transit route provider towards enriched Central Asia's natural resources

Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan and rise of fundamentalist 'Taliban' had changed all contours of India's foreign policy in the late twentieth century. But after the demise of Taliban in 2001, Afghanistan has emerged as the core area in Indian foreign policy objectives. India had done a lot of to rearrange its ties with Afghanistan. The latter has

also shown great maturity and close understanding towards Indian perspectives. After the demise of Taliban rule in November 2001 and establishment of interim Government in Kabul, bitter experiences of Taliban regime made India to rethink Afghanistan with more cautious approach. Since then, India has been engaging with Afghanistan at bilateral and multilateral platform. The return of Afghanistan has raised some serious questions regarding this hard earned platform by India. All the initiatives taken by India in this war ravaged country have become irrelevant for time being. An understanding of these aspects is vital to understand India's stake here.

3.0 India's Initiatives

India established diplomatic links with the up gradation of Indian Liaison Officer to Embassy there. It also established for Consulates mission in Mazar-e-Sharif, Herat, Kandahar and Jalalabad. It has played an important role in the reconstruction and rehabilitation program in Afghanistan. India is also actively participating in various meetings that concluded for the strengthening of Afghanistan setup. These efforts could be analyzed in these broad spectrums.

India was among the 21 countries that participated in the meetings held at New York in November and December 2001, in which the issue of interim authority and reconstruction of Afghanistan was the main agenda. Indian special envoy Satish Lamba participated as observer in Bonn Conference held from November 27 to December 5, 2001. Arun Shouri, minister of Disinvestment led the Indian delegation in the Tokyo Ministerial meeting. India actively took part in every 'Steering Group meetings of Donors' and Afghan Support Group meetings held time to time.

India, with the collaboration of UNDP, organized a Joint Conference on South-South Cooperation and Reconstruction of Afghanistan in May 2002. Foreign Minister of India attended the 'Friends of Afghanistan meeting' in September 2002. Foreign Secretary led the Indian delegation to the International Conference 'Afghanistan and the International community-A partnership for the Future' held in Berlin on March31-April 1, 2004. India also reiterated its commitment to support the development of Afghanistan in the recently held various Afghanistan Conferences in Istanbul (November 2011), Bonn (December 2011), Kabul (June 2012) and Tokyo (July 2012).^{vii}

3.1 High level visits

Since 2002, large number of exchanges of high level visits of delegates-governmental, private, commercial, entrepreneurial-have been undertaken between the two since 2002 to explore the possibilities of mutual grounds for enhancing cooperation. President Karzai has visited India in 2002,, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014. India granted million of dollar for reconstruction work in Afghanistan. Besides, various agreements were also envisaged in the field of civil aviation, road construction, media, rural development and education in these visits. These frequent visits of President Karzai to India have reflected the real political and strategic partnership between the two countries in these years.

Form Indian side Prime Minister Manmohan Singh paid reciprocal visits to Afghanistan in 2005 and 2011. India again provided grant in aid of US\$650 millions for the economic development of Afghanistan. Three important agreements were also signed in the field of small development project, healthcare and medical science and agriculture research and education.

At ministerial level, Foreign Ministers of India Jaswant Singh (2001), Yashwant Sinha (2002), Natwar Singh (2004) and Pranab Mukherjee (2007) were on the top of visitors list to Afghanistan. Other visitors, MoS (EA) E. Ahmed (2005), MoS (Tourism) Renuka Chowdhury (2005) and Saifuddin Soz Minister of Water Resources (2007) also visited Afghanistan. Nation Security Advisor M.K. Narayanan and A. Rehman Khan Deputy Chairman, Rajya Sabha, visits took place in same year 2007.

While from the Afghanistan side Yunus Qanooni Interior Minister, Mirwais Sadiq Minister of Labour and Communication and Abdullah Abullah Foreign Minister paid state visits in India in the same year in 2001. Besides, visits of Mohd. Arif Noorzai Minister of Light Industry, Thethen Afghan Minister of Civil Aviation, General Dostum Deputy Defence Minister, Seyyed Hussain Anwari, Zalmay Rasool Minister of Civil Aviation, Defence Minister Marshal Fahim, Finance Minister Arsala, Educatin Minister Rasool Amin, Justice Minister Karimi, Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, Commerce Minister Sayed Mustafa Kazmi and Education Minister Yunus Qanooni took place in year of 2002. These frequent visits showed the goodwill gesture of Afghan leadership towards India.

In the year of 2003, Communication Minister Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, Transport Minister Seyed Ali Javed, Minister of Civil Aviation Mirwais Sadiq was on the top of visitor list to India. These goodwill visits remained continue in the year to come as Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah visited again in 2004. Zalmay Rassoul,

National Security Advisor to Afghanistan Government visited India in 2005. Minister of Parliamentary Affairs Farooq Wardak and Foreign Minister Rangin Dadfar Spanta visited India in 2006.^{viii}

3.2 Financial aid and assistance

India has provided US \$ 2 billion approximately economic aid and assistance to Afghanistan in these years. Besides, it has already invested US\$ 10.8 billion in Afghanistan's infrastructural projects as of 2012. For a country like India, this is a significant contribution despite economic crunch. India's support and collaboration extends to rebuilding of air links, power plants, health, education and transport. It is also providing training to civil servants, diplomats and police and giving scholarships to students.

India has established Indian Medical Missions in four major cities i.e. Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kandahar and Herat for the free medical service and medicines. Gifting of ambulances, voltage stabilizer, heating and plumbing systems and setting up of the maternity ward were the other initiatives taken in this regard.

India also made arrangements for the distribution of 1 million MT of wheat's high energy Biscuits in 2 million school children across Afghanistan daily. Besides, wheat was also supplied for production in agriculture sector. 614 agriculture scholarships in the disciplines of B.Sc, M.Sc and Ph.D have been made distributed under the ICAR scheme till now. India also agreed for setting up a National Agriculture University at Kabul recently. A 'task force' has already been appointed under the leadership of leading agriculture scientist MS Swaminathan to explore this project. It is likely to start functioning very soon.

In education sector, India reconstructed and renovated the 'Habibia' school in Kabul. A computer laboratory is also established there recently. India also awarded 500 scholarships and training slots each to the Afghan students annually under the ICCR and ITEC projects during these years. India is also collaborated in settings up of India-Afghanistan vocational training centre for training 3,000 students in the trades of carpentry, plumbing, welding, masonry and tailoring. Indian NGO has established Women's Vocational Training Centre in Bagh-e-Zanana for training of 1000 women in the areas of garment making, nursery plantation, and food processing and marketing. 30 Indian Civil Servants were deputed in Afghanistan government institutions for the training and developmental activities. Jawaharlal Nehru Chair of Indian Studies at Kabul University is also established in these days.^{ix}

During the visit of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2011, 1000 buses donated to Afghanistan for smooth transport facilities in Kabul and other municipalities. It also gave 500 tractors for the Afghan farmers.

3.3 Development of various Projects

India has taken on a number of medium and large infrastructure projects in Afghanistan. The Indian army border roads organisation constructed a land road in the north-west region connecting the city of Delaram to Zarang in 2009. It has provided Afghanistan a direct access to the Iranian port of Chabahar. It will reduce the Afghanistan's sea route dependence on Pakistan.

India also constructed 220kv DC transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul for hurdle free supply of electricity. It also established a 220/110/20 kv sub-stations at Chimtala, Doshi and Charikar. India's role in construction of Salma Dam in Herat and Afghanistan Parliament and Indira Gandhi Hospital in Kabul showed the real involvement in Afghanistan and greatly praised by all section of society there. India also expanded national TV network by providing an uplink from Kabul and downlinks in all 34 provincial capitals. Besides, India also engaged in fostering community-based 'Small Development Projects' in vulnerable border areas, in the fields of agriculture, rural development, education, health and vocational training etc. with the total cost of approximately US\$ 19,785,706 till 2008.^x

3.1.1 Trade

India's trade with Afghanistan in 2006-07 was of \$216 million. It showed some growth in the years to come. It reached at US\$ 588 million in the financial year of 2012-13. It showed further growth in the next financial years also. Total trade reached at the value of US\$ 684 million in the year of 2014-15. India is one of the major export destinations of Afghanistan's goods with, although it is very modest figure in volume. It is considered that with the opening of the Chabahar port in Iran, Afghanistan's trade could make steady growth with outside world particularly with India. India already constructed road in interior Afghanistan to get linked with this port.

3.4 Some other initiatives

India proposed Afghanistan's membership in SAARC in 2005 and finally included as the eighth member of SAFTA and SAARC in 2007 during New Delhi Summit. Afghanistan will receive the benefit of zero import duty on its export to India and get linked with other South Asian Countries also.

India had signed a strategic partnership agreement in 2011 with Afghanistan and formalized a framework for cooperation in areas of political & security cooperation; trade & economic cooperation; capacity development and education; and social, cultural, civil society & people to people relations. It gave a major boost in their bilateral relations. India will provide assistance in rebuilding Afghanistan's infrastructure and institutions, encouraging investment in natural resources, and support for an Afghanistan-led, Afghanistan-owned, broad-based and inclusive process of peace and reconciliation. Indian private sector, thus, has been investing in the Hijigak iron ore reserves for the long-term investment and sustainable development. Besides, a steel plant by SAIL, and an 800 MW power plant are likely to be completed very soon there.

India hosted the 'Delhi Investment Summit on Afghanistan' in June 2012 to forge cross-country partnerships for investment there. Around 350 delegates from India, China, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan participated in this event. It was the pioneer effort done by India in promoting direct investment in this economically starved state of Afghanistan. India also hosted Senior Officials Meetings of the 'Heart of Asia Countries' in New Delhi in January 2014 for the promotion of trade, commerce and investment process in Afghanistan.

With the change of regime in Kabul, the new President Ashraf Ghani sought to realign their relations with its neighbours. His changed stance towards Pakistan and China raised some serious questions regarding India's position and added worries to its positive gesture. Although, the visit of President Ashraf Ghani in April 2015, and his open criticism of Pakistan's hostile policy towards Afghanistan recently has brought some sight of relief in Indian camp. In this visit Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi reiterated India's commitment to strengthening bilateral relation with Afghanistan. India also delivered three advanced country-build 'Cheetal' helicopters desperately needed by Afghan National Army (ANA).^{xi}

5.0 Conclusion

India's interests in Afghanistan are linked with peace and stability there. If Afghanistan has a broad based functional government and ethnic harmony in demographic setup that serve at a great level to Indian objectives. The success achieved during the past few years in the growth of bilateral cooperation is ample proof of it. But India could not take it as a guarantee due to flexibility and fluidity in the nature of Afghanistan scenario. The resurgence of Taliban and the continuing and deepening political instability there are worrisome for India. The recent terrorist attacks on Indian embassy and workers may justify India's stand on terrorism from across the border remains its main concern. It adds the burden in its policy orientation towards Afghanistan. India's basic thrust towards this region should be one of positive engagement as the relaxation of tension in the post-Taliban period is likely to provide more opportunity for strengthening of bilateral ties in a constructive manner. India should realize that stability can result in Afghanistan only if all the major actors including Pakistan have a stake in its stability, growth and prosperity. Hence, India should favorable respond to initiatives to evolve any regional formation for the sake of economic and political stability there. However, the changing global and regional politics, along with the changed domestic scenario in Afghanistan are likely to determine the future course of their relationship.

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