

India's Growing Presence in Afghanistan: Manifestation of its Soft Power and Diplomacy

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Introduction

The great game played out in Afghanistan has complex and intricate geostrategic dynamics, which invariably have been a factor for multiple internal and external players shaping, constraining or affecting diplomatic, political and military policies of the region. The great game has not only interested global powers but has also attracted powerful regional players to create a sphere of influence in the country. Various countries, depending on their goals, perspective, degree of influence, and foreign policy objectives have adopted different sets of policies in the region. The Afghanistan problem has turned out to be the outcome of the competing interests of many countries. The complexity of the great game has often forced regional and global players to shape and reshape their approach.

Two countries, India and Pakistan, important players and critical determinants of the outcome of the ongoing war in Afghanistan have adopted more or less uniform but dissimilar policy in Afghanistan, often forcing some countries to change or modify their policy.

Trump's new policy in South Asia in general and Afghanistan in particular is perhaps the best example of the changing nature of engagement that has been induced by the intricacies of the geopolitical factors in the region. Trump's new South Asia policy suggests the end of illusion about Pakistan among the policy makers in Washington. Unlike, Barrack Obama's 2009 policy for the region in which he had shown trust in Pakistan by declaring that the future of Afghanistan is inextricably linked to the future of its neighbour, Pakistan, and calling on Islamabad to "demonstrate its commitment to rooting out Al-Qaeda and the violent extremists

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within its borders”, Trump appears to have realised Pakistan’s double game in Afghanistan. The realisation has come from the fact that nothing has changed for good and in fact things have worsened in last eight years.

Similarly, there is a substantial shift in China’s foreign policy. Initially, China was reluctant to interfere in Afghanistan affairs; however the growing influence of the US and India has forced China to reformulate its policy. It now actively participates in Afghan peace processes and other strategically crucial activities along with Russia, Iran and Pakistan.

For India, stability in Afghanistan is always crucial to its national interest. Its policy, however, remains reflective of its core values and belief system of non-interference and non-coercion. With regard to the dynamics, its complexities and multiple internal and external factors, it is imperative to understand India’s foreign policy towards Afghanistan, the factors shaping the uniformity and the possible changes.

India Banking Upon Its Policy of Soft Power and Economic Aid

India has been able to maintain strong ties with Afghanistan based on not only historical and cultural links but also strong strategic ties it has built over the years. The core of India’s foreign policy has been manifestation of its soft power, with notable historical elements of prefiguration. It has expanded its soft power with policy of providing economic incentives to Afghanistan in an assimilative manner rather than coercive manner. Above all, the role India is playing in Afghanistan is substantially different from the role played by other major regional and global powers, and its involvement goes beyond just government to government relations.

Relations between the two countries became stronger after the Government of India and the Royal Government of Afghanistan, recognising the ancient ties which have existed between the two countries, signed Treaty of Friendship in 1950. India’s involvement in Afghanistan was initially marked by technical assistance in various fields, beyond which it could do little. The lack of geographic access and the absence of economic instruments severely limited India’s ability to play any credible role.¹

During the Taliban era, particularly during 1997-1999, India was among the top 35 aid donors contributing to the assistance programmes for Afghans. In 2001, after the Taliban government fell, the then Indian Foreign Minister Mr Jaswant Singh flew to Kabul to welcome the new government, not packed with arms or food but crammed with tapes of Bollywood movies and music, which were quickly distributed across the city.² India's involvement in Afghanistan noticeably was one of caution and restraint evolving from uncertainty over various issues.

The two primary issues that initially shaped Indian interests and strategies in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban government were : impact of extraordinary US military presence in Afghanistan on their strategic interest and strategic involvement of Pakistan in the war against terrorism. India saw US's military presence close to its border both as empowering and limiting.³ Similarly, Pakistan's presence as crucial partner of the international forces against the Al-Qaeda and the Taliban was a matter of concern for India. For India, it was a matter of a promoter of extremism and terrorism becoming a critical partner against fundamentalism – a fallible paradox of geostrategic calculation of the US in 2001. India despite its geopolitical and territorial limitations continued supporting Afghanistan in public health, small-scale industries, and education.

However, Indo-Afghan historical ties got a boost after the two countries signed Strategic Partnership in 2011. India, by 2011 was fast turning into economic powerhouse and was rapidly expanding its imprint across the globe. Its growing economic and diplomatic mark helped it to put its core concerns and interests across as a powerful nation involved in South Asia. India is now taken more seriously than it was taken a decade back.

India expanded its footprint in the region by supporting various pro-people initiatives. India's investment in the region now encompasses wide variety of activities including helping to train Afghan civil servants, diplomats and police; rebuilding of air links; investment in agricultural developments; building infrastructure power plants and investing in health and education sectors.

In the field of education alone India is the favourite destination for the Afghan students. The impact of Indian education system is easily perceptible as Indian cities such as New Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, Bangalore and Bhubaneswar attract thousands of Afghan

youth for higher studies. There are more than 16,000 students from Afghanistan studying in India. It has nearly tripled in the last five years (the number of Afghan students were nearly 5500 in 2011). Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), an autonomous body under administrative control of Ministry of External Affairs, provides a total of 1000 scholarships to Afghan nationals to pursue undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD courses through Indian universities.

Similarly, the Indian Government understands the need for good medical facilities for a country ravaged by conflict. India is favourite destination for those seeking quality medical services at affordable rate. In 2015, Bangladeshis and Afghans accounted for 34 per cent of foreign patients, the maximum share, primarily due to their own poor healthcare infrastructure and close proximity to India.⁴ Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement that immediate medical visas at home will be issued to patients from South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries has substantially increased the number of patients coming from Afghanistan.

Of late, the Indian Government has understood the importance of promoting its image of soft power through effective utilisation of tools like economic incentives and public diplomacy. For the last one decade India has consistently used the various components of soft power to further its national interest in Afghanistan. Last year, India had taken up 116 High Impact Community Development Projects in 31 provinces of Afghanistan. Recently, it has inaugurated the Afghan-India Friendship Dam, earlier known as Salma Dam. This highlights the kind of role India is playing in Afghanistan.

The operationalisation of the Chabahar Port, as an alternative inland transit route to Afghanistan via Iran is perfect manifestation of India's growing commitment to continue with its development work in Afghanistan despite hurdles. It also illustrates India's willingness to engage with various stakeholders in order to promote India's economic engagement with Afghanistan. The alternative trade route is crucial for Indo-Afghan trade, ever since Pakistan, in order to deprive India of any strategic gain in Afghanistan, denied India direct land route gateway, the shortest and the most economical one for India through Pakistan to enter Afghanistan and Central Asia. This makes the achievement unique, particularly,

in the context of changing contours of conflict in the region; its geo-political impact and India's continuous strategic and diplomatic endeavor to counter it.

The rise of India as a soft power has for very long emerged independently of the government policies. As aptly suggested by Mr Shashi Tharoor, former Union Minister of State of External Affairs, *"Soft power, in other words, is created partly by governments, and partly despite governments; partly by deliberate action, partly by accident"*.⁵ Yoga and Indian movies have created a huge impact in the Third World countries without much promotion by the government. In Afghanistan, Indian movies and soap operas have long been popular, which is slowly being replaced by Turkish movies and Television serials.⁶ There is still a large section of society dedicated to Indian dramas propagating Indian societal and cultural values of diversity and pluralism.

All these soft power strategies, promoted by government or independent of its influence, have enormous influence in Afghanistan and great potential to connect people of both the countries, irrespective of the religious and geographical distance.⁷

Can India Replace its Soft Power with Hard Power in Afghanistan?

Indian soft power strategy has often been questioned and censured by analysts both in India and abroad. The attacks on the Indian Embassy and the Indian projects in Afghanistan are seen as a failure of Indian policy of employing its soft power policy; often considered as India's weakness to deploy hard power of military and economic coercion. Critics often question India's lack of interest in military assignments in Afghanistan. However, such criticism misses a critical point of India's geographical and strategic limitation for military engagement; above all, the kind of negative impact it can have on India's relations with the government and the society of Afghanistan.

The best case study for India's failed attempt to use its hard power has been deployment of forces in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan case study is the ideal case study of alienating not only the government of Sri Lanka but the two dominant communities – Tamils and Sinhalese.

Moreover, Indian Government understands that soft power in terms of political and cultural values alone cannot succeed. Therefore, it is employing a blend of soft power and subtle elements of hard power, with a strong focus on soft India.⁸ It understands that hard and soft power cannot be an alternate to each other rather a combination of two in a non-coercive, cooptive manner, often termed as smart power, can be the right strategy in Afghanistan. The elements of smart power are certainly different from the conventional meaning of hard power, and it hardly reflects India's aggressive approach associated with elements of hard power.

The most definitive example of this has been India's assistance to Afghanistan with a fair amount of non-lethal military equipment. Last year, four MI 25 attack helicopters were given to Afghanistan. Afghanistan, however, has long list of weapons and equipment that they would like from India. India, till now has not agreed to all of Afghanistan's demands.

The recent military aid is seen by many analysts as a change in India's policy towards Afghanistan. It might appear logical to assume that the recent engagement at military level is a change of strategy from soft power to hard power. However, it would be an erroneous understanding of the Indian capacity and capability and its core tools of foreign policy. The military engagement beyond helping with non-lethal weapons and training Afghan forces might provoke more retribution from Pakistan and its allies, which could be counter-productive to India's long term goals in the region. Nevertheless, India's aversion to provide lethal weapons and declining the US proposal of sending Indian boots in Afghanistan clearly illustrates that assistance of non-lethal weapon is merely extension of its smart power policy; and it has not made any structural change in its foreign policy.

Conclusion

India's smooth engagement with Afghanistan, both at government and societal level for nearly last two decades, suggest that India has been able to implement effectively its soft power policies. Through its cultural and political values, economic incentives and rigorous diplomacy, India has been able to convince the international community of its importance in the region. President Trump's new South Asia policy, where he appreciated India's important

contributions to stability in Afghanistan and wanted India to help the US more with Afghanistan, especially in the area of economic assistance and development, is demonstrative of the fact that India's 'soft power' approach is being well received. The overall developments in the last two decades also hints at India's capability of negotiating and formulating its own foreign policy, at least developmental policy without the political interventions of powers like the Saudis, Russia and the USA. Even its adversaries are not indisposed to its contribution to the overall development of Afghanistan.

A lot has been written on the issue of India's presence in Afghanistan - some claiming it to be India's entry into great game of Afghanistan; this at best should be considered as an overambitious interpretation of the ground reality. Notwithstanding the fact that India has achieved a strong hold in the region, it would be too early to term it as India's entry into the great game. In fact, the kind of developmental work undertaken by India hardly suggests that it even wants to be part of the great game as other countries are playing. India's success in the region has been carved out by different instruments of foreign policy which unlike the tools of hard policy adopted by other players of the great game has long term positive impact and grounded in the roots of peace and stability. In fact India's success could be a perfect example for other countries to emulate in Afghanistan. India has the potential to be a strategically leading player in Afghanistan, without adversely risking the stability of the region.

The changing dynamics, the change of policies of major global powers, the rising political instability, the engulfing violence, and the resurgence of extremists in Afghanistan have not altered India's policy; instead they have strengthened India's approach towards the region. This is perhaps the first step that could help India become a long term player without being a contestant of great game.

Endnotes

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