

# Indian Strategic Interest in Afghanistan

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## Introduction

The historical ties between India and Afghanistan stretch back several millennia with strong people-to-people contact, trade and cultural exchanges forming the bedrock of these ties. The country once formed a part of the Mauryan empire, and was later ruled by the Hindu-Shahi dynasty just prior to the advent of Islam. The Bamiyan Buddhas were amongst the most prominent archeological features testifying to this shared heritage. Even after the advent of Islam in Afghanistan and South Asia, these links continued. The most significant empire that ruled India in the last 500 years i.e. the Mughals, was established by the first Mughal emperor, Babur. The fact that he was buried in Kabul bears testimony to the strong link between the two nations. Partition created a new state between these two countries but the social, cultural and emotional bonds continue to exist till date.

That India has had a strategic interest in Afghanistan for ages is a fact that cannot be denied. Today, an engagement with Afghanistan should form part of a grand overall strategy to protect our national interests beyond the confines of South Asia. It was possibly with this in mind that India engaged Afghanistan very early in its efforts to recover, after the Taliban evacuated Kabul. Besides visible help in the form of aircraft for *Ariana Air* or teachers for schools, it set about developing infrastructure with the intention of freeing-up the landlocked nation from its dependence on Pakistan for access to the rest of the world. That was indeed a smart move. In one stroke it gave India an opening into Afghanistan and also a potential route into the energy-rich Central Asia.

Afghanistan's location at the crossroads of China, the Middle-East, South Asia and Central Asia has attracted traders and

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invaders for over 2500 years now. Its cities have held pre-eminent positions on global trading routes for longer than most cities across the world. After a period of relative obscurity the nation has been thrust onto the global map once again by a combination of its status as a hub of terror and its geography – which makes it an inevitable partner in any plans to feed the energy-hungry economies that surround it. Add to this its vast unexploited mineral resources and you have a country that is bound to be a significant part of the strategic calculations of the major players of the world – India being no exception.

### **Strategic Considerations**

Indian strategic interests in Afghanistan have many facets. The rise of fundamental terrorism in the region, egged on by Pakistan, was almost exclusively targeted at India in the initial few years. The trajectory of Jehadi attacks in India virtually mirrors the kind of government that was ruling in Kabul. The worst years were certainly between 1989 and 2002, when the Taliban controlled Afghanistan and acted as proxy warriors for their Pakistani masters. A scenario where these elements regain control of Afghanistan will certainly hit India badly. For the sake of our own citizens we need to ensure that the present status is maintained.

The reality of the extent of our energy needs was brought home best by the record-breaking blackouts that hit half of India in July/August 2012. The result was alarm bells being sounded off not just in India but across the borders in China too. There is certainly an urgent need to exploit all possible resources to ensure that our national growth is not derailed due to a deficiency of energy. Accessing Central Asian gas has to be a part of our plans for the future. A strong physical presence in Afghanistan with a friendly government in Kabul is the best bet to ensure uninterrupted energy supply if and when the pipeline from that region becomes a reality. The ground work for this has begun and is but naturally part of our long-term strategic plans.

The Chinese entry into Afghanistan to develop Aynak Copper mines in Logar province means that we have yet another country where we are likely to encounter our rival nation in the race to utilise precious natural resources. The experience in Sudan and South China Sea has taught us that unless we are quick off the blocks and nimble on our feet, we may get left behind by the

Chinese once again. Unlike Sudan and Vietnam, however, this is happening in our backyard and is therefore an extremely important issue. We need to build our capacity within Afghanistan to counter this new, though not-unexpected challenge.

### **Engagement with Afghans and Afghanistan**

In contrast to the NATO forces, Indian efforts in Afghanistan have been a mix of infrastructure development and projection of its 'soft power'. Four landmark projects that have been completed by Indians include the Delaram-Zaranj Highway, transmission lines providing Uzbek electricity to Kabul, the hydroelectric Salma Dam and a new parliament building in Kabul. The Highway has opened up a link between a deep sea port at Chabahar in Iran to Afghanistan's main ring road system which connects Kabul, Kandhar, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif and Kunduz. This has enabled free transport of goods from Afghanistan's main cities to the Iranian border. This will not only promote regional cooperation by opening new trade routes but also provide access to the landlocked nation to sea. The inauguration of the new parliament by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh saw an additional commitment of \$500 million being made by India towards the development of Afghanistan. This has made India the largest regional donor and the 5<sup>th</sup> largest global donor towards the rebuilding of Afghanistan.

A consortium of Indian miners and steel companies that calls itself Afghan Iron and Steel Company or AFISCO, was awarded three of the four concessions in Hajigak (Bamiyan) in November 2011 by the Afghan government. AFISCO will now have 30 years to develop the mine and put-up a steel and power plant. Additionally, the consortium plans to build a 900 km railway line connecting the mines to the Chabahar port in Iran that will ease the export of finished products. It may be pertinent to point out that presently there are no passenger services or railway stations in the entire Afghanistan. The only small railway line that exists links the Northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif to Termez in Uzbekistan. A creation of the Soviet Union, it is primarily used for transporting construction material. In view of this, the significance of the proposed Hajigak-Chabahar railway line cannot be over-emphasised.

India has projected considerable soft power in Afghanistan through its provision of education, medical treatment and small-

business support. 2,000 Afghans get scholarships annually for schooling and training in India. Many present-day Afghan leaders including President Hamid Karzai have studied in India in the past. More than 100 Indian-supported development projects are being implemented. English teachers, water-treatment experts, communication engineers and many others have been helping communities across the nation in the process of rebuilding. While many 'experts' have warned about the dangers of such close contacts and also doubted the benefit of the same, the ground reality is that it is this very nature of assistance that has endeared the Indians to the average Afghan more than the citizen of any other donor nation. The fact that our assistants share the miseries of their daily grind by living with them in their villages and cities and not dictating terms to them from the comfort of an air-conditioned office, has given us an influence which far exceeds what a \$2 billion assistance package should have got us.

Another well-acknowledged facet of our soft power is the influence of Indian television and movies. In the years following the Soviet invasion, millions of Afghans took refuge in Pakistani camps. Here they gradually picked up the local language 'Urdu' and came into contact with Indian tele-serials and films. Over the last 30 odd years these have been the primary source of entertainment for the Afghans. As Dr Shashi Tharoor says, the strength of these is that they are seen to have 'nothing to do with government propaganda'. Other experts see them as an ideal means of engaging with the population by a means that they are willing to accept happily. It is, therefore, not surprising that the over 4000 Indians working in Afghanistan find it far easier to get acceptance in the country than any westerner.

Extension of health care facilities is another very important aspect of direct Indian involvement with the populace of Afghanistan. Indian medical missions in Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif have been providing free treatment for nearly a decade to over 400,000 Afghans annually. The number of Afghans who are coming over to India each year is also on the rise. A liberal visa policy has ensured that the number of cases coming to India for advanced medical care has grown from 3000 to nearly 10000 per annum. Patients include members of all ethnicities including Pashtuns. Hospitals have employed translators and

Afghan cooks to help these patients have a pain-free experience while in India. This has helped cement India's position as the preferred destination and has far-reaching long term benefits. However, such growing influence has come at a cost for India. In February 2010, terrorists targeted the doctors of the Indian Medical Mission in Kabul in a direct attack. Besides other casualties, one doctor died and five were injured. Such attacks aim to dissuade other medical professionals from coming to Afghanistan to help out the local population. However, the extent of faith in Indian health assistance can be gauged from the fact that medicines manufactured in Pakistan are sold with a label of "Made in India" all across Afghanistan. However, the fact that the label is in Urdu, ensures that no one is fooled.

### **Future Plans and Strategies**

Indian assistance to the efforts of Northern Alliance in defeating Taliban was greatly responsible for creating a favourable impression amongst the members of this influential group. However in the Karzai era, this group has been marginalised to a great extent. Following a period of inactivity it has seen a revival in the form of National Front of Afghanistan (NFA) or Jabh-e-Melli. The major players are Ahmad Zia Massoud, Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq and Abdul Rashid Dostum. The National Front strongly opposes a return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan and retains significant military capabilities. The chairman of the National Front is Ahmad Zia Massoud, the younger brother of the anti-Taliban resistance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud. The NFA has called for decentralisation of powers and a Parliamentary form of government instead of the current dispensation. Its total opposition to the Taliban is in tune with Indian rejection of 'good' versus 'bad' Taliban. Pakistan on the other hand is playing a wait-and-watch game where-in it hopes to thrust Taliban back into Kabul once the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) forces leave by 2014. India needs to ensure that the revived entity is provided support in as many ways as possible so that a credible alternative favourably inclined towards itself is available in the post-ISAF Afghanistan.

The signing of a strategic partnership between India and Afghanistan on 04 October 2011 during Afghan President Hamid Karzai's visit to India was an historical event with great implications

for Indo-Afghan relations. Amongst other things it sets out a blueprint for the manner in which Indian engagement will increase after 2014. For the first time India has spelt out a clear plan which includes “training, equipping and capacity building programmes for Afghan national security forces”. Additionally, trade and economic activities will be strengthened along with cultural, social, educational and people to people contact. Mining and Hydrocarbon exploration have seen separate MoUs being signed.<sup>4</sup> This signals a deep and long-term commitment of Indian involvement in Afghanistan as the very nature of these activities implies a life-cycle of a few decades in the least. The agreement showcases India’s considerable soft power and demonstrates to the other neighbours the benefits to be had from partnering with India. India now has the task to ensure that these agreements translate into significant engagement with Afghans in all parts of the country.

## Conclusion

“Every triumph from patience springs, the happy herald of better things” – wrote the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Sufi poet Jami. As Indian efforts in Afghanistan over the last decade start giving dividends, it is important that we do not take our foot off the pedal this time. A visit to the nation reveals the strong support for Indian reconstruction and development efforts even in Kandahar – the heartland of Pashtuns. It is time to build upon this goodwill and ensure that peace and development in Afghanistan continues uninterrupted. For it is only in a peaceful Afghanistan, that we can find the germs of peace for the entire neighborhood.

## Endnotes

1. Jayshree Bajoria, Council on Foreign Relations: India-Afghanistan Relations.
2. Text of Agreement on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.
3. YC Halan, Himalayan Affairs, accessed on 04 Aug 2012, <http://www.himalayanaffairs.org>
4. International Institute For Strategic Studies, accessed on 03 Aug 2012, [http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2011/06/03/indias\\_role\\_in\\_afghanistan](http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2011/06/03/indias_role_in_afghanistan)