



## Afghanistan's Relations with India and Iran: An Assessment of Ghani Period

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### Background

The situation in Afghanistan remains grim even one and half decades after the 'war on terror' was launched. Grappling with multiple problems that include deteriorating security environment, volatile political situation, dismal economic scenario, Afghanistan is facing an uncertain future for the country and its people.



Courtesy: Hindustan Times, May 24, 2016.

Afghanistan's leadership is caught between the elusive peace process and strong military action against the Taliban and its sister organisations, as the Taliban has, so far, refused to join the peace negotiations. Taliban's spring offensive this year, code named as 'Omari Operation', had its initial impact on Kabul on 19<sup>th</sup> April when a blast killed more than 64 and wounded 350 innocent people, reminding that none of the cities, including Kabul, is safe from Taliban's onslaught.

The historic political transition in September 2014 resulting in the formation of National Unity Government (NUG) in Afghanistan was expected to herald an era of peace and stability in the country. But, unfortunately, it is not the case so far. Afghanistan's unstable domestic security situation remains a concern not only for the country but also for the region and beyond.

The uncertainty created after the new government led by Ghani took office in Afghanistan in 2014 added to Afghanistan woes (Iran and India had also elected new governments around the same time in 2013 and 2014). However, on important foreign policy matters, there were different postures by the newly elected leaders of these three countries. On one hand the new Iran and India governments postures and actions contributed to regional stability. Hassan Rouhani Government's approach in dealing with P5+1 on the issue of clandestine nuclear programme had a positive impact on the regional political situation. Prime Minister Modi's stress on 'neighbourhood-first' has both Afghanistan and Iran as two important pillars of India's policy in the neighbourhood. On the other hand, Afghanistan's initial pro-Pakistan tilt had an impact on country's relations with India.

All three countries have seen political engagements at the highest level in the recent past promising a better future in their relationship. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani visited Iran and India in April 2015, followed by Chief Executive Dr. Abdullah Abdullah's visit to both the countries in January and February this year. Prime Minister Modi's visit to Afghanistan in December 2015 further strengthened India's relations with Afghanistan and reaffirmed New Delhi's commitment for rebuilding the war-ravaged country.

The long pending issue of Mi-25 military helicopter, was clinched as a precursor to Modi's visit to Kabul. Indian Prime Minister's Afghanistan visit on 4<sup>th</sup> June - second visit within seven months - to inaugurate Dam built with the financial support of India will strengthen relations further. Rechristened as 'Afghan-India Friendship Dam', Salma Dam is a \$300 million hydroelectric and irrigation project constructed on Hari Rud River in Chisht-e- Sharif district of the Herat province.<sup>1</sup>

Trade and Commerce, Energy and Terrorism are common but important factors between India, Iran and Afghanistan. It is also noteworthy that Iran's resolve to contribute in Afghanistan's

reconstruction efforts in the post-Taliban era was not deterred by the US dominance in Afghanistan. Similar is the case with India, which has been involved in Afghanistan's reconstruction despite Pakistan's efforts to create hurdles in the good work New Delhi is continuing in that country. India and Iran have contributed significantly in the post-Taliban reconstruction and rebuilding of the war-ravaged country. Countries in the region, especially India and Iran, have a historical responsibility to help Afghanistan come out of the quagmire through their bilateral relationship with Kabul.

### **Afghanistan and the Regional Countries**

The support of regional countries for a safe, stable and economically sustainable Afghanistan is most important. Hence, Kabul's relationship with neighbouring countries would determine Afghanistan's future. Surrounded by countries like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and others in Central Asia, China, India, Iran, Turkey, Russia and Pakistan, Afghanistan shares cordial relations with most of these countries in the region. It has also been inducted as the 8<sup>th</sup> member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in November 2005 and, in June 2012, it was granted full observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), thereby signifying its importance in the region.

Bilateral relations between Afghanistan and India as well as Afghanistan and Iran have traditionally been strong and friendly, except for the period during the Taliban regime. There has been a similar pattern of Afghanistan's relations with both India and Iran, particularly since the ouster of Taliban in 2001. Although Afghanistan, India and Iran follow their relations with each other independent of any other factor, but, there are several points of convergence of all the three countries.

The proliferation of illegal production of narcotic drugs linked to terrorism has been a major concern for all three countries as drugs money has been used to finance terror activities in the region. Besides, the construction of Chabahar port, when completed, will usher a new era for India-Afghanistan relations.

### **India-Afghanistan Relationship since Ghani**

India has been a major player in the reconstruction of the post-Taliban Afghanistan. New Delhi's extensive developmental assistance programme, of more than US \$2 billion, makes it the 5th

largest bilateral donor in Afghanistan after the US, UK, Japan and Germany. India's financial assistance in building infrastructure, institutions and electricity installations, etc., is continuing despite Indians (including attacks on its Embassy and Consulates) being one of the prime terror targets in Afghanistan.

The intensity of India-Afghanistan bilateral relationship touched a new high when Afghanistan opted to sign its first Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) with India in October 2011. But, the change of government in Afghanistan after the 2014 Presidential elections was marked by certain changes in Kabul's policy towards countries in the region, including India.

India's engagement in the post-Taliban Afghanistan had taken a new turn immediately after the National Unity Government came to power. President Ghani assumed power at a time when the ISAF's combat operation was approaching the December 2014 date for withdrawal. Newly created ANSF was still not equipped to be a replacement for the ISAF forces creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and thereby making him believe that only option for durable peace and stability in Afghanistan was negotiations with Taliban. Therefore, it appears that President Ghani considered Pakistan as key to restart the stalled peace process with Taliban. This had an effect on its India policy pursued since 2002.

The fallout of the policy shift was reflected when the Afghan government suspended a request for heavy weaponry from India that was originally made by Ashraf Ghani's predecessor, Hamid Karzai.<sup>2</sup>

President Ghani's proactive engagement with Pakistan, without taking into account its hitherto robust relations with India, was to revive the peace process that was stalled after the disclosure of Mullah Omar's death. However, the Unity Government realised its folly sooner than expected as its strategy on Pakistan failed to achieve the desired results. A wave of bombings in Kabul forced Ghani to express his anger saying that, "Pakistan still remains the venue and ground for gatherings from which mercenaries send us a message of war."<sup>3</sup> Although the Pakistani leadership managed to control the damage to their relations with Afghanistan after President Ghani's outburst, but, it was enough for the NUG leadership to understand the importance of their relations with India. The spring offensive announced by Taliban earlier in April this year was followed by a powerful truck-bomb blast, killing more than 64 people in Kabul, which is a reminder that Afghanistan cannot rely on Pakistan and its commitments on the peace process.

The National Unity Government changed its Pakistan Policy by adopting a conciliatory approach expecting that Pakistan would leverage its links with Taliban leadership and make them join the peace process, which has achieved nothing till date. The failure of Pakistan to engage the Taliban in the peace process and the 19th April Kabul blast has forced President Ghani to rethink his policy towards Pakistan, which was outlined in his address to the joint session of Afghan Parliament on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2016. On the feeling of let down by Pakistan was so clear when the Afghan President said, “We no longer expect Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the negotiation table, but we want Pakistan to respect the commitments it made in the quadrilateral meeting to fight against those Taliban identified to be living in Pakistan.”<sup>4</sup>

President Ghani’s first official trip to India took place in April 2015, more than six months after assuming power and after visiting China and Pakistan. Although the reasons for visiting these countries could be tactical, the implications of this were reflected in NUG’s approach towards India. President Ghani had first articulated his five-circle foreign policy concept, during his inaugural speech in September 2014. He had delineated the first circle of neighbours to six countries – with India relegated to the outer circles in the fourth ring. However, for the first time during his visit India, Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani acknowledged India as a part of the inner core of his ‘five-circle’ foreign policy concept.<sup>5</sup>

President Ghani’s India visit helped to reinforce the strong bilateral relations despite the negative impression that was created since the formation of the NUG. The release of three multi-role Cheetal helicopters to Afghanistan earlier in that month was also acknowledged by President Ghani in the Joint Statement issued with Prime Minister Modi. The year 2015, which had started on a gloomy note for India in the wake of Afghanistan’s efforts to court Pakistan, ended with a positive atmosphere created after Prime Minister Modi’s visit on 25<sup>th</sup> December.

The Commander of the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, General John Campbell was on an unannounced visit to New Delhi in October 2015. It was believed that his India trip was to assure New Delhi about its prominence in future scheme of things in Afghanistan. In his statement, Campbell tried to clear the impression regarding Kabul’s over emphasis on Pakistan saying that, “President Ashraf Ghani was reaching out to the entire region as part of his effort to push the country on the path of sustainable peace and development.”<sup>6</sup>

## **India's Assistance and Reconstruction Efforts in Afghanistan**

India has completed a number of medium and large infrastructure projects in its assistance programme in Afghanistan. Some of these include: 218 km road from Zaranj to Delaram for facilitating movement of goods and services to the Iranian border; construction of 220KV transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul; construction of Afghanistan's Parliament Building; Afghanistan-India Friendship Dam (Salma Dam); upgrading of telephone exchanges in 11 provinces; expansion of national TV network by providing an uplink from Kabul and downlinks in all 34 provincial capitals for greater integration of the country. Besides India-assisted projects, India agreed to supply 170,000 tonnes of wheat to meet Afghanistan's urgent needs.<sup>7</sup>

One of the notable aspect of the India-Afghanistan relations has been the deepening of defence cooperation, that was earlier confined to mainly training Afghan military personnel, as India was reluctant to supply military hardware to Afghanistan. However, enhanced bilateral relations particularly since April 2015, and the visit of Afghan National Security Adviser Hanif Atmar and Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai's to New Delhi in November 2015, convinced India to donate four Mi-25 attack helicopters to Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> Surprisingly, this was the first time India delivered lethal weaponry to Afghanistan.

India needs to be assertive in what it hopes to achieve as a long-term donor and partner in Afghanistan, that is, development and security. The inauguration of the Parliament Building built by India, constructed under India-Afghanistan development cooperation, achieved more than just a symbolic gesture. It reassured the people of Afghanistan about India's generous support in the reconstruction and rebuilding of the country. In the Joint Statement issued on 25<sup>th</sup> of December, Prime Minister Modi assured the President Ghani that India will be guided by the priorities and requirements of the Government of Afghanistan, including priorities for the reconstruction in Kunduz which was briefly under Taliban control in October 2015.<sup>9</sup>

## **Bilateral Ties: Changing its Course Since Ghani's India visit**

The confusion created in the wake NUG's Pakistan policy, that influenced first several months of President Ghani's approach towards India, appears to have been removed. Prime Minister Modi's second visit to Afghanistan on June 4, 2016, to inaugurate the Afghan-India Friendship Dam

(Salma Dam) in Heart Province is significant from many angles. It was not long ago that India was not in the priority list of countries for the National Unity Government. It was to the credit of India that it handled its relations in a prudent manner, particularly between September 2014 and April 2015.

The growing bonhomie between both the countries have been reflected in Afghan President describing Modi's visit to Afghanistan as his 'second home'.<sup>10</sup> Besides, the Indian Prime Minister Modi was conferred by President Ghani with 'Amir Amanullah Khan Award', Afghanistan's highest civilian honour<sup>11</sup>. It was not only an acknowledgement of India's contribution and commitment in rebuilding the country since 2002, but, also, Prime Minister Modi's genuine interest in continuing India's engagement with Afghanistan and its people.

The bilateral relationship between India and Afghanistan is set to grow stronger in future as our engagements in last one year suggests. Afghanistan needs to create supportive atmosphere to attract Indian investments, particularly in the mining sector. India will be hosting the Ministerial Conference of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process this year. During Prime Minister Modi's Afghanistan visit, it was decided to conduct the first Strategic Partnership Council meeting in early 2016.<sup>12</sup>

### **Afghanistan-Iran Relations**

Iran is one of Afghanistan's most important neighbours. The two countries not only share 936-kilometre-long border but also historical, cultural, linguistic, economic, ethnic and religious ties. The political turmoil that has affected several countries in the region, has not derailed the bilateral relations between Afghan and Iran, except during the Taliban regime. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan had brought both the countries on the brink of a war following the killing of Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998.

Afghanistan has pursued a pragmatic policy towards Iran in the aftermath of 9/11, despite the UN sanctions on the issue of nuclear programme. The political leadership in Afghanistan have realised the importance of nurturing stronger bilateral relations with Iran, which is mutually beneficial to each other. In a remark at Brookings Institution, Hamid Karzai had made it clear that Afghanistan should not be a place for rivalry between America and Iran.<sup>13</sup>

## Afghanistan-Iran Relations since President Ghani

In order to enhance their bilateral relations, Afghan President Ghani visited Iran in April 2015 and held meetings with President Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. During Ghani's visit to Iran, besides economic, security and cultural ties, the one issue which was given primacy was the issue of Afghan refugees in Iran. Afghanistan has set up Refugees High Commission with a long term plan that could facilitate gradual and voluntary return of Afghan refugees in phases.<sup>14</sup> According to UNHCR, 950,000 Afghan refugees are living in Iran.<sup>15</sup>

The President's visit was followed by CEO Abdullah's trip to Iran in January 2016. Several issues pertaining to both the countries were discussed including the strengthening of economic cooperation, also through Chabahar port, providing education for Afghan refugees living in Iran, joint fight against terrorism and extremism, focusing on the completion of Iran-Afghan railway as soon as possible.<sup>16</sup> More than 900 km of common border between Afghanistan and Iran could contribute towards future economic cooperation between both the countries.

There are several important issues that influence bilateral ties between Afghanistan and Iran. These include drugs, refugees and the spectre of terrorism, particularly Taliban and ISIS.

President Ghani has pursued Karzai's policy of cordial relations with Teheran. Iran has played a constructive role in the post-Taliban Afghanistan irrespective of its opposition to the presence of U.S. in the country. The historic nuclear agreement between P5+1 and Iran and lifting of sanctions on Iran will help Kabul and Tehran to enhance their bilateral engagement, particularly in trade and commerce.

It is worth noting that bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Iran have gained momentum in the post-sanction period signifying that Iran is expected to play a major role in Afghanistan. Both the countries have already signed MoU to cooperate in the field of exploration and exploitation of mines in Afghanistan and its exports to other countries.<sup>17</sup> Customs duty has been exempted for those Iranian businessmen who invest in Afghanistan and move their production lines to that country.<sup>18</sup> According to Afghan Minister of Trade and Industries, omayoon Rasa, Iran's export to Afghanistan stands at \$3 billion, which accounts for 40 percent of Afghanistan's total import.<sup>19</sup>

## **Iran's Reconstruction Efforts in Afghanistan**

Iran is a major player in the post-Taliban Afghanistan and had pledged \$ 560<sup>20</sup> million at the donors conference in 2002 and provides \$50<sup>21</sup> million as anti-narcotics aid annually. Iran assisted infrastructure development projects include electricity supply to border villages in Herat and Nimroz, building the Dogharoun-Herat road and the extension of Herat Highway to Meymaneh in the north.<sup>22</sup> Other Iran-assisted projects include the construction of the Khavaf-Herat Railway track, which connects Afghanistan's railway network to Iran, Central Asia and Europe.<sup>23</sup>

## **Drug Trafficking**

According to a report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC),<sup>24</sup> the problem of drug use is a serious challenge in Iran with over 1,325,000 opiate dependents in the country (2.26% of the adult population), placing Iran among the countries with the highest prevalence of opiate use worldwide. Another UNODC report launched in November 2015 shows that the total value of illicit heroin and opium trafficked from Afghanistan to Western Europe through the Balkans amounts to some \$28 billion every year.<sup>25</sup> The report further shows the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey as the two countries are used as transit of a greater percentage of heroin and opium destined for Europe. Iran seizes about 30 per cent of the 155 tons of heroin and opium entering its territory each year.<sup>26</sup>

Iran has been in the forefront of fighting illegal narcotics from Afghanistan. There were instances of mobilisation of 30,000 troops along its borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan leading to narcotics confiscation.<sup>27</sup> The menace of illegal drugs has forced both the countries to take immediate steps for its eradication and preventing its trafficking. There was discussion between both countries on intelligence and security cooperation to counter drug trafficking rings during Afghan President's visit to Iran.<sup>28</sup> Besides the issue of illegal drugs, Tehran and Kabul reached an understanding to share intelligence on terrorism, violence and extremism in the region, including in Afghan regions bordering Iran, and conduct joint operations if need be.<sup>29</sup>

## **Future of Bilateral ties with Iran**

In this background, it is essential to analyse the implications of Afghanistan-Iran relations in the wake of lifting of international sanctions on Iran. From all possible angles, it is expect to have a

positive impact on the bilateral relations. From economic point of view, it is going to benefit Afghanistan's economy in a significant way. Iran without sanctions will accelerate the process of developing Chabahar port with Indian participation that will give India direct access to markets in land-locked Afghanistan and Central Asian countries, bypassing Pakistan. This will also open a two-way trade route for Europe and Middle East.

Possible future US-Iran cooperation in Afghanistan may help the country in its developmental effort. The Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) which appears to have made no headway even after five rounds of talks, should be recalibrated with the inclusion of Iran and Russia. Iran has played a constructive role in Afghanistan since 2001.

Another area of cooperation could be counter-narcotics. Iran would prefer to have a stable Afghanistan which could prevent uncontrolled narcotics production that fuels Iran's drug problems. Besides, Iran could play a major role in contributing significantly towards rebuilding Afghanistan.

### **Afghanistan-India-Iran Relations: Way Forward**

There are several similarities between India and Iran in their relations with Afghanistan. Both have played a significant role in the reconstruction and rebuilding of the war-torn Afghanistan since 2001. India and Iran did not find a place in the Quadrilateral Coordination Group. Coincidentally, the Afghan President chose to visit both the countries one after another in April 2015, six months after assuming power. In fact, both India and Iran will play a major role in the future economic development of Afghanistan through, inter alia, the Chabahar project, whose implementation has been fast tracked after the sanctions on Iran were lifted.

India and Iran along with Afghanistan should fast track implementation of strategically important trilateral trade and transit agreement that was signed by all three countries on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2016 in Tehran during Prime Minister Modi's visit. It would not only facilitate movement of goods through the Iran-Afghanistan land route but also make Pakistan's efforts to restrict the movement of Indian goods through Pakistani territory to Afghanistan, less important.

Another important bilateral contract on Chabahar Port development and operations was concluded between India Ports Global Private Limited (IPGPL) and Arya Bander of Iran during the visit<sup>30</sup>.

The Chabahar port project initiated in 2003 was held up due to sanctions imposed on Iran. India is poised to initiate Chabahar's full-fledged development as the sanctions have been officially lifted. India has already constructed Delaram-Zaranj Highway, which will facilitate to connect the Chabahar port. In effect, the Chabahar port represents huge economic prospects for the war-ravaged nation with dismal economic progress. Afghanistan has been largely an aid-dependent country since 2001 and the reduction in foreign aid is reflected on its GDP. According to the World Bank, Economic growth in Afghanistan slowed to 1.3 percent in 2014, down from 3.7 percent a year earlier.<sup>31</sup>



Courtesy: Live Mint, May 24, 2016.

The conclusion of the Chabahar Port deal has provided the push that was necessary to expedite the process of developing Chabahar port as also the road link from Chabahar to Afghanistan to facilitate quicker and efficient trade. The Indian Government has already given its approval to the proposal of the Ministry of Shipping for the provision and operationalization of credit of \$150 million from EXIM Bank for the development of Chabahar Port in Iran.<sup>32</sup> India is to equip and operate two berths in the Phase-I of the Chabahar Port.<sup>33</sup>

The Chabahar Trilateral Transit Agreement was described by Indian Prime Minister as 'creation of history'.<sup>34</sup> Terming the agreement as new routes of peace and prosperity for the three

countries, Indian Prime Minister said that, “Afghanistan will get an assured, effective, and a more friendly route to trade with the rest of the world”.<sup>35</sup>

Iranian President stressed the need for joint initiatives in the region saying that the trilateral transit agreement of Chabahar is one of the bases for good cooperation in the region and for the three countries.<sup>36</sup> He further added that, “the message of the agreement to the world is that we are united for joint cooperation on a constructive path”.<sup>37</sup> Afghan President Ghani in his address stressed the importance of the the Chabahar agreement, saying that the entire region can connect and contribute to this joint cooperation.<sup>38</sup>

The Chabahar Port deal and Trilateral Transit and Transport Agreement will open a new vista of cooperation not only between the three countries but with others in the region also. Afghanistan will get access to sea via Iran and India will get access to Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics through Iran. This will also attract Indian investments to the region, in several sectors. The trilateral accord, besides providing connectivity for India to Afghanistan and central Asia, is likely to facilitate not only economic and industrial activities between Chabahar to Zahedan in Iran but also into Afghanistan and beyond.

The MoU signed between India and Iran for the construction of Chabahar-Zahedan railway line in Iran, that forms part of the transit and transportation corridor in the trilateral agreement, could be further developed and connect Hajigak mines in Bamiyan province of Afghanistan. This would help India transport iron ore from Afghanistan and earn Iran substantial transit revenue. Apart from this, on the Iranian side, India could access the International North South Trade Corridor (INSTC) to reach its goods to Europe. This route is about 40 per cent shorter and 30 per cent cheaper than its current sea route of Red Sea-Suez Canal-Mediterranean.<sup>39</sup>

As expected there were adverse reactions to the Chabahar deal in Pakistan that made the Iranian Ambassador to Pakistan, Mehdi Honerdoost, give a clarification that the deal is not ‘finished’ and “not limited to these three countries”.<sup>40</sup> Pakistan’s uneasiness with Chabahar Trilateral deal came out in the open when two former Defence Secretaries called the proposed transit corridor as a threat to country’s security.<sup>41</sup>

Considering the importance of a stable and secure Afghanistan for the region and beyond, India and Iran could jointly work out a security cooperation framework for Afghanistan involving training and providing ANSF with military equipment to make it capable to fight the terror groups. Partnering Iran would provide India the required space it lacked for engaging with Afghanistan because of Pakistan's opposition to Indian presence in Afghanistan. The resurgence of the Taliban has put maximum stress on the limited resources of the ANSF as military operations are going on in 15 provinces of Afghanistan.<sup>42</sup>

India and Iran together can play a vital role in the changed political scenario in the region, particularly in the post-sanction era. The US also needs support from India and Iran to stabilise Afghanistan as Pakistan still remains unpredictable in its approach towards Afghanistan.

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*Disclaimer: Views expressed are of authors and do not reflect the views of the Council.*

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