



Assessing India's Decade-long Engagement in Afghanistan

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Introduction

History proves once again that external military interventions in Afghanistan have always been inconclusive. More than a decade of international military intervention in Afghanistan following the catastrophic attacks of 11 September 2001, the political and security scenarios unfolding in the country are still ambivalent. Although considerable progress has been achieved in state-building, reconstruction and development in the country since 2001,¹ the society remains divided, economy disjointed, security disturbed and politics disoriented. After a decade of fighting, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which achieved limited success, has begun its withdrawal from the country, and the West is making efforts, though in the nascent stages, to reconcile with the Taliban. Similarly, the regional political dynamics still appear to be competitive and devoid of any regional consensus for ensuring peace and stability in Afghanistan.

India as a major stakeholder in Afghanistan's security and development is keenly observing the unfolding scenarios in Kabul. It is in touch with the regional capitals including Beijing,² Tashkent and Dushanbe.³ Considering the severe implications of continued political instability and probable resurgence of Taliban to its security and wider economic interests in the region, India has reasons to be concerned. However, New Delhi is unlikely to deploy forces in Afghanistan; it will remain more inclined to employ soft measures in its quest towards achieving regional stability and

greater economic integration between South Asia and Central Asia. Due to its geo-strategic positioning, Afghanistan can be a lynchpin for India's pursuit of energy and mineral resources as well as for increasing trade with Central Asian Republics. In these evolving dynamics, this paper attempts to assess India's engagement in Afghanistan since 2001 and examines role of Kabul in the prospects for India-Central Asia trade, particularly in minerals and energy.

Unfolding Scenario in Afghanistan

Currently, Afghanistan is passing through dual transitions, i.e. political and security. President Hamid Karzai is completing his second presidential term, maximum allowed under new Afghanistan constitution, which is in force since 2004. Although the constitution provides institutional set up for the election of the president, a sense of uncertainty looms large over the political leadership to succeed Karzai in 2014. On the other hand, without establishing an effective and efficient national security apparatus and reducing insurgency and terror threats,⁴ the ISAF is completing the process of security transition to Afghan national forces in the same year. Simultaneously, the process of reconciliation among various exogenous and endogenous, and political and armed-opposition groups is also underway. The elusive process of reconciliation was initiated by recognising the Taliban as a major stakeholder in future Afghan political dispensation and providing an institutional platform for negotiations in Qatar. The fate of the process of reconciliation is critical for both political and security transitions in Afghanistan as well as for stability in the region.

The reconciliation talks among Taliban, the US and Afghanistan government are shrouded in mystery and voices of discontent are getting louder. It would be pertinent to note how the top-down approach and Western-led process of reconciliation amicably accommodates the concerns and interests of a diverse Afghan society and polity. Besides, it would be a daunting task to bridge the differences of perceptions between Afghan domestic actors and the external facilitators on the process of reconciliation. The reconciliation is neither Afghan-led nor does it incorporate regional initiatives on Afghanistan, which are critical elements in resolving the crisis. The reconciliation must evolve in a way that addresses the concerns of regional powers and major stakeholders, including India.

India seems to be concerned about the situation after the drawdown of ISAF from Afghanistan in 2014. New Delhi appears to be in a wait-n-watch mode with regard to the shaping of the political and security formation after the presidential election and transfer of security to Afghan national forces. India also believes that the process of reconciliation will play a significant role in determining future political and security scenario in Afghanistan. Despite the request for military presence by Afghanistan,⁵ India would continue its 'light footprint' approach and focuses on state building engagements. New Delhi has genuine concerns that its military engagement would have adverse impact on regional political dynamics and its relationship with Pakistan.

India's Engagement in Afghanistan

India has multifaceted interactions with Afghans since antiquity. Cultural linkages and trade ties through the Silk Route connected the two in the past.⁶ The areas of Afghanistan had also figured in India's strategic thinking in the medieval period. Due to India's vulnerability to invasions through Afghanistan, the British Empire tried to develop the country as a buffer zone between India and the Tsarist Empire. Despite geographical contiguity, the British Empire and Tsarist Empire created wedge between Afghanistan and India. However, people-to-people and cultural contacts remained intact. During the mid 20th century, partition of India though broke the geographical contiguity,⁷ political interactions intensified further. Soviet intervention could not bring political order and stability; rather, the country became a battleground between two opposing superpowers unleashing a new phase of violence that still persists. The Soviet military withdrawal in 1989 created a vacuum leading to infighting and ultimately the rise of Taliban, who came to power in 1996 and continued till they were ousted by the US-led international forces in 2001. Political disorder and civil war in Afghanistan hampered New Delhi's relations with Kabul in this period. India did not recognise the Taliban government and had already closed its embassy in Kabul before Taliban's coming to the power.⁸ India considered Taliban as a threat to its security, especially in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. However, the post-Taliban period in Afghanistan has provided opportunities for India's extensive association in the realm of state-building, economy, reconstruction and development.

India joined the international community's efforts in rebuilding Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. It adopted a cautious approach and did not deploy troops in

Afghanistan. On the other hand, New Delhi has been playing a significant role in the process of reconstruction and development, building and strengthening state institutions, capacity building and skill enhancement. By pledging around US\$ 2 billion⁹ for reconstruction and development, India is the largest regional donor to Afghanistan. Different from the approach adopted by the traditional donors, India opted for demand-driven method for providing assistance to the Afghan people, i.e. infrastructure development, capacity building, local economic development, agribusiness, education and empowerment of women, local government and election process.

By signing the strategic partnership with Kabul in October 2011, New Delhi made it amply clear that it has long-term interests in Afghanistan. The India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement also reflects India's strategy for the region. It states that India would stand by Afghanistan for governance and security even though international forces withdraw in 2014. Although the agreement emphasises on reconstruction and development, economic engagement and trade and investment have also been explicitly mentioned. Mining and hydrocarbons are also seen as major potential areas for cooperation between the two countries.¹⁰ Recent discovery of natural resources also provides opportunities for Indian investments in Afghanistan. It is estimated that Afghanistan has mineral wealth of more than US\$ 3 trillion, including huge reserves of oil, gas, copper, iron, gold, etc.¹¹ The iron ore deposits are worth US\$ 421 billion; copper deposits about US\$ 274 billion and gold deposits are worth US\$ 25 billion.¹² Besides, the country has 36.5 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 3.6 billion barrels reserves of oil.¹³ Indian companies were granted four blocks of Hajigak mine, which have an estimated reserve of 2 billion tonnes of iron ore.¹⁴ Indian Inc. has also shown interests in Afghanistan's petroleum blocks and copper ore mines.¹⁵ New Delhi and Kabul are engaged in exploring opportunities for greater economic cooperation; however, the total bilateral trade is only US\$ 588 million, i.e. 0.07 per cent of India's global trade in 2012-13.¹⁶

Trade between India and Afghanistan has been hampered because there is no direct connectivity between the two countries. During Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Tehran to attend the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit in August 2012, a tripartite agreement between India, Iran and Afghanistan was concluded successfully and it was decided to set up a Joint Working Group to boost trade and transit through Chabahar to Afghanistan and Central Asia.¹⁷

Besides, Afghanistan is a bridge between South Asia and Central Asia. Once the country becomes politically stable, India's trade and economic engagement with Afghanistan would get a boost and Kabul can become a conduit in expanding the engagement further with Central Asian countries.

Table 1: India's Trade with Afghanistan (US \$ millions)

Year	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
Export	394.23	463.55	422.41	510.9	472.56
Growth (%)		17.58	-8.88	20.95	-7.5
Share (%)	0.21	0.26	0.17	0.17	0.16
Import	126.24	125.19	146.03	132.5	115.8
Growth (%)		-0.83	16.64	-9.26	-12.61
Share (%)	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.02
Total Trade	520.47	588.74	568.44	643.41	588.36
Growth (%)		13.12	-3.45	13.19	-8.56
Share (%)	0.11	0.13	0.09	0.08	0.07
Trade Balance	268	338.36	276.38	378.4	356.77

Source: Directorate General of Foreign Trade, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India

The Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) 2010 allows passage of Afghan goods through the territory of Pakistan. The agreement also allows Afghan trucks to carry Afghan transit export cargo to the Wagha border where the cargo is transferred to Indian trucks. During the last nine months, more than 2,000 trucks load of dry fruits and pulses crossed into India through the Wagha border.¹⁸ However, Pakistan does not allow Indian exports to Afghanistan and it has been stated that this “could be discussed at an appropriate time in the future”.¹⁹ Recently, Pakistan and Afghanistan have also agreed to widen the scope of their transit trade agreement to include Tajikistan.²⁰ Once included, goods from Central Asian countries could come to India via road, and after Pakistan grants India the Most-Favoured Nation (MFN) status, goods from India could go overland to Afghanistan and further to Central Asia. Further, when fully operational, the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) would be another significant route to trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia. Using the connectivity of the Afghanistan corridor of the ‘garland road’, trade would increase between India, Iran and Afghanistan as also among Central Asian countries.

Moreover, there is an increasing trend of economic cooperation and integration between South Asian and Central Asian countries. The 1,700 km long and US\$ 7.6 billion Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline is an important economic venture. There are reports which suggest that substantial progress has been made and inter-government agreement, gas pipeline framework and gas sales and purchase deal have been signed. There is a broad agreement on transit fee among the stakeholders.²¹ Another important inter-region energy project is CASA-1000 power transmission line²² between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan.²³ The project is currently underway and is supported by the World Bank and other international agencies.

Assessing India's Engagement

Political: In the decade-long journey of Afghan political process, India has been active from the very beginning. It has been an important participant in almost all significant international conferences on Afghanistan including Bonn (I-2001 and II-2011), London (I-2006 and II-2010), Tokyo (2002), Paris (2008) and other regional conferences. India emphasises the Afghan political integration process should be Afghan-led.²⁴ However, due to competitive regional political dynamics New Delhi was left out of some major initiatives such as the Turkey-sponsored meeting on Afghanistan in January 2010²⁵ and marginalised in the London Conference on Afghanistan in 2010.²⁶ The reconciliation process is considered as the key to Afghan peace and the US does not visualise India's role in this process.²⁷ Besides, the political process so far shows that India's view has not been given due consideration as most of the processes are foreign initiated than being Afghan-led.

At the bilateral political level, India is assisting Afghanistan in the state-building process. It plays a key role in establishing institutions and infrastructure, such as building the Parliament House in Kabul.²⁸ India's role is prominent in facilitating the election process and has provided Electronic Voting Machines and trained staff. In May 2008 India and Afghanistan also signed an MoU on cooperation in the areas of local governance.²⁹ Besides, India's non-interference principles, the country's political engagement with Kabul is constrained due to prevailing regional geo-political environment, ineffective regional institutional mechanism, common Afghans' disliking of foreign troops presence, especially the night raids and rising civilian casualty, and seemingly unending nature of conflict in Afghanistan.

Regionally, India-Pakistan relationship has a bearing on India-Afghanistan relations. Islamabad perceives India's heavy presence in Afghanistan is detrimental to Pakistan. To deter, there were several attacks on Indian interests in Afghanistan, which New Delhi alleged to have been planned and executed by groups and establishments based in Pakistan.³⁰ On the other hand, the regional grouping of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) could have been an important catalyst to initiate solution for Afghan problem. Afghanistan joined SAARC in 2007 Delhi Summit³¹ but the organisation has not taken any effective initiatives to bring peace and stability in the country.

Politically and economically, it would not be viable for India to commit long-term military presence in Afghanistan; however, New Delhi can be expected to remain committed to the country's reconstruction and development.

Reconstruction and Development: Reconstruction and development are focus areas of India's engagement in Afghanistan. New Delhi believes inclusive development is essential to establish a viable and peaceful statehood in Afghanistan. India has made substantial contribution in building infrastructure. For example, the Zaranj-Delaram road,³² Salma dam power project,³³ Pul-e Khumri transmission line³⁴ and schools, hospitals in Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif, etc. Education, public health and infrastructure have improved significantly since 2001, and India's assistance in these areas has been considered crucial by the people of Afghanistan as well as the international community. Capacity building and empowerment of women particularly in terms of skill development is another crucial area in which India has made a meaningful contribution. New Delhi provides a large number of scholarships to various sections of Afghan population; for instance, 2,000 scholarships to Afghans annually for schooling and training in India, including for 500 Afghan civil servants.³⁵

It is pertinent to mention that 68 per cent of Afghan population is below 25 years³⁶ and India's policy of capacity building and skill development is focused on tapping the youth potential. It will not only assist Afghanistan in its development but also keep the youth engaged in economic activities and away from activities detrimental to the country's security and stability such as

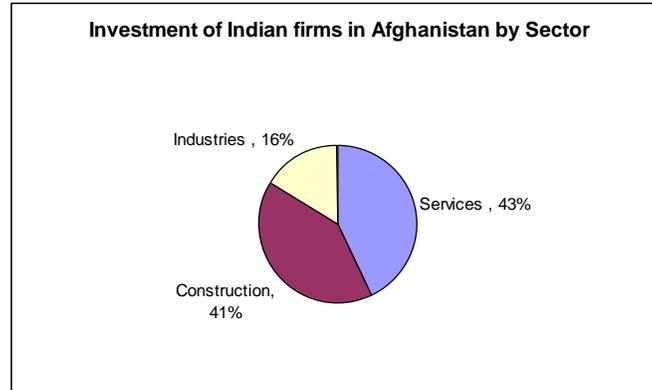
terrorism, organised crimes and drug trafficking. In addition, in its innovative approach, more than 80 Indian-supported but Afghan-owned small development projects are at different stages of implementation.³⁷

India is an IT power and has vast experience in the implementation of IT projects in the field of governance and development at a feasible cost. It can provide e-governance solutions to Afghanistan to enhance governance at the grassroots level. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can play a critical role in providing services in rural and remote areas, and enable the population to access services like e-health, e-education, etc.

New Delhi's soft power measures and people-centric approach has created a positive perception about India among Afghans.³⁸ However, due to persistent fighting between insurgents and ISAF, weak governance, massive corruption and other institutional and social factors, the international development assistance, including from India, has produced limited result. Afghanistan is yet to recover from the destructions of wars and civil wars, and it needs more development assistance to support its reconstruction and development processes.

Economic: Although security dominates the discourse on Afghanistan, potential for business and trade opportunities in the country is emerging as a prominent area of bilateral cooperation. India Inc. has shown interests in harnessing business potential, particularly in the areas of mineral and natural resources. Many public enterprises are engaged in Afghanistan such as Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL), National Mineral Development Corporation Ltd. (NMDC) and Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Limited (RINL).³⁹ India can optimise huge potential of Afghan services sector.

To give a boost to the Afghan economy, India organised the 'Delhi Investment Summit on Afghanistan' on June 28, 2012 to highlight business opportunities in Afghanistan. Indian companies have made investments in the order of US\$ 25 million since 2001.⁴⁰ Services and construction can also be prime destinations for Indian investment in Afghanistan. India's economic presence in the country would significantly contribute to transform the aid-based Afghan economy to a self-sustaining and vibrant economy.



Source: *Delhi Investment Summit on Afghanistan 2012*

Although India has been granted *Hajigak* mines and has signed the deal for TAPI project, substantial progress is yet to be made in terms of implementation of these projects. Connectivity between the two countries is still a problem and how the minerals would be transported to India is a question that needs to be addressed. India's economic engagement has largely been state-driven, the private sector needs to be encouraged to come forward for investments and development after the security scenario is workable.

Conclusion

The prevailing international and regional political and economic dynamics highlight the necessity to establish durable peace and stability in Afghanistan. The international community, including the US, multilateral organisations, and neighbouring and regional countries are taking concerted efforts to stabilise Afghanistan. On the other hand, there is a strong urge on the part of common Afghan people as well as armed groups to end the long-running crisis affecting the country in all spheres.

India's policy towards Afghanistan has been inclusive, consistent and engaging. New Delhi has been constantly involved in political and development processes in Afghanistan and making meaningful contributions, which have also been taken positively by the common Afghans. Taking history and geo-politics into consideration, it is prudent not to send troops to Afghanistan. Nevertheless, effective and friendly government in Kabul that can successfully counter the threats of terrorism would remain the key objective for India. New Delhi also wishes a viable statehood, which incorporates virtues of democracy and good governance, in Afghanistan.

Despite the cautious approach, if the security and political situation becomes encouraging, India is likely to continue and enhance its development partnership with Afghanistan. In the economic sector, New Delhi is taking into consideration the basic requirements of Afghanistan and joining hands with regional countries, including Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Iran, in the inter-region energy and infrastructure projects. It seems that India is consciously avoiding major joint investments with western countries because that may lead to differences in the policies and priorities. Besides, it may affect the huge goodwill enjoyed by India among the common Afghan people. Gradually, Afghanistan is realising its economic potential and geostrategic positioning to be a gateway to Central Asia, and India in this context can play a critical role to make Afghanistan a model of bilateral and regional cooperation.

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End notes

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