

SIGNIFICANCE OF AFGHANISTAN IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

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Article History: Received on 15th July 2019, Revised on 30th August 2019, Published on 19th September 2019

Abstract

Purpose of the study: The purpose of the study is to understand the importance of Afghanistan in India's foreign policy. Being situated in the proximity of Pakistan and Central Asian countries, Afghanistan holds a strategic significance in India's neighbourhood foreign policy. Since the earlier period of time, the geographic location has made Afghanistan involved in any development occurred in Central Asia and South Asia.

Methodology: The study is interdisciplinary in nature. It is based on a comparative analysis of research methodology, comparing traditional and current relations between the nations. The study is empirical since it tries to explain the historical-cultural linkages of India and Afghanistan. The study also tries to investigate the obstacles furthering India's relations with Afghanistan and beyond. The study involves both descriptive and qualitative analysis. The study is based on both primary and secondary sources. While books, articles and newspaper reports are secondary sources in the study, primary sources comprised of government sources like an annual report, other relevant reports of the Ministry of External Affairs, etc.

Main Findings: India's policy towards Afghanistan is the embodiment of the soft power approach with a long term goal. Energy security and regional security connected with internal security are the topmost priorities of New Delhi factoring the significance of Afghanistan in India's neighbourhood foreign policy.

Applications of this study: This study can be useful for understanding International relations covering areas of India-Afghanistan relations, the significance of Afghanistan in India's foreign policy connecting with Central Asia and Iran.

Novelty/Originality of this study: India's strategic consideration factoring Afghanistan to connect Central Asia and Iran for energy security, regional and internal security.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Significance, Central Asia, Iran, regional, India.*

INTRODUCTION

India and Afghanistan share a strong historical and cultural relationship. The close cultural and historical relation of India and Afghanistan goes back to the period of the Great Silk Route. The Silk Route was a series of interconnected trade routes linking Asia and Europe in the ancient period. This Silk Route enhanced not only trade relations among the countries and regions but slowly a cultural interaction also started among people. For example, during ruler Ashoka's time, Buddhism has propagated sidewise the Silk Road over Kashmir to Afghanistan and Central Asia, finally rooted in China. Changes Khan used it during the 13th century to expand the Mongolian empire. The Great Silk Route existed from the second century BC to the 16th century AD. It got the name from the first item of transit trade-Chinese silk. Chinese Han Dynasty was the first extensive use of the Silk Route during the second century B C. After that successor empires in the region utilized the route and expanded thereafter such as the Roman Empire, Kushan Empire till Mughal Empire ([Joshi, 2011, pp. 20-31](#)).

Afghanistan's location between India and China is also a contributing factor for the promotion of cultural ties. The religious exchange among the nations of Afghanistan, India, including China and Central Asia was another factor of that interaction. Buddhism spread from India to China through Central Asia, whereas Islam came to India in a big way from Central Asia. There is a lot of cultural-religious heritage still visible today. A sleeping Buddha statue of 12 meters long in Tajikistan and a massive statue in Afghanistan although destroyed by Taliban shows the linkages. Sufism represented an important cultural interaction among the regions. Takshashila (now in Pakistan) was strategically located on the river Indus and the city of Puruspura (near Peshawar in Pakistan) ([Roy and Kumar, 2007, pp. 3-10](#)).

During the colonial era, the strategic significance of Afghanistan came as the region saw the Anglo-Russian rivalry in the 19th century. In the later period, it comes to know as the Great Game. In this game, Afghanistan became a buffer zone between two Great Empire; British India and the Russian Empire. Both empires wanted to carve out their sphere of influence and expand their empire in the neighboring region of Afghanistan, i.e. Central Asian region. The modern boundary of Afghanistan is also the creation of colonial time only. Since that time Afghanistan remaining a focal point in the region pertaining to superpower hegemony in the whole Central and South Asian region ([Warikoo, 2009, pp. 15-35](#)).

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF AFGHANISTAN IN INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

In terms of relations among nations, historical-cultural backgrounds always help to create a cooperative space in the present context of relationship. The relationship between India and Afghanistan is quite old and comprehensive. While the ancient pre-colonial era was marked by a trade link enhancing cultural-historical relations, post-colonial globalized era

compel the region to renovate their relations in a new way by looking for cooperation of strategic equation to fulfill their own national aspiration; be it political, geostrategic, economic or military.

With its geostrategic location neighbouring Central Asia, Pakistan, and Iran, Afghanistan has been the much-focused country in India's regional foreign policy. Besides, among the non-communist states, India was the first to stand with the government set by the Soviet Union after its invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Except for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, India supported the government in Kabul. India, also along with Russia and Iran supported the non-Pashtun Rabbani forces opposing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. India provided warfare apparatus, technical and medical support to the Northern Alliance forces in the border of Tajikistan. India also set up a medical facility in Farkhor on the Afghan-Tajik border to provide medical help to the soldiers ([Adnan and Fatima, 2015](#)).

India's security interest in Afghanistan started post hijacking the India flight 'IC-184' operated by Indian Airlines from Kathmandu in 1999 by Pakistan based terrorists to Kandahar in southern Afghanistan. The hijackers were funded and trained by the Taliban. India apparently established its first overseas airbase Ayni near Dushanbe in Tajikistan to defend its commercial flights to Europe. During the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, India experienced many security threats in terms of rising Islamic militant groups in the Kashmir valley which encouraged India to offer support to US-led war on terrorism in Afghanistan in the form of intelligence input. The fall of the Taliban government led India to actively participate in rebuilding efforts of Afghanistan ([Sachdeva, 2016](#)).

Two aspects in modern sense have developed in India's growing interest in Afghanistan and the neighboring region. First and foremost being the security and stability of Afghanistan, which is interlinked with India's domestic security, linking with Pakistan factor and India's Connect to Central Asian policy. India has been experiencing Pakistan sponsored terrorism and Pakistan's quest for a favorable heartland in Afghanistan expandable to Central Asia covering radical Islamic groups. To counter, India approached through development measures to change the political economy of Afghanistan. More than 100 companies of Indian origin have invested in the market of Afghanistan since 2001 ([Hanauer and Chalk, 2012](#)). The sectors range from sectors of construction, pharmacy, industrial development, and services, etc. Both countries also have signed a preferential agreement on a trade to increase trade and investment between the countries. India ranks the second position as a trade partner in terms of export destination of Afghan commodities (World Bank Group, 2019). Although the trade volume is below the potential level, both countries are trying to ease the impediments between the countries. The landlocked nature of Afghanistan's location and Pakistan's transit denial to India are major obstacles in this regard. Moreover, New Delhi has been working with Kabul for the extraction of untapped natural resources. India won the mining right of the Hajigak iron ore which is the largest iron ore deposit in Afghanistan. So far, this is the single largest venture in Afghanistan by any country. Additionally, India's construction of road within Afghanistan and between Iran and Afghanistan from Delaram to Zaranj through the signing of MoU in 2003 between India, Iran, and Afghanistan shows India's active and strident strategic role in the region in coming years ([Kumar, 2013](#)). It shows India's courage to sidestep Pakistan and approach to other countries bypassing the Gwadar port of Pakistan and facilitate the movement of goods to and fro through Iranian port to Afghanistan and Central Asia. India already has started connectivity and trade via the Chabahar port of Iran to Afghanistan. In terms of military cooperation, India has limited its involvement by only sending helicopters, assisting and training the Afghan military personnel. India has to be very cautious furthering the defense cooperation with Afghanistan as it has been a part of a longstanding warzone between super and regional powers. A regional forum would be more beneficial seeing not only the past experiences of Afghanistan's political situation but due to its location in the junction of Central Asia and South Asia and neighboring two great military power of the world; China and Russia.

On the other hand, Pakistan, bordering country of both Afghanistan and India, and also the only land route between the two is an important factor for India. Pakistan also sees India's involvement in Afghanistan in a skeptical way due to all-time hostility with India. It has also reserved transit right to India connecting through their land to Afghanistan. However, the international community always recognized India's humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan in a positive way and appreciate India's efforts. Moreover, Pakistan in recent time is facing their home-grown terrorism problems and accepted the fact that economic integration and development of Afghanistan is necessary for their own economic development. Agreement on development of TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India) pipeline projects by all stakeholders is a good example of this initiative ([Noorani, 2015](#)).

Secondly, to get access to the energy-rich market of Iran, Central Asia, and further Russia, India except Pakistan hold a good relationship with its northern neighboring region. With Russia, Iran and Central Asia, India shares warm friendly cooperation. India is heavily dependent on crude oil imports from Gulf countries. Iran in addition, in terms of oil import has been playing a key role. India's daily crude oil import from Iran was 425,000 barrels which makes Iran, India's second-largest crude oil supplier till 2018. India too is prime foreign investors in Iran's oil and gas industry. However, the increasing crisis between Trump administration and Iran has halted furthering cooperation between the two. India has been approaching President Trump to exempt India's engagement with Tehran especially in the energy sector and in the cooperation of the development of Chabahar port ([Ghosh, 2019](#)). Additionally, in Central Asia, India already has invested in major oil fields. The two major energy-rich countries of Central Asia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan share energy cooperation agreement with India. In Kazakhstan, India has invested in the Satpayev oil field (25 percent stake) while the development of TAPI that includes Turkmenistan. India along with Afghanistan, The undergoing TAPI pipeline project is

an important project hoping to carry the energy from Turkmenistan to India via Pakistan and Afghanistan. The project carries significance furthering peace, cooperation and development in the region ([Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs 2015-16, Govt. of India](#)). Although all stakeholders are agreed to develop the same, the security situation in Afghanistan is the major impediment for this project. Hence, a secure and stable Afghanistan is a prime requirement for the development of the whole region. On the other hand, in Central Asia, during the visit of Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi to Central Asia inaugurated the first drilling of the Satpayev oil block with the premier of Kazakhstan Karim Massimov. The attempt was to conduct a viability study on importing crude oil and gas through pipeline or LNG in ships from Kazakhstan. It is expected to carry the hydrocarbons via the Caspian Sea through Iran. India also shares an MoU with Kazatomprom envisaging cooperation on the supply of uranium to India for the civil nuclear purpose ([Tej Kadam 2015, Embassy of India, Kazakhstan](#)). Currently, Kazakhstan is the largest producer of Uranium and is one of the significant top most reservoirs of uranium. It is the most resourceful country in Central Asia and one of the important partners of India among Central Asian countries ([Energy Report: Kazakhstan, U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2019](#)). New Delhi shares nuclear agreement with Astana that makes Kazakhstan the fifth country to supply uranium to India for civilian energy purposes. Besides Kazakhstan, the rest countries are the US, France, Mongolia, and Russia. Accordingly, the Nuclear Power Corporation of India will begin to import annually at least 2100 tonnes Kazakhstan's uranium to India ([India-Kazakhstan relations, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2018](#)). However, Lack of access through land or sea has created a difficult situation for India to imports energy from Central Asia. Pakistan's denials to transit right to India through its land to Afghanistan hampering to link these two regions. However, India along with Iran, Central Asia, and Russia are searching an alternative trade route to connect India with the region. The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is connectivity route comprising rail, ship, and roadways for cargo movement among India, Iran, Central Asia, Russia, and Europe. The objective of the corridor is to increase trade and connectivity between major cities of the region such as Mumbai, Tehran, Bandar Abbas, Moscow, Astrakhan, etc. India is helping Iran to develop its Chabahar port to connect Afghanistan and Central Asia. India is also supporting to develop the border region of Central Asia and Afghanistan to connect with the Chabahar port of Iran ([Roy, 2019](#)). These developmental measures of India can be retrieved in a positive aspect of India's role in Afghanistan and its neighboring region. However, the recent escalation of tension between Tehran and Washington has posed as a major challenge in India's furthering relations with Iran that may affect India's interest in Afghanistan and the region.

WAR ON TERRORISM AND INDIA'S ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN

India has been playing a significant role in the rebuilding and restoration efforts in war-torn Afghanistan. New Delhi has been actively engaged with Kabul in the process of societal and economic development of common people that will carry prosperity and stability in Afghanistan first and the region at large. India's assistance towards Afghanistan mainly focused on the humanitarian grounds which affects the common Afghan people. New Delhi aims to increase partnership with the government of Afghanistan by assisting to build up indigenous capacity and institutions encompassing all the potential areas that will touch the life of common people. The Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between India and Afghanistan in October 2011 during the visit of Afghan President Hamid Karzai reflects India's support towards the reconstruction of Afghanistan ([Ghosh, 2013](#)). It is primarily based on multi-faceted relations between the two countries for cooperation in various areas, be it geostrategic, economic or security. The agreement indicates India's committed steps towards Afghanistan's stability, peace, and prosperity during the crucial governance transition period. India's assistance in Afghanistan has widely targeted various sectors identified by the Afghan government which covers community development projects, capacity development projects, and infrastructure projects.

As part of capacity development projects, India provides annual scholarships to Afghan students intended to study in Indian Universities, numbering almost 1000 per year. Similarly, in the Agriculture sector too, India is closely working with Afghanistan. To renovate the agricultural sector, India is assisting fellowships to Afghan people to enhance knowledge in the agricultural sector. New Delhi has been associating with the Afghan government to make sure the development of capacity building along with institutions which includes training and scholarships to the civil servants of Afghanistan. As community service, Indian doctors are assisting and actively participating in healthcare services to the common Afghan people ([Kumar, 2013](#)). In the sector of communication and connectivity, India put projects to connect eleven provincial capitals with a telecommunication network and a television network across the country. Also, a power grid line was set up for additional power supply between Uzbekistan and Kabul. In construction-related projects, India completed the construction of Afghanistan's parliamentary building, the Salma Dam in Herat province and 220 km road to link Afghanistan with Chabahar port of Iran. Apart from these, India supplied aircraft, buses and other vehicles as part of development projects in Afghanistan ([Kumar, 2013](#)). All these socio-economic development projects were carried out in Afghan border areas. India also involved in building schools, colleges, hospitals, bore-wells and distributing biscuits, wheat, etc. These actions made Afghanistan to consider India as a friendly nation. Afghanistan applauded New Delhi's effort in reconstruction projects throughout the country. Former President of Afghanistan, Karzai repeatedly hails India as a 'great friend' ([Kamboj, 2013](#)). India has a historical relationship with Afghanistan closely sharing each other's privileged civilization. India has been supporting Afghanistan's efforts to stand as a peaceful and prosperous democratic country. Moreover, India's growing steps in Central Asia through strategic policy measures covering economic, energy and military support has been benefiting both the regions. This has further heightened the Afghan factor in the relation between the two countries as both share common interests and concerns in the region. India is also a member of many regional forums and

dialogues on Afghanistan. The Istanbul Process is also known as 'Heart of Asia Process' is such a regional dialogue on Afghanistan comprising of member countries like India, China, Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. Western countries along with the UN are also a supporter of this process. The 'Heart of Asia Process' takes action to counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics. It also deals in economic development aspects along with education, regional infrastructure and response to natural disasters. These cooperation involve a series of confidence-building measures by each member group countries ([Embassy of India, Kabul 2019](#)). SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), SAARC, etc. are some regional organizations where both countries share a platform with other regional countries. Besides, India contrasts to its previous stand, agreed to share a platform on peaceful negotiation with Taliban on the future stability of Afghanistan.

CURRENT POLICY APPROACH OF INDIA ON AFGHANISTAN

The current policy of India in Afghanistan is reflective of its growing engagement with Central Asian countries and Iran. Regional stability connected with Pakistan factor is another important aspect in this regard. Moreover, the present scenario of stability and security of Afghanistan is very fragile. The crisis on a peaceful transition of power via democratic way, the repeated failed negotiations with Taliban, continuous terrorist attacks of Taliban and emergence of ISIS in Afghanistan has threatened and far more complicated the security and stability of Afghanistan ([Kugelman, 2019](#)).

New Delhi, furthering its relations with Kabul believed in cooperation with the US on one hand and other regions like-minded countries on the other to tackle the security and enhance stability in the region. India is part of both bilateral and multi-level engagement in Afghanistan. At the multilateral level, India is part of SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), Ashgabat Agreement, the Heart of Asia Conference and India-Central Asia Dialogue ([Kaura, 2017](#)). India's approach to Afghanistan encompasses the stability and security of the region to further connectivity and prosperity for the greater region.

CONCLUSION

New Delhi's policy towards Afghanistan represents a soft power approach with a long term goal. In terms of historical and cultural interactions, India enjoys amicable relations with Afghanistan. India and Afghanistan signed a 'Friendship Treaty' agreement in 1950. In the Post 9/11 era, both also have signed a strategic agreement in 2011 to enhanced cooperation further. India has successfully attracted the common people of Afghanistan through its humanitarian assistance. Indian humanitarian efforts already have crossed \$2 billion positing as the foremost regional aid-giving country in Afghanistan. Despite many threats and attacks, New Delhi has been engaged in continuing its development assistance to the people of Afghanistan.

The energy security and regional security connected with internal security are the topmost priorities of New Delhi factoring the importance of Afghanistan in India's neighborhood foreign policy. India has participated in regional connectivity project such as INSTC (International North-South Transport Corridor) to secure India's energy security from the energy-rich countries of Iran, Russia and Central Asia. The 'Connect Central Asia Policy' is another important policy that meant to enhance future energy cooperation with Central Asian countries. The increasing energy demand while lack of energy resources, the overdependence on Gulf countries to meet the energy demand, etc. led the emergence of Central Asia along with Russia and Iran as additional energy outlets for India. Besides, Russia and Iran share good friendly cooperation with India since earlier time. Although the land route is a problem to communicate, the development of INSTC could lead to a major change promoting regional cooperation among the countries. New Delhi is also supporting and helping the infrastructure and developmental projects in Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia to link South Asia, Central Asia and further beyond. India's cooperation in the development of the Chabahar port of Iran is important which was mentioned above has the prospect to link Afghanistan with Central Asia via the port. India along with other regional powers believes in the economic integration of Afghanistan with regional groupings to stabilize the region in future. Geographical proximity leads the significance of Afghanistan in India's north neighborhood foreign policy. It has a regional perspective to understand the relations between the two nations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study is an outcome of the multifarious inputs and comprehensive feedback provided by several personalities. I appreciate all the materials and ideas received through my teachers especially Prof. Ajay Patnaik. I am indebted to the library staff of Jawaharlal Nehru University, ICWA for making the materials readily available. Finally, I would like to thank my family for their unconditional love and support.

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