

INDO-AFGHAN POLITICAL RELATION UNDER MODI GOVERNMENT

Afroz Ahmad*
Najish**

ABSTRACT

In the General Election held in 2014, India once again broke its own record by conducting the largest democratic exercise in history. The victorious Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a majority in the Lok Sabha becoming the first party to do so since 1984 and the first-ever non-Indian National Congress Party to rule India's federal government without need for coalition partners. During the election campaign, Modi blamed Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) that it has failed to endure friendly and cooperative relations with India's neighbors. He also made promise that if BJP will come to power, his leadership will take sufficient steps to revive friendly relations with neighbors. Since coming into power, Modi government has been continuously seeking to fulfill those promises by forging friendly ties with India's neighboring states. This paper seeks to examine the continuity and changes that have taken place in foreign policy of India towards Indo-Afghanistan relations under Modi Government.

Keywords: Afghanistan, changes, continuity, foreign policy, political reconciliation, rebuilding.

INTRODUCTION

The historical roots of India-Afghan relations can be traced back to ancient time. The friendship between India and Afghanistan are not solely restricted to the governments in New Delhi and Kabul. They have had strong historical contacts based on exchanges between the tradition, culture, and people. The bilateral ties between India and Afghanistan spans centuries, given Afghanistan's close links to the South Asian civilisation historically. India has traditionally maintained strong cultural ties with Afghanistan, resulting in stable relations between the two States.

***Afroz Ahmad** is a Research Scholar at the Centre for Research and Security Studies, School of International Studies, Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar, India. Email: afrozcug@gmail.com

****Ms. Najish** is a Research Scholar at Centre for Indo-Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Email: najish.jnu@gmail.com

INDIA-AFGHAN POLITICAL RELATION

The present India- Afghan relations can be traced to King Zahir Shah (1933-1973). During the regime of King Zahir Shah, India enjoyed healthy and amicable relations with Afghanistan. Even after his overthrow, India managed to maintain good relations with succeeding communist regimes.¹ During the Cold War period, the two States tend to embrace almost similar foreign policy. While India was one of the active members of the Non-Aligned Movement, Afghanistan also tried to forge an independent foreign policy and, briefly was able to effectively play one superpower against the other thereby garnering economic assistance from both sides. Gradually, due to changing regional equations in South Asia where on the one hand the USA sought to establish close ties with Pakistan and on the other the Soviet Union started providing extensive military and economic aid generously. In such scenario, Afghanistan gradually fell into the Soviet orbit of influence, culminating in the Soviet invasion in 1979.

The Non-Aligned Movement was divided on this issue, and India was one of the few nations to support the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, thereby damaging severely its prestige and credibility in the international community.² The collapse of the Soviet puppet regime of Mohammad Najibullah and the resulting civil war inside the country left India with limited influence in the country. Indeed even during the Burhanuddin Rabbani regime (1992-1996) in Afghanistan, India had a limited presence in the country.³ In 1996, when Taliban came to power, India was at a loss to evolve a coherent foreign policy response. As Taliban had close ties with Pakistan, India's ties with Afghanistan hit their nadir through the Taliban's seven year rule when India supported the Northern Alliance of Ahmed Shah Massoud to oppose the Taliban by providing money and material.⁴

The dreadful terrorist attack on the United States on 11 September 2001 changed the political scenario in South Asia when the US declared War on Terror. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government promptly offered the US logistical support for military action against the Taliban regime.⁵ Ever since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, India has tried to pursue a proactive Afghanistan policy, and a broad-based interaction is taking place between the two states.⁶ The emergence of the Karzai regime in the wake of the toppling of the Taliban gave India an opportunity to rebuild its ties with Afghanistan. Karzai, who had obtained much of his education in India, was well disposed towards pursuing a cordial relationship.⁷ India actively participated in the Bonn Conference and was instrumental in the emergence of post-Taliban governing and political authority in Afghanistan. Since then, India's main focus has been to support the Afghan government and the political process in the country as mandated under the Bonn Agreement of 2001.⁸ India has continued to pursue a policy of high-level engagement with Afghanistan through extensive and wide-ranging humanitarian, financial, and project assistance, as well as participation in international efforts aimed at political reconciliation and economic rebuilding of the country.⁹

During each of his visits to India by President Karzai, several important bilateral initiatives have been announced by both sides. New Delhi has emerged as one of Afghanistan's top six donors, having extended a \$500 million aid package in 2001 and gradually increasing it ever since. This includes a \$70 million financial commitment by India for the construction of the

Zaranj-Delaram road; a Preferential Trade agreement between the two states. This project was completed in 2008 by India's Border Roads Organization despite stiff resistance from the Taliban. The security of the Indian workers on this project was provided by a 300-man-strong paramilitary force furnished by India, which caused the project to exceed time and monetary deadlines. The Indo-Afghan Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)(2006) includes, inter alia, cooperation in the fields of civil aviation, media and information, rural development, standardization, and education; and the establishment of a Joint Committee at the level of Commerce Ministers to conclude an Export-Import (Exim) Bank Line of Credit of \$50 million to promote business-to-business relations. Afghanistan has also required Indian aid in agri-technology, which would halt desertification, deforestation, and water wastage in Afghanistan.¹⁰ India has built Afghanistan's new Parliament building and trained its legislators. It has also helped build a power transmission line to Kabul and developed a hydroelectric project at the Salma Dam in Herat at a cost of \$180 million.¹¹ Furthermore, India has also been active in providing various forms of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. India is also investing in the rebuilding of institutional capacity in Afghanistan by providing training to more than 700 Afghans in various professions, including diplomats, lawyers, judges, doctors, paramedics, women entrepreneurs, teachers, officials in various departments of Afghanistan's government, public officials, and cartographers. Afghanistan's public transport system relies on Indian support, as India is not only providing buses but also training traffic operators and other personnel related to transport. Finally, it granted as many as 500 scholarships on an annual basis to Afghan students under the aegis of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR).¹² The former Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, visited Afghanistan in 2005, the first by an Indian head of government in 29 years. (Indira Gandhi visited Kabul in 1976, the last Indian Prime Minister to do so before Singh). In an act of significant symbolism, Singh's visit was also the first by a foreign Head of State or government to last for more than a day since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001, as Singh brushed aside concerns for his security and demonstrated India's special commitment to Afghanistan.¹³ During the visit, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced that India would adopt 100 villages in Afghanistan to promote integrated rural development by introducing solar electrification and rainwater harvesting using technologies that have been developed and successfully demonstrated in India. While announcing a gift of 1000 sewing machine to the Ministry of Women's Affairs, it was agreed that India would assist in establishing a Women's Vocational Training Centre in Kabul.¹⁴

However the strategic realities in South Asia radically changed in the aftermath of killing of al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden by US commandos in the Pakistani town of Abbottabad on 2 May 2011. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh lost no time in reaching out to Afghanistan with his two-day visit to Kabul, where he announced a fresh commitment of \$500 million for Afghanistan's development, over and above India's existing aid assistance of around \$1.5 billion.¹⁵ New Delhi and Kabul agreed that the "strategic partnership" between the two neighbors, to be implemented under the framework of a Partnership Council to be headed by the foreign ministers of the two nations, would entail cooperation in areas of security, law enforcement and justice, including an enhanced focus on cooperation in the fight against international terrorism, organized crime, illegal trafficking in narcotics, and money laundering. The Indian Prime Minister, in a rare honour, addressed a Joint Session of the Afghan Parliament,

underscoring Indo-Afghan unity in fighting extremism. Most significant of all was Singh's expression of India's support for the Afghan government's plan of national reconciliation involving Taliban insurgents, thereby signalling an end to India's public opposition to a deal with the Taliban and bridging a strategic gap with the US.¹⁶

New Delhi's review of its regional foreign-policy priorities couldn't have come at a more urgent time. The Indian Prime Minister's visit was followed by the signing of a landmark strategic partnership agreement between New Delhi and Kabul during Hamid Karzai's visit to New Delhi in October 2011, which commits India to "training, equipping, and capacity building" of the Afghan security forces. India has pledged to train and equip Afghan army and police force, expanding on limited training it conducted for the Army in India a few years back in 2007. India acceded to Afghanistan's request for 150 army officers to receive training at Indian defence and military academies and also agreed to begin hosting training sessions for Afghan police officers.¹⁷

The two nations agreed to enhance political cooperation and institutionalise regular bilateral political and foreign office consultations. Underscoring its role as Afghanistan's main economic partner, India hosted the "*Delhi Investment Summit on Afghanistan*" in June 2012, where it called upon the private sector in the regional states to invest in Afghanistan "to create a virtuous cycle of healthy economic competition in Afghanistan."¹⁸ The strategic pact with India is Afghanistan's way of trying to deal with an increasingly menacing Pakistan. During his visit to New Delhi, Karzai was categorical in stating that South Asia faced "dangers from terrorism and extremism used as an instrument of policy against innocent civilians."¹⁹

INDIA- AFGHAN RELATIONS UNDER MODI GOVERNMENT

After an overwhelming success in 2014 historic election BJP came to power, Modi invited heads of government of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in his swearing ceremony. Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's President, readily accepted the invitation. After the ceremony, Modi described new government's first major initiative in foreign policy as the "right decision at the right time" with neighboring countries.²⁰

First in the list, the Hon'ble Minister of External Affairs Smt. Sushma Swaraj visited Afghanistan and called on the President Karzai and jointly inaugurated a monumental Afghan Flag on 10 September 2014. This flag, a symbol of Afghan unity and nationhood was organised with assistance from various sponsors including the Flag Foundation of India. India announced the US \$ 1 million for creation of a National Public Park around the flag. Sushma Swaraj also inaugurated the new Chancery complex in Kabul from which the Embassy has started operating since July 2014. She pointed out that this was the clearest statement of 'No Exit' policy by India. During the '*Heart of Asia 2015 Conference*', Ministry of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj led a high level delegation to Islamabad. In the conference, Ministry of External Affairs stressed on increased connectivity, regional trade and openness with Afghanistan, and also "extended India's hand towards Pakistan" in this regard. PM Modi met the new President Dr Ghani on the sidelines of the SAARC Summit in Kathmandu in November 2014.

In 2014, Presidential elections were held in Afghanistan. After a protracted electoral process for two rounds of elections and UN mediated audit process, a Political Agreement was signed between two leading contenders Dr Ashraf Ghani and Dr Abdullah Abdullah which led to the formation of National Unity government, inaugurated on 29 September 2014. On 14 March 2015, Abdullah Abdullah, Chief Executive of Afghanistan arrived in India for a three days visit. During his visit he met with Hamid Ansari, the Vice President of India and some other high ranking government officials. He also participated in India Conclave Conference organised by the *India Today* magazine. President Dr Ashraf Ghani, paid an official visit to India in April 2015. During the visit, President Ghani met President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee; Prime Minister of India Shri. Narendra Modi; and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, Both sides discussed the cooperation and assistance in various sectors including the health, education, agriculture, disaster management, power sector and electoral management.²¹

On 25th December 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, along with a high-level delegation paid a visit to Afghanistan. During his visit he called on President Ashraf Ghani; he met Chief Executive, Dr Abdullah and Former President Hamid Karzai. During his visit he inaugurated the newly built Afghan Parliament; and Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced 500 scholarships for the children of the martyrs of Afghan Security Forces in school and colleges both in Afghanistan and in India. Prime Minister Modi also gifted four Mi 25 Attack helicopter to Afghan Air Forces.

Prime Minister Modi and President Ghani discussed key aspects of utilisation of India's pledged assistance of over US\$ 2 billion for development in Afghanistan. The Prime Minister also assured the President that as always, India will continue to be guided by the priorities and requirements of the Government of Afghanistan, including priorities for reconstruction in Kunduz in the aftermath of terrorist rampage. The two leaders noted with satisfaction that India-assisted projects including Doshi and Charikar sub-stations and India-Afghanistan Friendship Dam in Chishti Sharif, Herat was to be fully functional shortly. President Ghani apprised Prime Minister Modi of the vast benefits to agriculture and the common man that would accrue from the Dam.²²

President Ghani and Prime Minister Modi exchanged views on the security situation in Afghanistan, which faces serious challenges of terrorism, extremism and narcotics. Strongly condemning the barbaric incidents of terrorism in Afghanistan in recent months, the two leaders reiterated that peace in Afghanistan required the elimination of terrorism perpetrated and supported from sanctuaries and safe havens. Prime Minister Modi expressed deep admiration of the people of India for their brave Afghan brothers and sisters in combating all forms of terrorism at great cost to them. The two leaders agreed that groups and individuals that perpetrate violence on the people of Afghanistan and challenge by use of violence and terror against the Government of Afghanistan cannot be allowed to exercise control or wield influence over any part of Afghanistan's territory in any manner whatsoever, as that would pose serious risks to the gains of the last nearly one and half decades, and renew those very threats against which the people of Afghanistan and international community had resolutely fought and made great sacrifices. In June, 2016, PM Modi made yet another trip to Afghanistan during which he with President Ghani jointly inaugurated the \$290 million Salma Dam in

Herat. The water from the dam will help irrigate the parched region and assist the country in taking advantage of the opportunities once the Chabahar port is completed. During the visit, it has been decided to conduct the first Strategic Partnership Council meeting headed by the Foreign Minister of the both country in the first quarter of 2016 along with four joint working group meetings.²³

Recently on 24th October 2017, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani made a rushed visit to India, at the invitation of Prime Minister Modi. This was President Ghani's fourth visit to India in the last three years and the 12th personal interaction between the two leaders. During the visit both leaders discussed the issues related to cross-border terrorism and greater cooperation with India. According to the Joint Statement issued after the meeting between the two leaders, President Ghani appreciated India's "efforts in defence and security fields, including training of thousands of Afghan defence and security personnel". The Indian side "agreed to extend further assistance depending upon the needs of the Afghan defence and police forces". The Indian "leadership reiterated its support for a negotiated political reconciliation in Afghanistan that is Afghan led, Afghan owned and Afghan controlled. It was emphasised that renunciation of violence and terror; and closure of state-sponsored safe havens and sanctuaries were essential for any meaningful progress and lasting peace".²⁴

Both sides agreed that the recent convergence and alignment of views at regional and international arenas have created opportunities for bringing peace, security and stability in Afghanistan. It was agreed to further deepen the bilateral strategic dialogue and consultations at all levels in order to achieve the shared objectives". Both sides "discussed the possibility for early operationalisation of the Chabahar Port, including the shipments of wheat in coming weeks to Afghanistan through the port. This step is vital in shaping new trade and transit opportunities for landlocked Afghanistan. The Indian side reiterated the readiness of its Integrated Check Post at Attari for receiving Afghan trucks carrying goods to and from India". Both sides "agreed to work closely with the regional and international partners; and consult, coordinate and cooperate in various international fora, with the view to further the objective of seeing Afghanistan emerge as a stable, peaceful, united, progressive, prosperous and pluralistic nation".²⁵

CONCLUSION

In recent times, India's foreign policy towards Afghanistan has been geared more actively to secure a reciprocal friendship believing that such tie is beneficial for both sides. Since ancient times, both India and Afghanistan have been linked through cultural linkages. Though the partition of British India changed the geographical contiguity still it did not alter the warmth that both shared from time immemorial. Today Indo-Afghanistan relations are multidimensional and unique in scope and characterization as both countries have acknowledged complete sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of each other. For India, the geographical location of Afghanistan makes it an immediate neighbor as well a gateway to/from central Asia. The importance of India in the wake of being a rising economic power is irresistible not only in region but at international arena. For post-independent India, Afghanistan showed its

firm support to India against Pakistan on the issue of Kashmir as well as Pakistan's entry into UN in 1948. Amidst the changing power equations during the Cold war and Indira Gandhi's stand on Soviet invasion of Afghanistan generated discomfort for both countries, still they managed to maintain cordial ties in terms of cultural linkages as well as economic assistance. In 1996, India suffered greatest strategic setback with the rise of the Pakistan-backed Taliban to the centre stage in Afghanistan. Afghanistan under Taliban then notoriously shifted towards becoming a hub of terrorism which India had faced in form of bloody Islamic insurgency in Kashmir and hijacking of Indian airliner IC 814 to Kandahar in 1999. The post- 9/11 events tilted India towards favouring the opposition Northern Alliance against Taliban under the international clamour for "War on Terror".

The Indo-Afghan relation under President Hamid Karzai was seen as an attempt of reviving old ties by means of extending diplomatic and extensive humanitarian support to the Karzai Government by India. Remarkably, under Modi government the ties ameliorate onto a new level of increased connectivity, regional trade and openness with Afghanistan. Indian PM Modi emphasized on "Development and Good Governance" as key to reinvigorate its relationship with international community under the theme '*Chalein Saath Saath: Forward Together We Go*' and '*Sanjha Prayas, Sab ka Vikas: Shared Effort, Progress for All*'. Regular visits by leaders on both sides further cemented the ties between the two. Both India and Afghanistan have expressed mutual concerns over tackling the issues of terrorism, extremism and narcotics. It is important to keep in mind that despite the close ethnic, religious and geographical contiguity with Pakistan, Afghanistan tends to forge strong ties with India. This actually is a plus point for India because any upheaval in Afghanistan has direct impact on Indian security aspects. Similarly being a rising economic power in the region, India can provide huge assistance to Afghanistan in form of aid and intelligence for its stability in political as well as economic affairs. Both States have understood this very well that a mutual bonding based on common interest is vital for each other. Prime Minister Modi continuously sought to take this relationship to a new level from bilateral to multilateral engagement. The vulnerability of both India and Afghanistan towards growing terror activities prompted the two nations to take pledge in enhancing cooperation against terrorism and establishing peace throughout the region.

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