

# INDIA'S PRIORITIES AND CONCERNS IN AFGHANISTAN

SHALINI CHAWLA

In recent years, the India-Afghanistan relationship has grown at an accelerated pace and the Afghan leadership has been very appreciative of India's developmental assistance. Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani's visit to New Delhi in 2017 once again demonstrated Kabul's trust in New Delhi as a reliable partner. India, indeed, has been consistent in its approach with Kabul and has been engaged actively in providing development and humanitarian assistance. India-Afghanistan relations have gone through highs and lows owing to strategic developments but, by and large, post 2001, the two countries have shared a cordial relationship which has not been limited to governmental exchanges but has also been driven by strong people-to-people contacts and New Delhi's developmental engagement with Afghanistan. President Ghani's term, in fact, has seen noticeable developments in India's initiatives in Afghanistan: the construction of the Afghan Parliament and the launch of air freight corridors. India has deep-rooted civilisational ties with Afghanistan and has maintained its position as a supporting actor, with focus on development and capacity building in Afghanistan.

The geographical location of Kabul at the strategic crossroads between South Asia and Central Asia as well as South Asia and the Middle East, makes it extremely important for India. New Delhi's relationship with Kabul

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Dr **Shalini Chawla** is Senior Fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

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suffered a major blow during the Taliban's seven year rule in the 1990s, when India continued to support the Northern Alliance. The fall of the Taliban regime post 9/11 once again allowed Indian diplomatic presence and engagement in Afghanistan.

India has growing stakes in peace and stability in Afghanistan. India's policy in Afghanistan faces multiple challenges, including the most significant ones posed by Islamabad and the radical Taliban which reportedly controls a large part of Afghanistan at present. India also needs to deal with the challenges posed by the growing interests of the major actors in Afghanistan: China and Russia.

## INDIA'S OBJECTIVES IN AFGHANISTAN

### *Shaping Regional Influence*

India has enduring problems within and in its neighbourhood, and has made efforts to move beyond these contentious issues into the wider international system. As a global player, and with its rising power image, India certainly wants to be a partner in the growth of the region. India aims to rise to power within the context of its troubled neighbourhood and the important question for the leadership in New Delhi has been regarding how India would integrate within South Asia.<sup>1</sup> The political leadership has made efforts for regional integration and the shaping of a stable Asian order. The determinants of power normally include the size of a country, its population, economic growth, military modernisation, the competence of its industry and industrial growth, its natural resources and its capability to influence policy making at the global level. A country's power is also determined by the influence it exercises in its neighbouring states, what Joseph Nye termed as

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1. For details, see Sandy Gordon, *India's Rise as an Asian Power: Nation, Neighborhood and Region*, (New Delhi: Foundation House, 2015), p. xxi.

“soft power”. The regional influence could also be a mix of soft and hard power depending on the relationship with the specific country, which was termed as “smart power” by Joseph Nye. India’s steps in Afghanistan have to be viewed in this context of shaping regional influence.

India has had historical and cultural linkages with Afghanistan and has always worked towards strengthening its ties with Kabul. Assistance to Afghanistan is part of India’s strategy to carve out its own position in South Asia as an influential regional power.

India’s posturing as an important player in the region helps in achieving its strategic objectives. India’s economic and military growth in the last decades has been significant, and has complemented its strategy to expand its regional influence. New Delhi wants to establish its credentials as a preeminent power, has stakes in the stability of the region and is eager to invest in regional peace and development. Needless to say that India’s geographical size, skilled human resource, large young population and positive economic growth allow it to take that positioning. India has managed to expand its soft power reasonably in Afghanistan, and the Afghans view India as a stabilising influence.

India’s growth as an economic power and its integration into the global economy has led to its image boost and, more importantly, the positive perception that it can assist in strengthening the stability. Moreover, New Delhi, as a responsible big power, cannot afford to have an unstable Afghanistan in its neighbourhood. While India has tried to build a balance in its engagement with different ethnic groups in Afghanistan, the balance was tilted in favour of the Pashtuns during Karzai’s period when India became quite vocal about its support to President Karzai. The former Afghan leader has close ties with India, given the fact that he is educated in India and one of his children was born in India. President Ghani too looks towards India

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for support and has displayed consistent trust in India's will and ability to assist Afghanistan's development.

### *Countering Pakistan's Anti-India Moves*

Pakistan's role in Afghanistan caters to its deep strategic interests which are in contradiction with stability in Afghanistan. For more than three decades, Pakistan has been adopting policies to fulfill its desire to create *strategic depth* in Afghanistan. Pakistan's military leadership and its intelligence agency, which authored and executed the policy of strategic depth in the late 1980s through to the 1990s, when it strongly backed the Taliban, still strongly believes in having control over Afghanistan. The aim of gaining strategic depth in Afghanistan was never a viable or logical option and is considered a strategic blunder which further facilitated Pakistan's drift into extremism and did not allow it to alter its strategic calculus. Pakistan's strategy did not succeed in Afghanistan and none of its objectives, including controlling the Pashtun nationalism at the border, the lingering Durand Line issue, or countering the Indian presence in any form in Afghanistan, was actually fulfilled. However, Pakistan's influence and its desire to pursue its objectives have not allowed Kabul to stabilise.

Pakistan has consistently tried to thwart India's efforts and moves in Afghanistan. For Islamabad, Afghanistan was one of the most logical choices to be used to balance India's influence in South Asia. A pro-India regime in Afghanistan was never acceptable to Islamabad as it would counter Pakistan's objectives in Afghanistan. Pakistan does have a leverage in Afghanistan due to the Pashtun-ethnic linkage.

Pakistan has followed the strategy of covert war through terrorism against India for more than 35 years now. It adopted the covert war strategy as early as 1947 when it launched its first aggression against India under the guise of a tribal revolt. In the 1965 War, Pakistan's aggression through covert war was launched with Operation Gibraltar, followed by the overt Operation Grand Slam. In the 1980s and 1990s, Pakistan accelerated its covert activities through proxy war not only in the Kashmir Valley but also in other parts of India (Punjab). Pakistan's covert war activities and its policy to use terrorism as a

foreign policy tool against India, accelerated since the late 1980s, which could be correlated to the expertise it had gathered as a frontline state during the Afghan War. Islamabad's acquisition of nuclear technology in 1987 further strengthened its confidence to initiate acts of terror, as the nuclear capability was to act as a shield against Indian retaliation in response to terrorism.

Afghanistan provided Pakistan a safe haven to train the anti-India state sponsored groups: Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). These groups have been actively conducting terrorist activities in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and also in other parts of India. One of the prime objectives of Pakistan in pursuing its strategy of strategic depth was to use Afghanistan as a sanctuary to train and equip anti-India terror groups. All the groups are trained in Afghanistan, with varying proximity to the Taliban and, by extension, Al Qaeda. There have been several attacks on the Indian Embassy, diplomats, and workers, with the Taliban's assistance, in Afghanistan, constraining India's ability to work. It is essential for India to have firm ground in Afghanistan and retain its political and diplomatic influence in Kabul to be able to control Islamabad's ambitions.

For Pakistan, it is desirable that India's role gets restricted as it would provide Islamabad ample space to pursue its objectives. Pakistan desires a pro-Pakistan government in Kabul which would facilitate its ambitions of controlling Pashtun nationalism on its borders, using Afghanistan as a sanctuary against India, using Afghanistan's territory during any future India-Pakistan War, and catering to the commercial interests of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) which have developed over the decades in the form of illicit activities, including drug trade, in Afghanistan. In the 1990s, the leadership in Islamabad not only created, but fully assisted the radical Taliban regime in Afghanistan to be able to maintain its control in the region and also deny space to India. In 2003, when the US was distracted in Iraq, Gen Musharraf facilitated the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban has reestablished itself in Afghanistan now and controls a significant part of the territory. Afghanistan, in fact, is riddled with complex security challenges, with the Taliban, Al Qaeda

and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) spreading their tentacles (Fig 1). According to the reports of Resolute Support, as of October 2017, about 56 percent of the country's districts were under the Afghan government's control, 30 percent were contested, and around 14 percent, under the insurgents' control.<sup>2</sup> However, there have been also reports in early 2018, suggesting that the Taliban are active in 70 percent of Afghan territory.<sup>3</sup> It is prudent for India to maintain and extend its engagement in Kabul to be able to contain Islamabad's ambitions in Kabul.

Fig 1: Taliban Control in Afghanistan (2017)



Source: <https://twitter.com/reuterspakistan/status/846248966287122432>. Accessed on January 30, 2018.

2. "The Taliban is Gaining Strength and Territory in Afghanistan", *NBC News*, January 30, 2018.
3. "Taliban Active in 70 Percent of Afghanistan, BBC Study Finds", *Reuters*, January 31, 2018, <http://in.reuters.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-study/taliban-active-in-70-percent-of-afghanistan-bbc-study-finds-idINKBN1FK065> . Accessed on February 1, 2018.

*Afghanistan Should not Become the Sanctuary of Islamic Extremism*

One of the major concerns of India is to control the spread of Islamic extremism. India has suffered terrorism backed by Islamic extremism in the Kashmir Valley and also in other parts of India (Punjab). The problem of Islamic extremism in Pakistan and Afghanistan affects India both directly and indirectly. Since a majority of the anti-India groups which have been nurtured by Pakistan for decades have their support base in Afghanistan, and draw their ideological and logistical support from the international terrorist organisations based there, India's concerns regarding the spread of extremism in Afghanistan are not unjustified.

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s and the nurturing of the Mujahideen force by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), with Pakistani assistance, created a substantive infrastructure for *jihad* in Afghanistan. Terrorism in Kashmir accelerated much more in the 1980s and later in the 1990s, as the ISI now had more resources and experience to conduct insurgency in India. After the Soviet withdrawal in the late 1980s from Afghanistan, terrorism increased in India as the entire resource base created for the Russians was now being used against India.

In the last decade, Afghanistan has seen the rise of extremism and non-state actors have been challenging the stability of the Afghan state. Al Qaeda has managed to maintain its foothold in Afghanistan and has been actively supporting the Afghan Taliban, and also the Taliban factions in Pakistan. It is in India's interest to have active developmental engagement with Kabul to be able to contribute towards the Afghan efforts of countering extremism in the nation.

*Afghanistan: India's Gateway to Central Asia*

Afghanistan is certainly India's gateway to Central Asia where New Delhi wants to expand its presence due to its inflating energy requirements. According to the World Bank ICP Report 2011, India is the third largest economy in the world by its share of the world Gross Domestic Product

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(GDP) in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms.<sup>4</sup> The US Department of Agriculture has said that India was “the fastest growing economy since 2000”.<sup>5</sup> Reportedly, India imports approximately 70 percent of its overall demand for fossil fuel. Given the fact that the Indian economy is growing at a rapid pace, the energy requirements for India are obviously high and it is the fourth largest energy consumer in the world. Central Asia, with its rich natural energy resources, is vital for India. Afghanistan is certainly the most feasible route to Central Asia for

New Delhi. India is keen on the imports of oil and uranium from both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Turkmenistan is the fourth largest gas reserve holder and one of the top natural gas producers. Other major powers like the US, China and Russia have already started to expand their role and influence in Central Asia. Consequently, New Delhi needs to adopt an assertive policy to be able to maintain its influence.

India started to expand its military profile in Central Asia in 1999 after the hijacking of the Air India flight from Kathmandu, which led to the release of three high profile terrorists from India. India set up its first military base in Farkhor in Tajikistan to be able to assist the Northern Alliance fighters in Afghanistan, and later to support the post-Taliban government in Afghanistan. India's air facility in Ayni in Tajikistan has been used to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.

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4. “2011 International Comparison Program Summary Results Release Compares the Real Size of the World Economies”, The World Bank, April, 29, 2014, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2014/04/29/2011-international-comparison-program-results-compare-real-size-world-economies>. Accessed on December 15, 2014.
  5. Shalini Chawla, “Asia and Africa and Post-2015 Development Agenda”, in Pedro Miguel Amakasu, David Arase and Scarlett Cornelissen, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Africa-Asia Relations* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 360.

In 2008, the agreement for the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline was an important development, given India's energy as well as strategic requirements. Finally, after a series of negotiations, a breakthrough was achieved in the megaproject and the construction of TAPI began in 2015. TAPI (when completed) will create the first overland link between Central Asia and India and alter the pattern of connectivity of Central Asia. TAPI would also diversify the exports of gas from Turkmenistan. After the decline in exports by Russia, China became the largest importer of gas from

Turkmenistan. The route of the \$10 billion pipeline traverses Kandahar province of Afghanistan and Quetta in Pakistan, and both regions are known for the Taliban insurgency. There were considerable delays in the commencing of the pipeline project due to the threats involved in it. The pipeline is scheduled to be operational by 2019.

In 2012, India launched its Connect Central Asia Policy (CCAP) which involves greater diplomatic, political and economic engagement at various levels between the states. The CCAP was launched in the first meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue, in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, to fast-track India's relations with the Central Asian Republics (CARs). In his keynote address Minister of State (MoS) Shri E. Ahamed said:

I believe that India's active presence in the region will contribute to stability and development in the entire Central and South Asia region. In this analysis, we must factor in the regional situation and especially the challenge of rebuilding the Afghan nation. A cooperative approach for embedding Afghanistan into a more meaningful regional economic and security framework would have benefits for the entire region. One way is to work

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towards converting Afghanistan into a hub for trade and energy, connecting Central and South Asia. The landmark agreement for the construction of the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline has put the spotlight on the importance of Central Asia for India's future energy plans. It would also greatly benefit Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

The CCAP comprises a broad-based approach and India aims to:

- Continue to build strong political relations through the exchange of high level visits.
- Strengthen strategic and economic cooperation.
- Step up multilateral engagement with Central Asia through existing forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Eurasian Economic Community and Customs Union.
- Establish partnerships in energy and natural resources.
- Cooperate in the medical, education and e-sectors.<sup>7</sup>

In 2015, the visit of the Indian prime minister to all the five Central Asian countries raised the profile of India-Central Asia relations. During the prime minister's visit, 22 agreements in different fields were signed.<sup>8</sup> However, so far India's ability to enhance its trade with Central Asia has been restricted due to the lack of direct transport access. Chabahar port in Iran will significantly help India to procure Central Asia's resources. India's presence and engagement in Central Asia will also strengthen its ability to engage in Afghanistan's developmental process.

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6. Keynote Address by MoS Shri E. Ahamed at First India-Central Asia Dialogue, June 1, 2012, <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/19791/Keynote+address+by+MOS+S+hri+E+Ahamed+at+First+IndiaCentral+Asia+Dialogue>. Accessed on July 12, 2014.

7. Ibid.

8. See Ministry of External Affairs, Annual Report 2015-2016, [https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/26525\\_26525\\_External\\_Affairs\\_English\\_AR\\_2015-16\\_Final\\_compressed.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/26525_26525_External_Affairs_English_AR_2015-16_Final_compressed.pdf) . Accessed on July 15, 2016.

## **INDIA-AFGHANISTAN: DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIP**

While India's role was constrained in Afghanistan during the anti-Soviet *jihad* between 1979-89, it did try to extend its support and activities in Kabul after the Soviet withdrawal. Also, during the time of the Taliban regime in the 1990s, India's role remained restricted. Post 2001, the focus of the Indian activities has been on developmental projects, including industrial and hydro projects, education and health sectors as well as humanitarian assistance. India's role post 2001 needs to be analysed not only in the context of the historical ties between Kabul and New Delhi, but also India's changing stature and role on the global platform, with its growing power, economy and image.

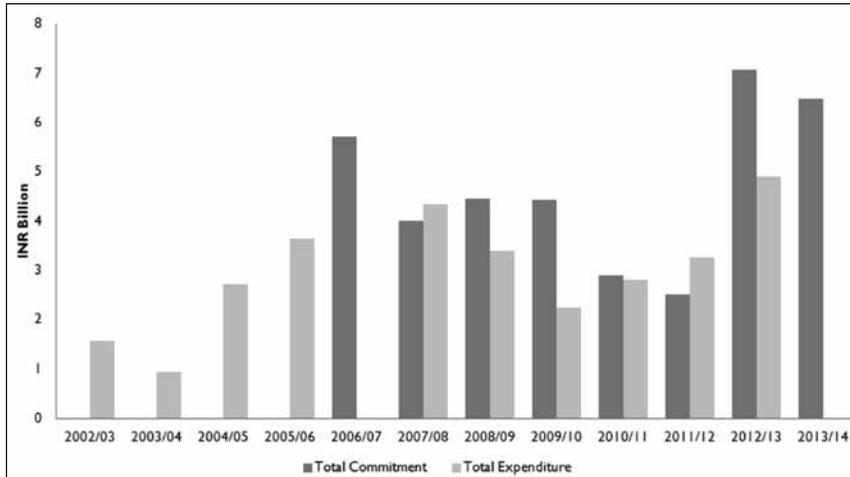
India is a key donor to Afghanistan and the cumulative level of commitment of Indian assistance to Afghanistan amounts over US\$2 billion. The Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between India and Afghanistan in 2011 provided a further boost to the relationship. India is the fifth largest provider of developmental assistance to Afghanistan with the total commitment for 2013-14 at approximately US\$120 million<sup>9</sup> (Fig 2). The period (till 2014) was critical as the US withdrawal was ongoing and Afghanistan required much needed support from India. India's grants and loan-based allocations for Afghanistan remained unaltered between Financial Year (FY) 2014-15 and FY 2015-16 (Fig 3) and India's commitments to Afghanistan stood at INR 6.76 billion.<sup>10</sup>

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9. Rani D. Mullen, "India –Afghanistan Partnership", Indian Development Cooperation Research, <http://idcr.cprindia.org/blog/india-afghanistan-partnership>. Accessed on April 14, 2015.

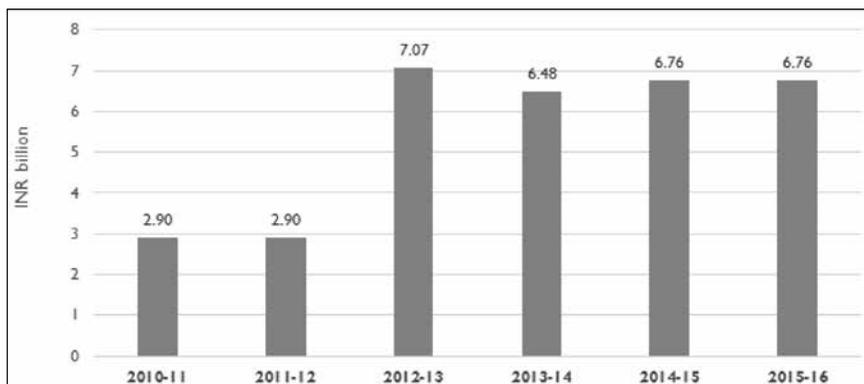
10. "Update on Afghanistan-India Relations", Indian Development Cooperation Research, April 25, 2015, <http://idcr.cprindia.org/blog/update-afghanistan---india-relations>. Accessed on May 25, 2015.

**Fig 2: India's Development Cooperation with Afghanistan: Commitments and Expenditures, 2002/03 – 2013/14**



Source: Preliminary calculations by the Indian Development Cooperation Research (IDCR) at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, based on data from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) Outcomes Budgets 2006/07-2013/14, Government of India, and Union Budgets 2002/03 - 2013/14, Ministry of Finance, Government of India, as cited in Rani D. Mullen, "India –Afghanistan Partnership", Indian Development Cooperation Research, <http://idcr.cprindia.org/blog/india-afghanistan-partnership>.

**Fig 3: Indian Grant and Loan-based Commitments to Afghanistan in INR Billion (between 2010-11 and 2015-16)**



Source: Calculations by the Indian Development Cooperation Research (IDCR) initiative at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, based on publicly available data from the Union Budget 2014-15, Ministry of Finance, Government of India, as cited in "Update on Afghanistan-India Relations", Indian Development Cooperation Research, April 25, 2015, <http://idcr.cprindia.org/blog/update-afghanistan-india-relations>. Accessed on May 25, 2015.

According to a report by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), most of India's development projects in Afghanistan can be broadly divided into four categories:<sup>11</sup>

- Large infrastructure projects.
- Humanitarian assistance.
- Capacity building initiatives.
- Small development projects.

India has initiated several medium and large infrastructure projects in its assistance programme in Afghanistan. Some of the important projects include:

- Construction of the 218-km road from Zaranj to Delaram for facilitating the movement of goods and services to the Iranian border. (The project has been completed and handed over to the Government of Afghanistan.)
- Construction of the 220KV DC transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri and a 220/110/20 KV sub-station at Chitkala. (The project has been completed and handed over.)
- Expansion of the national TV network by providing an uplink from Kabul and downlinks in all 34 provincial capitals, for greater integration of the country.<sup>12</sup>

Completion and inauguration of the Salma Dam known as Afghan-India Friendship Dam in 2016, highlights not only the efforts of about 1,500 Indian and Afghan professionals but also India's commitment to Afghanistan's development.<sup>13</sup> Construction of the Afghan Parliament has been another significant initiative as a part of Indian assistance. Afghanistan is extremely rich in minerals but the exploitation of the minerals remains a challenge. India is keen to encourage investment for sustainable development and

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11. "Development Partnership: India's Assistance Programme for Afghanistan", Indo-Afghan Relations, Embassy of India Kabul, Afghanistan, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, <http://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0707?000>. Accessed on June 5, 2015.

12. Development Partnership, Embassy of India, Kabul, Ministry of External Affairs, [www.mea.gov.in/Portal/Foreign\\_Relation/1Afghanistan\\_October\\_2017.pdf](http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/Foreign_Relation/1Afghanistan_October_2017.pdf). Accessed on February 9, 2018.

13. Indo-Afghan Relations, Embassy of India, Kabul, Afghanistan, [www.eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0707?003](http://www.eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0707?003). Accessed on January 30, 2018.

**India is one of the leading donors in Afghanistan and by far the largest regional donor, but its role has been constrained, given the complex security situation and Pakistan's continuous unhappiness over India's presence as well as soft power in Kabul.**

a consortium of public and private Indian companies has been formed to encourage investment in Afghanistan's mining sector in the Haigak iron ore mine.<sup>14</sup>

Under humanitarian assistance, the Indian efforts include:

- Commitment to supply 1.1 million metric tonnes (MT) of wheat to Afghanistan (711,882 MT of wheat or equivalent in cash has already been delivered at a cost of Rs. 989.45 crore).
- Commitment to contribute US\$ 1 million annually over the next five years to

the Afghan Red Crescent Society for the treatment of Afghan children with congenital heart diseases."<sup>15</sup>

Capacity building has been a significant area of Indian assistance to the Afghans. According to the MEA report, "The Government of India offers training to Afghan officials/nationals in diverse fields through 500 ITEC slots and 25 slots under the TCS Colombo Plan are allocated annually to Afghanistan."<sup>16</sup> Other critical capacity building initiatives include: Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) courses for Afghan government officials, training via telecommunication at medical facilities and Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) fellowships for Afghan students. The ICSSR scholarships have been extended till 2020.<sup>17</sup>

Small Development Projects (SDPs) have been initiated in the fields of agriculture, rural development, vocational training, education, health, etc. According to an MEA report, the SDPs have been implemented in three phases. Under Phases I and II, US\$ 20 million was committed, and 132 projects, at the cost of about US\$19.5 million, were approved. Out of 132 projects,

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14. n. 12.

15. n. 13.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

94 have been completed.<sup>18</sup> Under Phase III, a total of 287 projects at approximately US\$ 52.5 million, have been approved and are at varied stages of implementation.<sup>19</sup>

#### INDIA'S SOFT POWER IN AFGHANISTAN

India is one of the leading donors in Afghanistan and by far the largest regional donor, but its role has been constrained, given the complex security situation and Pakistan's continuous unhappiness over India's presence as well as soft power in Kabul. The efforts by the Indian government clearly indicate that New Delhi believes that sustainable development of Afghanistan requires long-term investment. Specifically, investment that can assist the exploitation of Afghanistan's natural resources. A stable Afghanistan is essential for regional stability. According to India's former Ambassador to Afghanistan, Shri Jayant Prasad,

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India's objective is to stabilize Afghanistan. Getting the Afghans to stand on their own feet is good for the Afghan people, good for India and good for the world, including all the regional countries.<sup>20</sup>

India's influence in Afghanistan is quite significant and India is able to wield a considerable amount of soft power. On August 30, 2009, in a confidential report submitted to US President Obama, Gen Stanley McChrystal wrote:

Indian political and economic influence is increasing in Afghanistan, including significant development efforts and financial investment. In addition, the current Afghan government is perceived by Islamabad as

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18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Jayant Prasad, Indian ambassador to Afghanistan, in an interview, "In Afghanistan, Indians are Praised Simply for Being Indian", *Business Standard* (New Delhi), October 9, 2009.

pro-Indian. While Indian activities largely benefit the Afghan people, increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan is likely to exacerbate Pakistani countermeasures in Afghanistan or India.<sup>21</sup>

As a multi-ethnic democracy with a growing economy, India is able to project an extremely positive image. India's developmental initiatives impact the Afghan society directly and some of the high profile Indian projects like the building of the Afghan Parliament, donation of planes to Ariana Afghan Airlines create a significant, positive image of India. The Bollywood movie industry—which makes close to 800 movies every year, portraying glamorous lifestyles and events—has permeated Afghan society.<sup>22</sup> These cultural products have penetrated deep into the Afghan society and are greatly appreciated by the Afghans. One of the most popular TV shows in Afghanistan is an Indian soap dubbed in Dari.<sup>23</sup> The entertainment industry and the education sector impact the youth in a country and India's role in these sectors has helped it to garner support from the Afghan youth.

India has also made an effort to create linkages with the Afghan elites who have had long standing ties with India. Hamid Karzai, for example, studied in India in Himachal Pradesh and speaks fluent Hindi, and Afghan Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah's wife resides in New Delhi. There have been specific efforts to increase business partnerships with Afghanistan which has attracted the elite business personnel from Afghanistan, further building up credibility for India. For example, the Investment Roadshow in Ahmedabad in 2014, the participation of the Afghan delegation in the India Mining Summit in 2014, the inauguration of the 'India Bazaar' in Kabul in 2014, and the participation of Afghan businessmen in PHARMEXCIL 2015, in Gujarat.<sup>24</sup> According to a Ministry of External Affairs report, there have

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21. Ajay Prakash, "Rising Indian Influence in Afghanistan Worries US and Pakistan", WSWS.org, November 19, 2009, <http://www.countermeasures.org/print.html>. Accessed on April 12, 2013.

22. "What is Bollywood", *Newsround*, undated, as cited in Larry Hanauer and Peter Chalk, "India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the United States and the Region", Occasional Paper, RAND, Centre for Asia Pacific Policy, 2012, p. 21.

23. Shashi Tharoor, "Hooray for Bollywood: India's 'Soft Power'", *Taipei Times*, January 7, 2008, as cited in Hanauer and Chalk, *Ibid.*, p. 21.

24. "India-Afghanistan Relations", Ministry of External Affairs, [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelations/Afghanistan\\_Dec2014.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelations/Afghanistan_Dec2014.pdf). Accessed February 20, 2018.

been ongoing visits of business delegations from both countries, including the conference and exhibition on “Made in Afghanistan” from July 19-20, 2016, and the 9th MP Expo, from January 29-31, 2016.<sup>25</sup>

In an encouraging move, the first Kabul-New Delhi air corridor was inaugurated by President Ghani in June 2017. According to the Afghan officials, goods worth more than \$20 million, including, 10,640 tonnes of fresh produce, fresh and dried fruits, handicrafts, etc have been exported to India since the launch of the corridor.<sup>26</sup> The second route was officially launched in December 2017.<sup>27</sup> Air corridors between India and Afghanistan are the key to increase Afghan exports (especially fruits and dry fruits) to India and also other parts of the world, which could be facilitated by India. The corridor will also facilitate Indian assistance to Afghanistan. The reactions in Pakistan following the launch of the first air corridor were adverse, as expected. Islamabad, in a much predicted reaction, sees this development as an Indian way to isolate Pakistan. The corridors provide flexibility to the Afghan traders to export their products without being reliant on Pakistan where they face constant impediments.

### **DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHABAHAR PORT**

Iran has interests in the stability of Afghanistan and is trying to increase its influence in Kabul, using its oil money. It has been keen on the withdrawal of the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) troops from Afghanistan, as the US presence in Afghanistan impacts Iran’s ability to engage in Kabul. Iran did not support the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the 1990s and has been a supporter of the Northern Alliance in the past, along with India. Iran has been concerned about Pakistan’s activities in Afghanistan and is uncomfortable in adjusting to Pakistan’s intentions of supporting a fundamentalist Sunni regime in Kabul. Islamabad’s close association with Saudi Arabia and long alliance with the US do not go down well with Iran. Pakistan has, for decades, tried

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25. “India-Afghanistan Relations”, Ministry of External Affairs, February 2016, [http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Afghanistan\\_17\\_02\\_2016.pdf](http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Afghanistan_17_02_2016.pdf). Accessed on March 11, 2016.

26. “India, Afghanistan Launch Second Air Corridor linking Kabul and Mumbai”, *Hindustan Times*, December 27, 2017.

27. *Ibid.*

**Afghanistan has shifted 80 percent of its cargo traffic from Karachi port to Iran's Bandar Abbas and Chabahar ports. The move of traffic to the Iranian ports was triggered by Pakistan's decision to impose trade tariff.**

to curtail its influence in bordering Balochistan, and a substantive amount of Saudi resources and funds have been invested in the *madrassas* preaching Wahabi Islam in Balochistan and the border regions of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). Thousands of *madrassas* which flourished in the 1980s catering to the requirements of the CIA's war against the Russians, with Pakistan as the frontline state, produced the top leadership of the Taliban, which is active in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although Pakistan's clandestine nuclear network did cater to the Iranian nuclear ambitions, Iran has not been comfortable with the growing nuclear arsenal of Pakistan.

India and Iran have common interests in the stability of Afghanistan and both countries are concerned about the spillover effects of extremism in the country. India finalised the deal with Iran for the development of the strategic port of Chabahar in Iran and a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the two governments in May 2015. The objectives of the MoU were clearly indicated in the statements of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, "With the signing of the MoU, the Indian and the Iranian entities would be in a position to commence negotiations towards finalization of a commercial contract under which Indian firms will lease two existing berths at the port and operationalize them as container and multipurpose cargo terminals."<sup>28</sup> Also, "the availability of a functional container and multipurpose cargo terminal at Chabahar port would provide Afghanistan's garland road network system alternate access to the sea port, significantly enhancing Afghanistan's overall connectivity to regional and global markets."<sup>29</sup>

The port is of critical importance to India as it is expected to significantly reduce transportation costs and freight time for India to reach Central Asia,

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28. "Inter-Governmental MoU between India and Iran", Press Release, May 6, 2015, [http://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/25185/InterGovernmental\\_MoU\\_between\\_India\\_and\\_Iran](http://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/25185/InterGovernmental_MoU_between_India_and_Iran). Accessed on June 5, 2015.

29. Ibid.

Russia, Europe and the Gulf. The Chabahar port allows India to reach Afghanistan bypassing Pakistan and its efforts in Afghanistan are likely to get a significant boost with the operationalisation of the port. The first phase of the Shahid Beheshti terminal at Chabahar port was inaugurated on December 3, 2017. Chabahar has two terminals: Shahid Kalantari and Shahid Beheshti. The first terminal is handling around 2.1 million tonnes of cargo per year, and the capacity is expected to go up to 10 million tonnes with the operationalisation of Shahid Beheshti.<sup>30</sup>

Afghanistan is clearly celebrating the operationalisation of Chabahar as it

will no longer be dependent on Pakistan for a transit route for its shipments.<sup>31</sup> Afghanistan has shifted 80 percent of its cargo traffic from Karachi port to Iran's Bandar Abbas and Chabahar ports. The move of traffic to the Iranian ports was triggered by Pakistan's decision to impose trade tariff.<sup>32</sup> Many Pakistani business are of the opinion that more Afghanistan trade will eventually shift to Chabahar, causing a severe blow to bilateral trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The business communities of KPK and Balochistan are likely to suffer severe financial losses.<sup>33</sup>

**India's interests in Afghanistan have multiple dimensions ranging from expansion of its regional influence; building its soft power; trade and commerce; countering the growth of Islamist extremism from Afghanistan; and deterring Pakistan from using Afghanistan as a territory for sponsoring terrorism against India. India has been primarily focussed on developmental and humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan.**

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30. P. Stobdan, "To make Chabahar a 'Game Changer,' Central Asian States Need to be Roped in", *IDSAs Comment*, December 12, 2017, [http://idsa.in/idsacomments/to-make-chabahar-a-game-changer-central-asain-states\\_pstobdan\\_121217](http://idsa.in/idsacomments/to-make-chabahar-a-game-changer-central-asain-states_pstobdan_121217). Accessed on January 15, 2018.

31. "With Chabahar, Pakistan is no Longer Dependent on Pakistan: Abdullah", *The Hindu*, November 15, 2017, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/with-chabahar-afghanistan-is-no-longer-dependent-on-pakistan-abdullah/article20449935.ece>. Accessed on December 1, 2017

32. F. M Shakil, "Chabahar Port Lures Afghan Traffic Away from Karachi", February 2, 2018, *Asia Times*, [www.atimes.com/article/afghan-port-shift-adds-pakistan-economic-woes](http://www.atimes.com/article/afghan-port-shift-adds-pakistan-economic-woes). Accessed on January 10, 2018.

33. *Ibid.*

### **ANALYSING INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN**

India's interests in Afghanistan have multiple dimensions ranging from expansion of its regional influence; building its soft power; trade and commerce; countering the growth of Islamist extremism from Afghanistan; and deterring Pakistan from using Afghanistan as a territory for sponsoring terrorism against India. India has been primarily focussed on developmental and humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan. Although there has been security cooperation and India continues its commitment to building capacity within the Afghanistan National Army and Afghanistan National Police, it has refrained from putting boots on the ground and providing direct military assistance in the Afghan crisis. President Ghani has expressed his unhappiness over New Delhi's resistance to intervene militarily in Afghanistan. India has delivered four combat helicopters to Afghanistan and has been actively conducting training of the Afghan troops but intervening militarily in Afghanistan is certainly not in India's interest. The world's strongest militaries (the US and NATO) have continued to fight the Taliban insurgency for 16 years and have been unable to counter it. It is unrealistic to presume that India's military would benefit the situation militarily in Afghanistan. The Afghan crisis, arguably, cannot be dealt with militarily but needs to be addressed through negotiations and non-military regional initiatives. Also, Indian boots on the ground has a strongly likelihood of opening another front of conflict with Pakistan on the Afghan territory which would worsen the security situation. Islamabad has, till now, tried to obliterate all Indian efforts in Afghanistan. The Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan enjoys Pakistan's support and there cannot be stability in Afghanistan without Pakistan altering its strategic choices. Also, it is important to remember that Pakistan had assisted in the establishment of the Taliban regime in Kabul in the 1990s primarily with the objective of restricting India's engagement in Afghanistan.

President Ashraf Ghani, soon after coming into power, in a much *expected* move, reached out to Pakistan for help. Although the leadership in Islamabad was rather surprised at Ghani's move, as it was totally different from his predecessor Karzai's approach of relying on India and frequently visiting New Delhi for support, President Ghani was

being realistic in his approach and the natural choice for Kabul has to be Pakistan which is actually the cause of all its problems. New Delhi reacted with maturity to Ghani's move (of approaching Islamabad) and handled the situation rather diplomatically. Ghani has been extremely candid about his expectations from Islamabad. Over the last two years, the Afghan leadership has been extremely disappointed with Pakistan's continued support to the Taliban and Haqqani network. Former President Karzai and President Ghani have both openly condemned Pakistan's support to the Afghan Taliban which has not allowed peace in Kabul. During his visit to New Delhi in 2017, Ghani very clearly said that Afghanistan "would like a push factor from Pakistan vis-a-vis the Taliban, not a Pakistan-managed peace process with the Taliban".<sup>34</sup>

Post US and NATO troops' withdrawal, the security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated significantly and, the Taliban has expanded much beyond the control of the Afghan forces and the US forces. It is estimated that there are more than 60,000 Taliban recruits operating from Afghanistan. On the other hand, there has been enhanced interest and engagement by the major powers, China and Russia, in Afghanistan. China is driven by its economic and security concerns in Afghanistan and has not only invested in Afghanistan but has been active in peace initiatives. Russia also is concerned about the security dimension and a likely spillover of rising extremism and terrorism in Afghanistan towards Central Asia and Russia. Engagement of the major powers can be beneficial if there is coordination of efforts between the countries and *Afghan stability and development* is prioritised. Unfortunately, India's engagement is seen as a security threat by both Pakistan and China. This raises serious challenges for India's engagement in Afghanistan.

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34. Text of President Ghani's address at Vivekananda International Foundation, available at Office of the President, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, <https://president.gov.af/en/speech/president-mohammad-ashraf-ghanis-remarks-at-vivekananda-international-foundation-vif/>, October 25, 2017. Accessed on October 26, 2017.

India has established its credibility in Afghanistan with the leadership and masses and continues to enjoy soft power, according to the polls.<sup>35</sup> It is in New Delhi's interest to continue with its developmental efforts in Afghanistan as sustained long-term investment will invariably be a key to stability in the country. Evaluation of the past efforts by India is a must to be able to deliver more productively.<sup>36</sup> Indian efforts to increase transport links with Afghanistan comprise a brilliant move. In a recent development, negotiations are underway to enable Afghan trucks to carry Indian goods from Wagah to Afghanistan—earlier, they could only bring Afghan goods to Wagah.<sup>37</sup> Also, India's initiative of developing Chabahar port in Iran would open up new links to Afghanistan, strengthening the trade and strategic relationship between the two nations.

India has faced continued resistance from the Taliban and other groups (some backed by Pakistan) in its efforts but these should not restrict its commitment to move ahead in its developmental initiatives. India should continue to work towards remaining the most popular country in Afghanistan. Recent developments, including Chabahar port, have the potential for India to consider adopting an integrated approach involving other powers like the Central Asian countries and Russia, in some of its initiatives in Afghanistan. The security situation in Afghanistan undermines New Delhi's efforts in the country. Thus, joint and forceful action against the common challenges of terrorism and extremism, along with the other actors, needs to be considered seriously for regional stability.

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35. "Afghan Poll," BBC News, December 6, 2010. Accessed on June 13, 2016, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/06\\_12\\_10\\_afghanpoll.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/06_12_10_afghanpoll.pdf); "PM Narendra Modi's Speech in US Congress: Read the Full Text," *Indian Express*, June 10, 2016. Accessed on June 13, 2016, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/primeminister-narendramodi-us-congress-speech-2842046/>, cited in Dr Rani D Mullen and Kashyap Arora, "Indian Development Cooperation with Afghanistan and the Afghan-India Friendship Dam", IDCR, Centre for Policy Research, June 16, 2016, [http://cprindia.org/sites/default/files/policy-briefs/Indian%20Development%20Cooperation%20with%20Afghanistan%20and%20the%20%E2%80%98Afghan-India%20Friendship%20Dam%E2%80%99\\_0.pdf](http://cprindia.org/sites/default/files/policy-briefs/Indian%20Development%20Cooperation%20with%20Afghanistan%20and%20the%20%E2%80%98Afghan-India%20Friendship%20Dam%E2%80%99_0.pdf)

36. See, Shakti Sinha, "Ghani's Afghanistan: Policy Options for India", *New Age Islam*, April 23, 2015, [newageislam.com/ghani-s-afghanistan-policy-options-for-india-/islam-and-politics-/d/102663](http://newageislam.com/ghani-s-afghanistan-policy-options-for-india-/islam-and-politics-/d/102663). Accessed on July 11, 2017.

37. Ibid.