

# ORF SPECIAL REPORT

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## India and Afghanistan: Old Friends, New Dialogue

Sabah Ishtiaq and Kriti M Shah

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### ABSTRACT

Since the toppling of the Taliban government in 2001, India and Afghanistan have witnessed a significant strengthening of their bilateral ties. As Afghanistan's stability is important for India's own, New Delhi has readily supported the growth of democracy in its neighbour, battered as it is by many years of conflict and instability. This paper maps out the nature of India's relationship with Afghanistan, focusing on the two nations' economic, political and social

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engagement. It studies Afghanistan's present security situation and how its future is hinged to a considerable degree on Kabul's relationship with the US, Pakistan and China. The paper builds on themes discussed during the 'Afghanistan-India Relations: A Way Forward' conference organised by the Observer Research Foundation with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung on 28-29 March 2016.

## INTRODUCTION

The year 2015 was a crucial one for the National Unity Government (NUG) of Afghanistan: it faced a resurgent Taliban, even as it led a major international push to seek peace negotiations with the insurgent group. Since the formation of the NUG in September 2014, President Ashraf Ghani has made it his government's priority to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table, reaching out to Pakistan to court its influence. However, the Taliban's blanket rejection of peace talks—and, in a punctuation to such rebuff, its violent offensive—have resulted in the deterioration of the country's security situation. President Ghani, it seems, is left with little to show for more than 18 months in office.

It is in the context of the Taliban conflict, and the daunting task ahead of finding peace and stability in Afghanistan, that its relations with India must be viewed. Afghanistan and India have maintained close historical and friendly ties over many decades. In December 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Afghanistan was looked at by Afghans in a favourable manner. During that same visit, PM Modi delivered a speech before Parliament, calling on Afghans to vote in the elections and encouraging the people to participate in their country's democratic processes. It was a heartening development that built even greater goodwill between the leaders of both countries.

India has sought to show its support for a stable and democratic Afghanistan with significant investments and financial assistance. Playing a major role in Afghanistan's social and economic development, India has provided extensive development assistance amounting to some \$2 billion since 2001.<sup>1</sup> Much of this assistance has been focused on infrastructure projects, humanitarian assistance, community-based development projects, and education and humanitarian needs. For example, the Indian government recently pledged \$1 million for the annual routine maintenance of Habibia High School in Kabul, highlighting India's long-term commitment in nurturing the country's education system.

India has also contributed in the strengthening of the Afghan army by providing military equipment such as helicopters and training to officers and soldiers. The building of the Afghan-India Friendship Dam (Salma Dam) and the Zaranj-Delaram highway demonstrates India's commitment in assisting Afghan development and connecting the country to Iran and other parts of Central Asia. Very recently in June 2016, PM Modi visited Afghanistan again, this time to

inaugurate the \$290-million Salma Dam project. Designed to irrigate fields in 640 villages across the districts of Chist-i-Sharif, Obe, Pashtun Zarghun, Karokh, Gozara, Injil, Zindjan, Kohsan and Ghoryan,<sup>2</sup> this dam may well be a symbol of India's long-term commitment to the region. Only a month earlier, the Iran-India-Afghanistan trilateral trade and transit corridor agreement on the Chabahar port was also signed.

Analysts point out that while India and Afghanistan have maintained historical and friendly relations, the potential of the two countries' cooperation has yet to be fully realised. A crucial impediment is related to Pakistan's fears over Indian interests in Afghanistan; this has led India to become more cautious in its involvement. Further, given the complex relationship between the United States, China and Pakistan and their interests in Afghanistan, India has, historically, focused on a development and soft power approach while keeping its distance from any deep political involvement in Afghanistan.



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**The Afghan-India Friendship Dam**

In April this year as the Taliban launched its spring offensive in Kabul, the Afghan government responded with military means, signalling a significant change in the country's counter-insurgency policy. Faced with the abject failure of the peace talks in the form of the QCG or the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, the US and President Ghani's focus has shifted to the military neutralisation of the Taliban. Given the uncertainty surrounding the future US policy towards Afghanistan and its presence there—following the drawdown of its troops in December 2014 and the prospect of a new administration in 2017—it is critical for India to step up and begin playing a greater role in stabilising Afghanistan and securing its own interests therein.

## **FACTORS INFLUENCING INDO-AFGHAN TIES**

In light of the developments in Afghanistan and the rising concerns within the international community, it is essential to identify the key factors and actors that affect Indo-Afghan ties.



## **Afghan security situation**

The National Unity Government (NUG) in Kabul suffers from a severe legitimacy crisis, as it has failed to initiate electoral reform or even hold parliamentary and district council elections. Political bickering between President Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah has led to key cabinet positions remaining vacant for months after the general elections in 2014 and the expiration of the parliament's term. Participants in ORF's March conference called attention to the lack of public support for the government due to the fact that Ghani and Abdullah have not attempted to include the citizens in discussions about the very nature of the peace process that they are seeking. Such absence of popular support for peace talks is also reflected in a decline in the government's approval rating.

Yet it is not only the Taliban that has been the source of Afghanistan's insecurity; there are other militant networks that pose threats to the country, such as the Haqqani Network, for example. The brief takeover of Kunduz in September 2015 and the siege in Helmand in December 2015 are reminders that the insurgency is far from dying down as the Haqqani Network assists the Taliban in stepping up its attacks against the Afghan security forces. The year 2015 has been the bloodiest in recent history since the US entered Afghanistan in 2001, resulting in the highest casualties among the coalition forces and the Taliban. In his report to Congress in January 2016, John Sopko, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, noted that there was a "worrisome upsurge in insurgent activity" in the country and that one in four districts was at risk of falling to insurgents.<sup>3</sup> Under Mullah Mansour, the former Taliban commander, the group rejected peace talks with the Afghan government and have been working in closer cooperation with groups such as the Haqqani Network and al-Qaeda.<sup>4</sup>

## **Pakistan**

There is hardly any debate that Pakistan is a vital actor in the question of Afghanistan's stability; its role has been enhanced by the international military drawdown. The US and Afghanistan have repeatedly asked Pakistan to cooperate in the stabilising efforts by cracking down on groups that attack Afghanistan within their own country. Sartaj Aziz, foreign affairs adviser to Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, has admitted that Pakistan indeed exerts some influence over the Taliban;<sup>5</sup> this admission invariably compelled the Pakistani government to pledge its support to bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. However, despite Afghan President Ghani's diplomatic outreach to Pakistan, their relations have gone through a major setback. President Ghani has expressed his disappointment over the failure of Pakistan to bring the Afghan Taliban to agree to talks, blaming them for disturbing peace and security in the region. Ghani's statements were in response to a deadly attack on the Afghan intelligence agency headquarters in Kabul on 19 April. The general sentiment in Afghanistan is that

Pakistan has failed to do enough to break the back of militant and terrorist groups operating in and from their country. There is also a growing sense of skepticism towards Pakistani interests and a fear that Pakistani involvement in the QCG comes attached to certain costs—such as the recognition of Durand Line that Afghanistan is unwilling to give, water dominance in the region, and other economic and political conditions.

In April 2016 news of the visit of the Afghan Taliban to Karachi came a day after President Ghani called out on Pakistan for failing to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. The Afghan Taliban have demonstrated their strength and ability to launch attacks against the state, riding on the high of a successful poppy harvest in the southern provinces. Their refusal to participate in the peace talks has hardly been surprising. The QCG has met five times since January 2016, with no participation from the Taliban. The QCG talks on 18 May exposed the differences within the group regarding the peace process. While the US and Afghanistan demand for a more decisive action against groups such as the Haqqani Network, Pakistan and China are of the view that only a peaceful negotiation would lead to a stable Afghanistan. In order for a dialogue with the Taliban to even begin, a ceasefire needs to be respected under which the Taliban demands the release of prisoners under the Afghan government, the recognition of their political office in Doha, and a complete withdrawal of all foreign forces from the region.

Rather than being Afghan-led and Afghan-owned, the process had become Pakistan-driven. With the neighbourhood policy in mind, it should be noted that Pakistan is strategically relevant for Afghanistan. It is the GHQ leadership that is of consequence and not the leadership in Islamabad, as it is the Pakistani military that pulls the lever on matters pertaining to the country's foreign policy.

Due to its exaggerated fear of encirclement from two hostile neighbours—Afghanistan and India—and its desire to control Afghanistan's security and foreign policy, Pakistan has squandered the opportunity to play a constructive role in the region. At the same time, the India-Pakistan rivalry has prevented India from playing a greater role in the Afghan solution. It is evident that Pakistan wants to keep India out of the process of finding solutions. Yet it is also deeply concerned with the Taliban gaining military control over the region and taking over Afghanistan, as this could lead to major repercussions for Pakistan's own security.

The current state of Afghan-Pakistan relations provides an opportunity for Afghanistan and India to increase their bilateral engagement, given the growing sentiment in Afghanistan that Ghani has been unwise in putting all his eggs in one basket, i.e., Pakistan. In November 2015, Hanif Atmar, Afghanistan's National Security Adviser and Hekmat Khalil Karzai, Deputy Foreign Minister visited New Delhi in what was seen as a “reach out” by the Afghan government amidst the severe security crisis.

## China

As one of the member countries in the QCG, China has committed itself to assisting the security situation in Afghanistan. However, the defiance from the Taliban over peace talks with the Afghan government highlights the failure of QCG. China has long-term economic interests in Afghanistan as it also faces its own domestic threats, including the extremist Islamic militancy by the Uighurs in the province of Xinjiang. China is wary of the Uighur militants getting the support of the Islamic State (IS) and the Taliban. With Afghanistan, China has agreed to cooperate on the implementation of the 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) initiative in the area of facilitating trade, investment, connectivity, people-to-people exchanges, and boosting growth.<sup>6</sup> Earlier, China signed multibillion-dollar deals with Afghanistan, a few of them involving the extraction of copper from the Mes Aynak mine in Logar Province worth \$10 billion. State-owned China Metallurgical Group Corporation has acquired the extraction rights of the mine in 2007 for \$3.5 billion, but the project remains stalled due to the deteriorating security situation and poor infrastructure in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

China is keen to provide military aid and assistance, including counter-terrorism intelligence cooperation and joint drills to strengthen the Afghan military forces. Meanwhile, Afghanistan hopes that China, being a strong ally of Pakistan, will be able to exert pressure on Pakistan to further the peace talks with the Taliban. However, taking into account the long history of China-Pakistan alliance, it is possible that China will hold on to its part of the deal with Pakistan and stall any possible involvement by India in the region.

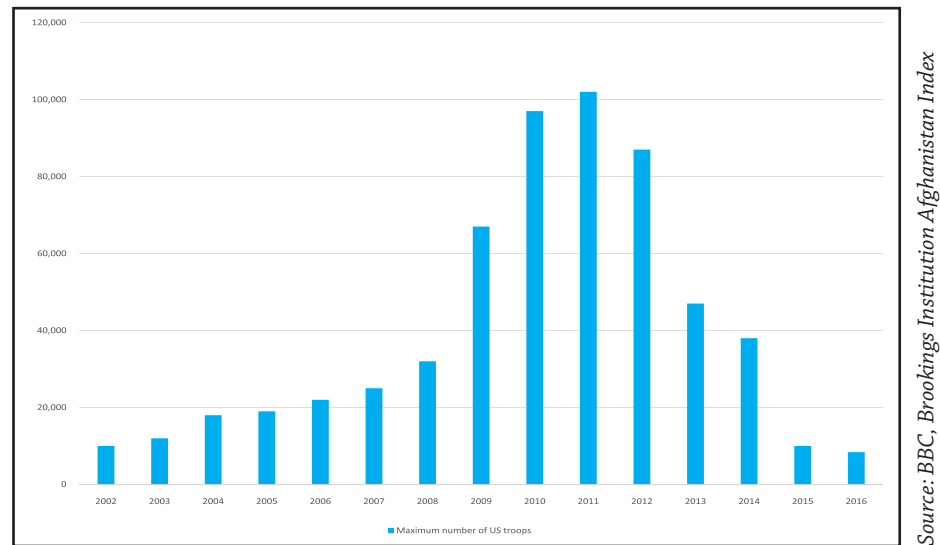
Given China's economic interests with reference to OBOR and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), it is keen on maintaining a balance in its policies towards Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Afghan government expects China to play a more decisive role in the region rather than being a mere observer,<sup>8</sup> while exerting extra pressure on Pakistan towards its commitment in the region.

## The United States

For over 14 years now, the United States has been providing both military and economic assistance for Afghanistan's security efforts. For one, the US orchestrated the drone strike in the Balochistan province of Pakistan which targeted Mullah Mansour, the Afghan Taliban chief. The operation on Mansour has reflected a drastic shift in US policy, demonstrating its willingness to secure Afghanistan with or without Pakistan's cooperation. The US is no longer convinced of Pakistan's commitment to the security of the region. The attack on the Taliban leader eliminated a huge roadblock to the possibility of peace talks with the Taliban. But then again, the newly appointed Taliban chief, Mullah Haibatullah, has proved himself hardly any different from his predecessor: he has

ruled out on any possibility of cooperation for peace negotiations and has declared that the group is now even more strongly determined to fight foreign forces.

**Fig. 1: Presence of US troops (2002-16) in Afghanistan**



US President Barack Obama's earlier decision to reduce the number of troops in the region from 9,800 to about 5,500 had been a major concern to the Afghan leadership due to the deteriorating security situation. Washington, however, has had to rethink its exit strategy due to the Taliban's resurgence. President Obama, prior to attending the Warsaw summit of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in July 2016, announced that some 8,400 troops will remain in the region through the end of his term.<sup>9</sup> The US has also committed itself to work with its NATO partners and the international community on training the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF). However, the Afghan leadership remains unfit to face its numerous challenges. The ANDSF, involved in security operations, lacks capacity in both personnel and material to eliminate or restrict the Taliban for the overall transformation of the region.

President Ghani recognises the likelihood of fresh challenges amid the slow decline in US military presence. Afghanistan needs to tighten its security infrastructure, and its leaders must build their political and security plan to negotiate with the Taliban and pursue the overall development of the region. Given the recent shift in the US' Pakistan policy as far as Afghanistan is concerned, India can assist the US in tackling the Afghan Taliban and strengthening the Afghan forces' capabilities.

## Russia

Russia has kept its distance from Kabul, given its historic ties with the country and the weak public support for Russian investment. It has, however, kept a close eye on international involvement in Afghanistan, alarmed as it is at the resurgence of the Taliban and the growing threat of ISIS in the country. Moscow's concern stems from the advances made by the Taliban in the northern provinces of Afghanistan,

such as Badakhshan and Kunduz. Russia's fear is that the withdrawal of Western troops will lead to a power vacuum and a political resurgence of the Taliban and other insurgency groups. While there is great distrust for all actors that are a part of the QCG (the US, China and Pakistan), Russia supports reconciliation with the Taliban and wants the process to be Afghan-led. In light of its desire to have a stable Afghanistan, Russia has expanded its cooperation with Central Asian states sharing a land boundary with Afghanistan while continuing to remain fearful that insurgency movements in Afghanistan will affect its interests in Central Asia.

### **India and Afghanistan**

Before the failure of the QCG and the shift in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, President Ashraf Ghani had been engaged in a diplomatic outreach to Pakistan. Despite Pakistan's close relationship with China, one can continue to expect an Indian role in stabilising the country irrespective of the relation between Kabul and Islamabad. The recent signing in Tehran of the trilateral pact between Iran, India and Afghanistan allows India access to Afghanistan from the Chabahar port; it is a major step towards increased bilateral trade. New Delhi and Tehran have also signed a Memorandum for Understanding, with India extending a \$500-million line of credit for the development of the Chabahar port.<sup>10</sup> The port is expected to ease India's access to Afghanistan, and connect India, Afghan and Central Asian markets. The deal is crucial for landlocked Afghanistan as it provides an alternate route for trade, reducing the country's dependence on Pakistan. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, meanwhile, will transfer gas from oil-rich Turkmenistan through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India, and is a prime example of cooperation between Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Analysts suggest that the future of the pipeline is in jeopardy given that it travels through volatile parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Indian support in securing the pipeline through Afghan territory will be of great benefit to all parties, and will ensure that the gas pipeline reaches India safely. This project showcases New Delhi's commitment to Afghan economic viability and sustainability.

Moreover, India is already involved in the training of Afghanistan's National Army and Air Force and has supplied the country with three Mi-25 attack helicopters that should prove helpful in its counter-terrorism and anti-insurgency campaigns. There is much to be done in this regard, and the potential for security cooperation between the two countries is tremendous.

India has repeatedly reiterated its commitment to work with Afghanistan for the long run. Unlike other actors involved, India is not looking for an exit strategy. It is important to highlight that while military neutralisation of the Taliban seems improbable in the foreseeable future, the US is banking on the hope that significantly weakening the group will provide them enough incentive to enter into a reconciliation process with the government. However, New Delhi has voiced its reservations against any sort of government that is headed or partly run by the



Taliban; it has consistently stated its support for a sovereign, democratic Afghanistan. And while India has proved itself tenacious in dealing with Afghanistan, it now needs to create a comprehensive policy that involves all aspects of power, beyond economic and military.<sup>11</sup>

## **PROSPECTS FOR INDO-AFGHAN PARTNERSHIP**

The Afghan National Unity Government under the leadership of President Ashraf Ghani is keen on giving peace a chance despite the absence of popular support for the process. There has been a great deal of criticism over the lack of political inclusiveness, particularly in the official talks between Pakistan and Afghanistan regarding negotiations with the Taliban. India is faced with an opportunity to deepen its ties with Afghanistan as the dynamics of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations evolve.

Given their long history of friendly relations, India and Afghanistan stand to gain a great deal by expanding their areas of cooperation and engagement. India can play a greater role in assisting Afghanistan's initiative towards stability and development, which in turn will create a ripple effect for the larger interest of South Asia. Apart from providing infrastructural and military support, India needs to be more proactive on the international front by getting involved in a joint resolution for a larger Afghan solution. While Afghans have viewed India's support to their country extremely favourably, it is unfortunate that hurdles are being created by the peculiar dynamics of India-Pakistan relations. However, India must overcome its dithering position towards providing military support to Afghanistan. New Delhi needs to continue providing assistance for training the Afghan security forces in India, in coordination with NATO commanders. This will be of great benefit for NATO while at the same time strengthening ties between Kabul and New Delhi. India cannot afford to slow down on its engagement in Afghanistan because of Pakistan's paranoia. In the absence of boots on the ground in Afghanistan—which will likely cause great distrust in Islamabad about India's intentions—India must seek new avenues for cooperation aside from traditional development and humanitarian assistance.

It has not helped the Ghani government that they have failed to initiate electoral reform and hold parliamentary and district council elections. Following allegations of fraud and systemic shortcomings in the country's electoral system, both Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah made promises on electoral reform, vowing to overhaul the current election system. However, the inability of the government to pass reform laws, and the disagreements between the leaders over members of the Election Commission—have led to a delay in reforms. No reform came before the Parliament's term expired in July 2015. This has caused widespread uncertainty amongst Afghans on the capabilities of their government.

In this regard, India's assistance in constructing Afghanistan's parliament building is crucial, and is a manifestation of its commitment to helping build a sustainable and vibrant democracy in Afghanistan. Democracy, after all, can be said to be India's other expertise. While drawing on its own democratic experiences, India should engage Kabul in processes that strengthen its democratic institutions. While the importance of a fully functioning parliament simply cannot be understated, India should use its soft power to help Afghan political parties across the aisle, unite and pass much needed electoral reforms. This should help alleviate the burden of failed promises, riding on the shoulders of the NUG, and further prompt the holding of district and parliamentary elections. In 2013, a batch of election officials from Afghanistan commenced a two-week training course in India, organised by the country's Election Commission.<sup>12</sup> This is an extremely promising step towards strengthening democracy in Afghanistan. India should ensure that it continues to hold such programmes for Afghan officials and assist in the export of democratic values to Kabul.



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**The Afghan Parliament**

The following are more specific recommendations:

1. India and Afghanistan's Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA, 2011) should be implemented as it shall provide a framework for future bilateral engagements.
2. The SAARC grouping (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) can be utilised as a common platform for deeper engagement and cooperation with Afghanistan. As a member of SAARC, India needs to facilitate Afghanistan to embrace security and peace by investing in large-scale projects in order to create more job opportunities that are currently lacking in the region.
3. Facilitating trade and development-related activities can assist in achieving a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. Projects such as the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) gas pipeline can be utilised to strengthen Indo-

Afghan ties. This project stands to benefit the Afghan economy as it will provide gas exports to energy-demanding countries like India and Pakistan. Afghanistan shall act as a gateway to connect Central Asia to Pakistan and India. This will also create an impact on the overall infrastructural and economic development of Afghanistan.

4. The much anticipated India-Afghanistan-Iran trilateral agreement also has huge potential and can aim to benefit long-term Indo-Afghan ties. This will allow India access to Afghanistan via the strategically located Iranian port of Chabahar. The agreement will significantly enhance the utility of the port, as it contributes to Afghanistan's economic growth and facilitate better regional connectivity by connecting India and Afghanistan to Central Asia. India and Afghanistan ties can also be utilised in enhancing regional efforts in activities like counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics trafficking.
5. There is huge potential in trilateral cooperation between India, Afghanistan and China, as the first two can gain immensely under the 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) project and establish Afghanistan as a trade and transit hub.
6. It is imperative to engage with the Afghan civil society through interaction between the Indian and Afghan journalists, think tank institutions, and other opinion-makers. This will enable a deeper understanding of the perception at the ground level and assist in building institutions that encourage the potential of young leaders.
7. In order to boost bilateral relations, more people-to-people contact should be encouraged by way of access to education, healthcare, and student or faculty exchange programmes. While air connectivity between the two countries has increased over the years, the frequency of flights can be increased in order to encourage greater movement of citizens, particularly for medical purposes, education, and tourism.
8. The Afghan government requires greater regional support from its neighbours, particularly India, in order to tackle the deteriorating security situation and to assist in the region's overall economic development. India recognises that the presence of both development and democracy are the key to tackling terrorism within Afghanistan. [ORF](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Sabah Ishtiaq** is a Junior Fellow, and **Kriti M Shah** is a Research Assistant at Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi.

**ENDNOTES**

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E-mail: [contactus@orfonline.org](mailto:contactus@orfonline.org)  
Website: [www.orfonline.org](http://www.orfonline.org)