

## INDIA – AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS

### History of India-Afghanistan Relations

1. Contact between the people of modern-day India and Afghanistan has existed since the days of the Indus Valley Civilisation.
2. One of Alexander the Great's Diadochi (Greek for successors), Seleucus Nicator, controlled most of Afghanistan before ceding much of it to the Mauryan Empire in 305 BC as part of an alliance treaty.
3. The northern regions of India were invaded between the 10th century to the mid-18th century by a number of invaders based on what today is Afghanistan. Among them were the Ghaznavids, Ghurids, Khaljis, Suris, Mughals, and Durranis. During these eras, especially during the Mughal period (1526–1858), many Afghans began immigrating to India due to political unrest in their regions.
4. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan was one of the prominent leaders of the Indian independence movement and active supporters of the Indian National Congress.
5. Even though the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) became the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, unanimous Pashtun support for the Indian freedom struggle led to great sympathy in India for the cause of Pashtun autonomy and freedom.
6. The Indian government continued to support Pashtun leader Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan in lobbying for greater Pashtun freedom in the NWFP.
7. India was the only South Asian country to recognize the Soviet-backed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan in the 1980s, though relations were diminished during the 1990s Afghan civil war and the Taliban government.
8. India aided the overthrow of the Taliban and became the largest regional provider of humanitarian and reconstruction aid to Afghanistan.
9. Indians are working in various construction projects, as part of India's rebuilding efforts in Afghanistan.

## **India Afghanistan Relations since 2001**

1. During Operation Enduring Freedom, the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, India provided intelligence and logistic support for the Allied forces. After the fall of the Taliban, India established diplomatic relations with the newly established civilian government and participated in relief and reconstruction efforts.
2. India has provided about \$650–750 million worth of humanitarian and economic aid, making it the largest regional provider of aid for Afghanistan. India's support and collaboration extend to the rebuilding of air links, power plants, and investing in health and education sectors as well as helping to train Afghan civil servants, diplomats, and police.
3. In 2005, India proposed Afghanistan's membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).
4. Three memorandums of understanding were signed (MOUs) between the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) and the Afghan National Standardisation Authority for strengthening cooperation in the fields of rural development, education, and standardization.
5. During Hamid Karzai's visit to India in April 2006.
6. An agreement providing \$50 million to promote bilateral businesses between Afghanistan and India was signed during the visit of the Afghan Foreign Minister Dr. Spanta between 29 June – 1 July 2006. During the same year, India raised its aid package to Afghanistan by \$150 million, to \$750 million. In 2007, Afghanistan finally became the eighth member of SAARC.
7. In December 2015, India donated three Mi-25 attack helicopters, with the option to send more in the future to Afghanistan as part of the bilateral strategic partnership to counter the Taliban insurgency.
8. Indian PM Narendra Modi visited Kabul on December 25 2019 to open the newly constructed Afghan parliament which had been built by India for \$90 million.
9. On 15 August 2019, on Indian Independence Day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi extended greetings to Afghanistan who was due to also celebrate Afghan 100th Independence Day.
10. PM Modi in a statement issued on that day asserted that: "Afghanistan is a good neighbour of India, and I wish the country for celebrating 100 years of independence this year.

11. "President Ashraf Ghani also sent congratulations with the comment "May our friendship last forever."

### **Economic Relations between India and Afghanistan**

1. India seeks to expand its economic presence in Afghanistan as the international coalition fighting the Taliban have begun their withdrawal process.
2. Especially, it wants to improve transport connectivity and economic collaboration with countries in Central and South Asia.
3. India has already invested \$10.8 billion in Afghanistan as of 2012.
4. More such projects are likely to come once NATO withdraws completely from Afghanistan.
5. This includes setting up Iron ore mines, a 6 MTPA steel plant (by SAIL—Steel Authority of India Limited), an 800 MW power plant, Hydro-electric power projects, transmission lines and roads.
6. India helped in the reconstruction of Salma Dam in the Herat province. Besides producing 42 MW power, this Indo-Afghan friendship dam provides irrigation for 75,000 hectares of farmland in the Chisti Sharif district.
7. Salma Dam, officially the Afghan-India Friendship Dam, is a hydroelectric and irrigation dam project located on the Hari River in Chishti Sharif District of Herat Province in western Afghanistan.
8. The Afghan cabinet renamed the Salma Dam to the Afghan-India Friendship Dam in a move to strengthen relations between the two countries.
9. The hydroelectric plant produces 42 MW of power in addition to providing irrigation for 75,000 hectares of farmland (stabilising the existing irrigation of 35,000 hectares and development of irrigation facilities to an additional 40,000 hectares of land).
10. India and Iran are set to ink a transit agreement on transporting goods to landlocked Afghanistan.
11. The Indian government is investing more than US\$100 million in the expansion of the Chabahar port in south-eastern Iran which will serve as a hub for the transportation of transit goods.

### **Relevant Questions for India-Afghanistan Relations**

**When did relations between India and Afghanistan fully develop?**

Although contact has always existed between the populations of Afghanistan since the days of the Indus Valley Civilisations, diplomatic relations between the two nations were officially developed post the 1950's. In January 1950, a five-year Treaty of Friendship was signed between the two countries in New Delhi.

### **Did India establish any relations with the Taliban regime while they ruled in Afghanistan?**

The Taliban regime was recognized only by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha monuments by the Taliban led to outrage and angry protests by India. In 1999, the hijacked Indian Airlines Flight 814 landed and stayed in Kandahar in Afghanistan and the Taliban were suspected of supporting them. India became one of the key supporters of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance following these developments.

### **What kind of military assistance does India provide Afghanistan?**

Besides providing equipment such as attack helicopters, military assistance also includes the training of Afghan security personnel by the Indian Army.

## **INDIA'S AFGHAN POLICY AND TALIBAN**

This article is based on "**Getting India back to the Afghan high table**" which was published in The Hindu on 18/05/2020. It talks about the need to recalibrate India's Afghan policy, as the Taliban takes the central role in Afghanistan politics.

Recently, the United Nations Secretariat held a meeting of the "**6+2+1**" **group on regional efforts to support peace in Afghanistan.**

This group includes six neighbouring countries: China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; two global players the United States and Russia, and Afghanistan itself.

However, **India has not been invited to this peace process.** The reason given for keeping India out of this regional discussions is that India holds no "boundary" with Afghanistan. However, the "6+2+1" grouping ignored India's stand that its territory borders Afghanistan (along Wakhan Corridor) and is currently under Pakistan's illegal occupation.

Despite all the development work taken up by India in Afghanistan over the past 18 years since the Taliban were ousted from Kabul in 2001, it finds itself on the margins of international diplomacy in Afghanistan. In this context, there is a need for India to recalibrate its Afghan policy, in order to secure its **strategic and economic interest**.

### **India's Voice in the Afghan's Reconciliation Process**

- In the past, due to terror activities of the Taliban, **India has been very critical of the Taliban** coming into power and shown resistance to publicly dealing with the Taliban.
- Under the **US-Taliban peace deal**, the Taliban will be in the centre of power in Afghanistan, as the US forces withdraw from Afghanistan.
- In the present scenario, India has never announced its support for the U.S.-Taliban peace deal. Rather, India supports the Ashraf Ghani government and backs the idea of an **Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and Afghan-controlled process**.
  - Further, in order to provide legitimacy to recently held Afghan president elections, Ashraf Ghani entered into a power-sharing agreement with former chief executive Abdullah Abdullah.
  - This agreement will inevitably further weaken Ashraf Ghani and subsequently undermines Indian interest in the region.
- Due to these factors, India's voice in the reconciliation process has been limited.

### **India's Interest in Afghanistan**

- **Economic and Strategic Interest:** Afghanistan is a gateway to the oil and mineral-rich Central Asian republics.
  - Afghanistan's main advantage is its geography, as anyone who is in power in Afghanistan controls the land routes connecting India with Central Asia (via Afghanistan).
- **Developmental Projects:** The massive reconstruction plans for the country to offer a lot of opportunities for Indian companies.
  - Three major projects: the Afghan Parliament, the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, and the Afghanistan-India Friendship Dam (Salma Dam), along with India's assistance of more than \$3 billion in projects, hundreds of small development projects (of schools, hospitals and water projects) have cemented India's position in Afghanistan.

- **Security Interest:** India has been the victim of state-sponsored terrorism emanating from Pakistan supported terrorist group operating in the region (e.g. Haqqani network). Thus, India has two priorities in Afghanistan:
  - to prevent Pakistan from setting up a friendly government in Afghanistan, and
  - to avoid the return of jihadi groups, like al Qaeda, which could strike in India.

## **Challenges Ahead**

### **India's Dilemma**

Due to the Taliban's coming to power, India faces a dilemma, between:

- Should India reconsider its current policy that a lasting political settlement in Afghanistan must come through an **"Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan controlled process"** (considering that the elected Afghan Government is hardly in control of the peace process).
- Should India, consider the option of entering into **direct talks with the Taliban**. But, If India does so, it would constitute a major departure from its consistent policy of dealing only with recognised governments.

### **Dent in India's Goodwill**

- The building blocks of India's goodwill are assistance in infrastructure projects, health care, education, trade and food security, and also in the easy access to Afghani citizens to study, train and work in India.
- Above all, it is India's example as a pluralistic, inclusive democracy, inspires many in Afghanistan.
- However, there has been a dent in India's goodwill, due to recent events in India, especially the controversy over the **Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019**.

### **Exclusion of India**

- India has been excluded from the Afghanistan peace process many times including the recent meeting (6+2+1 grouping).
- This poses a challenge for India to secure its interest in deciding the fate of Afghanistan and its people.

## Steps To Be Taken

- India must also pursue opportunities to fulfil its role in the peace efforts in Afghanistan, starting with efforts to bridge the **Ghani-Abdullah divide**, and bringing together other major leaders with whom India has built ties for decades.
- India should take the diplomatic route to press for its inclusion in "6+2+1" dialogue, to claim its legitimate role in the Afghan peace process.
- India should leverage the United Nations's call for a pause in conflicts during the **Covid-19 pandemic** to restart dialogue with Pakistan, which in turn is necessary for lasting peace in Afghanistan.
- Also, India can learn from US-Taliban talks where two opposing parties came to the negotiating table for talks on Afghanistan's future.
  - For India, given its abiding interest in Afghanistan's success and traditional warmth for its people, making that leap should be a bit easier. Thus, India can consider the appointment of a special envoy and start Track II diplomacy with the Taliban.

## Conclusion

In the current situation, it is essential for India to maintain its strong links with the Afghan government, build and support its traditional Afghan allies and open lines of communication with the Taliban.



**Mains Question**

How a recent power-sharing agreement in Afghanistan will impact Indian interests in Afghanistan. Critically analyse.

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