



INDIA-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONSHIP IN THE MODI ERA : EMERGING DYNAMICS

□ Sandip Kumar Singh*
Dr. Namita Kumari**

ABSTRACT

Throughout contemporary history, India has maintained robust political, economic, and cultural ties with Afghanistan, with the exception of a brief period when the Taliban ruled Kabul. India's interest lies in greater peace and prosperity of Afghanistan. India aims for a relative stability in the in the war-ravaged Afghanistan. Since 2014, Indo-Afghan relationship have improved substantially under the Prime Ministership of Narendra Modi in the last seven years. During his initial days in the Kabul, Afghan leader Abdul Ghani's positive moves of seeking closer ties with Pak Army created some unease in New Delhi for some time. But that changed very soon because of Pakistan military unwillingness to abandon their close relationship with Taliban and deep state policy towards Afghanistan. India-Afghanistan during Modi-Ghani period have witnessed greater warmth in their relationships and more active cooperation at multiple levels, from infrastructure development to capacity building assistance. Because of this reason, President Ghani led Afghan government later on had sought a much greater Indian participation in developmental role in building of infrastructure and capacity building in Afghanistan. Prime Minister Modi government continues to emphasise on its support for a negotiated political settlement that is "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled", which means the primacy of democratically elected government of Afghanistan. This article also argues that Modi government's Afghanistan policy is based on continuous engagement for the betterment of the larger Afghan society and strengthening and the primacy of Afghan government in the Kabul.

Keywords : Indo-Afghan relations; Taliban; Ghani government; Modi government

Introduction

In the setting of post-Taliban Afghanistan, and against the backdrop of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the bilateral relationship between India and Afghanistan has become stronger over time. Except for a brief period of Taliban control of Kabul from 1996 to 2001, India and Afghanistan have been good extended neighbours. The vast majority of Afghans regard India favorably, and India has returned with similar views toward ordinary Afghans. It's a well-known fact that India and Afghanistan share a long historical and cultural tie. With shared mutual history of cooperation and respect, India and Afghanistan are transforming and

building mutually beneficial and cooperative relationship in post- 9/11 scenario. Afghanistan being a land-locked country has advantages and disadvantages both and, it is the center of many connecting regions. It was the focal point of much used phrase the "Great Game" in the past centuries between British Empire and Russian Empire, British and Afghans, Soviet Russians and Afghans.

The year 2014 was the watershed moments between two countries, because both New Delhi and Kabul elected new rulers through popular votes to rule their respective countries. In India, BJP leader and three-time Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi got elected with thumping majority. In Afghanistan also there

*Assistant Professor - Centre for Kashmir Studies, Central University of Himachal Pradesh

**Assistant Professor - SPM College, University of Delhi

was a change in the guard in Kabul after almost 13 years of Hamid Karzai rule. It was Asraf Ghani who emerged victorious in the multifront battle in newly created democratic structure of the war-torn country. It is in this context that this paper will look into Indo-Afghan relationships in post-2014 scenario and will try to explain and analyses in the framework of foreign policy approach of both the countries. India-Afghanistan signed "Strategic Partnership Agreement" in 2011 in the backdrop of India's unwavering support to new democratic regime in Kabul and commitment for infrastructure building as one of the largest aid assistance providers from South Asian region.

Background

India had a very cordial relationship with this landlocked country, till the emergence of Islamists Mujahideen and Taliban in the backdrop of USSR invasion in 1979. Cold-war between two superpowers, US and USSR, played an important role in creating this environment of ruthless violence within Afghan society. Even historically, Afghanistan was tribal-militia based society from medieval period to modern day. The 18th century ruler of Afghanistan Ahmad Shah Abdali was one the best example of this hybrid combination of tribalism and violence as means to capture political power. Because of its important and very strategic location, Afghanistan had historically remained at the center of geo-political changes and rivalries between great powers. Once it was rivalries between British and Russian Empire and both tried to capture this mountainous region but they failed. Second time was Soviet Russian empire and US proxy war on the land of Afghanistan during cold-war period. The scholars of Afghanistan studies use the phrase, "Afghanistan as the graveyard of Empires", to explain the failures of superpowers in Afghanistan.

Indo-Afghan long standing friendship and relationship were cemented and made stronger formally by the signing of the "Friendship Treaty" between two countries in the year 1950. Later on, both India and Afghanistan held regular meetings for greater interdependence and signed various agreements and protocols to promote co-operation, mutual-reliance and people to people engagements. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and subsequent regime

building through proxy, during at the height of the Cold War, created a favourable situation for India, given the country closer ties with USSR. Between 1979 and 1989, India provided and increased much of its investment in Afghanistan's development sectors, including industrial, irrigation, and hydroelectric projects. In this context, India has had a strong impact and soft power in Afghanistan since the beginning, whereas Pakistan, India's arch foe, fails to recognise India's positive role in Afghanistan's growth trajectory and perceives India's presence as a threat.

India-Pakistan Factor

Pakistan as an immediate neighbor country treats Afghanistan as its "sphere of influence" and within that framework it treats India's involvement in Afghanistan as an attack on its "strategic interest" of "deep state policy". India on the other hand have its own reason to support an independent Afghan government which does not uses religious extremism to capture power in Kabul. So, the enduring factor of India-Pakistan rivalry in South Asia have undeniable impacts on Afghanistan crisis, directly or indirectly. Indian foreign policy approach towards Afghanistan had been of mutual respect and cooperation throughout her history with emphasis on development cooperation and building of infrastructure, which will benefit common Afghans.

In contrast to India's approach, Pakistan's policy toward Afghanistan has been characterised by "deep state policy" and a "sphere of influence" approach. Pakistan has considered Afghanistan as its backyard throughout its history. In its myopic "strategic" vision, Pakistan cannot accept that India plays any role in Afghanistan, where India provides much-needed developmental aid and capacity building for ordinary Afghans. Pakistan considers India's presence in Afghanistan to be a "strategic" loss for them and a "strategic" gain for its arch-rival across the border. For Pakistan, Afghanistan is a "zero-sum game" in which it may either lose to India or gain the upper hand in the bigger geopolitical game of Afghanistan.

Indo-Afghan Relations, 2001-14

Following the 9/11 attacks, the United States led the "Operation Enduring Freedom," which successfully ousted the Taliban from Kabul and appointed a caretaker