

INDO-AFGHAN BILATERAL RELATIONS

The Indian-Afghan relationship has drawn closer in the post-September 11, 2001 period. Building on a long history of bilateral relations, the Indian government reengaged with the Afghan government after the 2001 defeat of the Taliban, initially largely on a humanitarian basis. The importance of Afghanistan to India has increased significantly for political and geo-strategic reasons, as well as for access to natural resources.

India and Afghanistan: A Long History of Bilateral Relations

Historically, Afghanistan has been the land bridge to India from the West. The two countries also have a common history, with several empires having encompassed areas of present day Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The anti-colonial struggles of British India had a champion in Afghan-Pakistani Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, also known as the “Frontier Gandhi,” and the close ties between the freedoms movements of both countries carried over into the post-independence period. Despite the Cold War and ensuing regional and geostrategic calculations of all neighboring countries, relations between India and Afghanistan remained friendly. The relationship only deteriorated when India was one of the first and few countries to recognize the Soviet-installed government in Kabul in 1979. Yet India remained engaged with Afghanistan during the civil war that followed Soviet withdrawal in 1989, providing Afghanistan with several million U.S. dollars in grants and humanitarian assistance through the United Nations during the 1990s. Only with the rise of the Taliban in 1993 did India totally sever official relations with Afghanistan. Instead, from the 1990s up until 2001 India provided development assistance to Afghanistan through funding for United Nations (UN) agencies providing humanitarian assistance in the country. During this period India also provided intelligence and military support to the Northern Alliance, the main anti-Taliban force.

The India-Afghanistan Development Partnership

India’s development partnership with Afghanistan since 2001 should be understood against this historical context, as well as India’s changing regional and global economic and geopolitical perceptions and needs. India is today the fifth largest provider of development assistance to Afghanistan with its total commitment for 2013/14 at approximately US\$ 1200 million as seen in figure 1. Moreover, Indo-Afghan development cooperation is likely to increase in importance and volume after the withdrawal of most international forces in 2014.

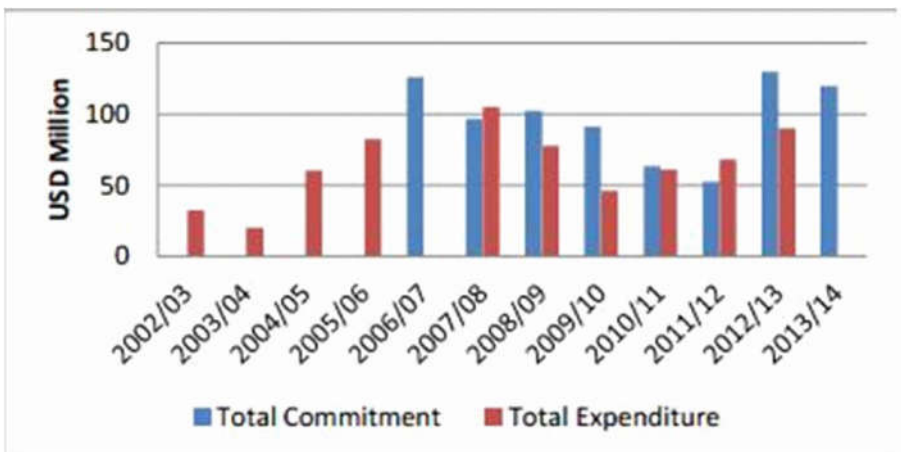


Figure 1: India’s Development Cooperation with Afghanistan: Commitments and Expenditures, 2002/03 – 2013/14

Source: International Development Cooperation Research (IDCR) based on respective Outcomes Budgets, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India and Government of India Budget

- **Humanitarian Assistance**

India currently supports a daily distribution of high protein biscuits

through school feeding programs managed by the UN World Food Program for nearly two million Afghan children and has also periodically supplied emergency food assistance to tide over food shortfalls. Indian humanitarian assistance has also included medical services and equipment through the reconstruction of the Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health in Kabul and the provision of free medical consultation and services to over 30,000 Afghans monthly through Indian Medical Missions in five Afghan cities.

• Development Cooperation

The vast majority of India's commitments between 2002 and 2013 is in the form of grants. These grants have spanned a variety of sectors identified by the Afghan government and the Afghan National Development Strategy as priority areas, **particularly infrastructure, small and community-based development projects, and education and capacity building projects.**

As seen in figure 2, the majority of India's development financing in Afghanistan is committed to infrastructure projects. Some high-profile projects have included construction of the Afghan parliament building in Kabul, the Zaranj-Delaram road which links Iran's Chabahar port and roads to Afghanistan, a power transmission grid to bring additional electricity to Kabul, the power-generating Salma Dam in Herat, and telecommunications infrastructure in 11 Afghan provinces. Small and community-based development projects have focused on socio-economic development in border areas, while education and capacity-building projects have included provision of 500 annual scholarships for Afghan students to study at universities in India, 500 annual scholarships for Afghan civil servants to receive training in India, and vocational training programs in Afghanistan.

The Government of India has recently stated that its development cooperation commitment to Afghanistan has been increased to US\$ 2 billion. disbursement rates always lag behind commitments and the security environment in some areas of Afghanistan has led to understandable delays (for example, in road construction), other delays in projects, such as only partial delivery of 200 mini buses promised several years ago, point to capacity constraints on the Indian side.

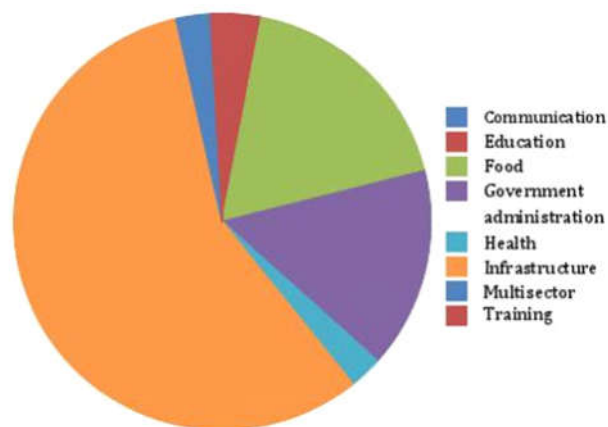


Figure 2: Sectoral breakdown of India's development cooperation with Afghanistan

Strategic factors undergirding India's Partnership with Afghanistan

India's growing engagement in development cooperation with Afghanistan reflects its increasing regional and global ambitions.

• Securing Access to Energy and Natural Resources

The development assistance India provides to Afghanistan increasingly has an underlying goal of facilitating India's access to the natural resources within Afghanistan and through Afghanistan in Central Asia (see figure 3 for potential mineral mining locations in Afghanistan). For example, India's support for hydroelectricity generation and power transmission in Afghanistan's Herat province has largely benefitted the local Afghan population. However, a secure source of electricity in Herat, along with India's investment in the Iranian port and container terminal at Chabahar, investments in the Delaram-Zarang highway connecting Iranian roads from Chabahar port across the border with Herat and other major cities in Afghanistan through the A01 ring road, and proposed investments in a railway linking Chabahar with Bam on the Iranian-Afghan border and into

Afghanistan, all help India in accessing land-locked Afghanistan. India is also working to connect Iran and Afghanistan with Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries via these roads, thereby increasing regional trade as well as creating a route for India to access the rich gas and oil reserves of Central Asia.

This infrastructure will provide Indian private and state-owned companies, like the Indian consortium that has the majority rights to mine the Hajigak iron-ore mines in Bamiyan province, with a route for exporting this natural resource from Afghanistan through Iran back to India. These resources of course also represent huge potential income for Afghanistan. Finally, this infrastructure provides India with a route for Indian exports (and continued aid) to Afghanistan. This sea and land route to and from Afghanistan through Iran is all the more important to India given the continued intransigence of Pakistani government in not allowing India access to the quicker and cheaper land route across their country, even for the transport of humanitarian goods.

• **Economic Diplomacy**

India’s development cooperation with Afghanistan increasingly has a second goal of economic diplomacy. Indian companies and services are significantly cheaper than their western counterparts and entry into the Afghan market thus offers opportunities for the Indian private sector. For example, India has provided significant development assistance in the field of health care: India funded the construction and upgrading of Afghanistan’s only children’s hospital, and supplied the hospital’s infrastructure and training of its medical personnel along with a telemedicine project that links it with Indian hospitals. India also provided ambulances to the Afghan Ministry of Public Health and built numerous basic health clinics in border areas.



The government’s development assistance has helped pave the way for India’s private sector to find a market for its goods and services in Afghanistan. As Afghanistan seeks to shift the foundation of its economy from aid to trade, this economic diplomacy angle of India’s development cooperation will further increase in significance.

To this end India has tried to use its development projects to support the capacity of the Afghan government and its democratic institutions through significant allocations to a training program in India for Afghan bureaucrats and by financing the construction of Afghanistan’s parliament. Indian development assistance is also used to tie Afghanistan closer into the economy of Iran and the neighboring Central Asian republics in the hopes that this will provide greater economic integration and prospects for the Afghan government beyond 2014.

Afghanistan after Nato Withdrawal (Post 2014)

United States have completely pull out its forces from Afghanistan and had delegated control of the war-torn country to Afghan authorities.

But the US also has kept about 10,000 troops in the war-battered Afghanistan after 2014. NATO allies are expected to provide around 5,000 troops if the security-related agreement is agreed to among the stakeholders in Afghanistan, US and NATO.

Brief history

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks on twin towers in USA, the then US president, George W. Bush waged a war in Afghanistan with an aim to eliminate Bin Laden (the said mastermind behind 9/11) and the Al-Qaida terrorist network; two, to remove the Taliban from power and to prevent Afghanistan from continuing to serve as a safe-haven for terrorists; and three, to bring stability to Afghanistan and its people through the creation of a functioning stable and democratic state.

With the establishment of the Afghan Interim Authority as a temporary local authority in the Bonn Agreement in December 2001, the issue of state-building was added to this agenda. And indeed, after NATO took permanent command of the ISAF force in October 2003 and its mandate was expanded territorially to reach across most of Afghanistan, ISAF's goals were further expanded to cover the maintenance of security, the aiding of reconstruction and development and the facilitation of governance.

The Afghan situation is unfolding rapidly. From the Bonn Conference in December 2011 till the Tokyo conference of July 2012, international meetings have been “an awkward mixture of hope, fantasy, and failure”, according to an American observer. At Tokyo, the international community did make a pledge of \$16 billion for the next four years, which is much less than what the Afghan President had quoted at Bonn (\$10 billion per year) and short of what the Afghan Central Bank estimated (\$6-7 billion per year) as necessary for sustaining economic growth.

The reconciliation efforts do not seem to be succeeding. There is no regional consensus on how to approach the post-withdrawal situation.

- Pakistan is looking for strategic depth;
- Iran wants to see the back of American forces from Afghan soil;
- China eyes Afghan resources without any definite commitment to invest in Afghan security and stability;
- Russia is ready to engage as a service provider if the funds can be arranged elsewhere. All in all, there is not enough international support for keeping the ‘new Afghanistan’ afloat.

Implications of withdrawal of troops

There could be many challenges to Afghanistan of which some are discussed below:

(a) Regional Security

It is assumed that after reduction/withdrawal of the coalition forces from Afghanistan, the militants would be reorganized/restructured and could threaten the peace of the entire region by drawing the neighbouring countries in the war. Thus the reduction/withdrawal can endanger stability of the south and central Asia.

History reveals that after complete withdrawal of Soviet Union forces from Afghanistan in 1988, America ceased taking interest in Afghanistan and the fighters made their way to Pakistan-India eastern borders. If the

terror activities persist in Afghanistan after 2014, they are likely to spill over into neighbouring countries, and Afghanistan could become “a staging ground for an Indo-Pakistan proxy war.

(b) Afghan Forces

The key question is: Will the Afghan forces be able to discharge their responsibility effectively? NATO’s withdrawal from Afghanistan can provide a golden chance to Taliban to challenge the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) potential to keep the country intact. The ANSF will simultaneously combat on two fronts. Firstly, it will fight against Taliban, which will use all their strength to re-take areas from army in the remotest rural territories. Secondly, the Taliban will strive to eliminate the country’s internal security and political apparatus - the police, government and the army by demoralizing and deserting the security forces.

(c) Economy

Afghanistan’s economy is totally dependent on foreign aid that has been cut down to a great extent. Some foreign funded media outlets, including TV and Radio channels have shut down or limited their services. In case of instability, foreign investors can cease their projects in Afghanistan that will be a great blow to its economy.

After 2014, the dependent Afghanistan would need to stand on its own feet, which would be something very difficult for this war torn country. Afghans who are drawing salaries in dollars and Euros now will plunge into severe despair when dollars are stopped. Afghanistan will need a minimum of 3-4 billion dollar apart from security fund to maintain the functioning of the government.

Afghanistan spent very little amount of the foreign funds on its industrial sector. Afghanistan imports are larger than its exports, the biggest export of Afghanistan are dry fruit. Rampant smuggling and corruption have almost ditched Afghanistan’s economy. There is no proper check and balance system in this regard and there is a fear that after 2014, a weak economy will be one of the biggest challenges to Afghanistan.

(d) Political Uncertainty

Currently Afghanistan has a very weak government. Karzai government has no or very weak control beyond Kabul. The Presidential elections are very important because Afghanistan needs a strong leader to implement not only the writ of the government, but also bridge the gap among the conflicting ethnic groups.

(e) Pakistan Interference

After 2014, Pakistan interference can mount in Afghanistan. The stability of Afghanistan is closely intertwined with developments in neighboring Pakistan. Islamabad has assisted the Taliban in the past and once again stands accused by the United States of supporting the Taliban groups fighting ISAF forces in Afghanistan.

Some researchers argue that the Pakistan military actively aids the insurgents through funding, weapons, strategic planning, and so on, as well as through its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency.

(f) Illegal drug trafficking

Illicit drugs is one of the major post-2014 problems that must be urgently addressed. Afghanistan remains by far the leading cultivator and producer of opium in the world. Poppy cultivation and illicit trafficking of opium threaten the health and well-being of people in the region and beyond. They fuel crime and corruption, undermine stability and can be used to finance terrorist activity.

Options for India

India must not view Afghanistan through a Pakistani Prism. India’s policy in Afghanistan must be Afghan centric and not Pakistan Centric! Given the prevailing flux, India must pursue what has been aptly called as a “**no strings- attached strategy**” in Afghanistan, encompassing institution building, capacity enhancement, reconstruction assistance, soft power projection, and outreach to all major Afghan ethnic groups.

India, by adopting a **low-key role** in the last few years, has set itself apart as a country which is genuinely interested in reconstruction and development. India's small-budget interventions in Pashtun areas have been well-received/appreciated by the population in areas infested by the militants, which has even forced the Taliban to grudgingly acknowledge India's constructive role. Thus, India does have the acceptability to play a key role in Afghanistan in the next few years. The partnership agreement between the two countries allows India to strengthen linkages in the security sector too. The common Afghan, irrespective of her/his ethnicity, is keen that India continues to play a bigger role in stabilising Afghanistan. In contrast, Pakistan has lost credibility among the Afghans, who consider it as a country which does not have anything positive to offer, and can only export terrorism and destabilise the situation further.

There is a pessimistic view in certain circles in India that India will find it difficult to stay engaged given Pakistan's continuing nexus with the Taliban and its resolve to disallow space for India in Afghanistan after 2014. **However, the situation in Afghanistan may not be all that bad at the moment.** It has to be remembered that:

- a. Pakistan is fast losing popular goodwill in Afghanistan;
- b. It may not be possible for the Taliban to take over Kabul so easily given that support from Pakistan will be hard to come by because of both the gaze of the international community on Afghanistan and increasing preoccupation with the internal security situation; and
- c. There is a recognition in Afghanistan cutting across all ethnicities and groups that the war ravaged country would need continued assistance from all possible sources and, among the regional countries, it could bank on India as a reliable partner. Even the Taliban may not be too averse to receive continued Indian assistance. The perception that India is open to the idea of working with Pakistan in Afghanistan (even if it is impracticable) has enhanced India's image among ordinary Afghans.

Thus, if India retains the political will to remain engaged in Afghanistan, it can do so even as the latter becomes turbulent. India must be ready to provide the necessary resources to sustain its engagement. It needs to improve its delivery mechanisms and cut down on implementation delays. India must show greater receptivity to the needs of common Afghans and build contacts at multiple levels. India no longer has as much leverage with the erstwhile northern alliance members (Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras) like it had a decade earlier. These links will have to be reactivated. India must reach out to all shades of Afghans.

The India-Afghanistan relationship must go beyond aid and build a comprehensive economic relationship. An FTA with Afghanistan can be considered here. The recent investment summit on Afghanistan is a good beginning that must be sustained. Afghanistan is in urgent need of measures to boost its revenue generating capacity. India can contribute in the field of revitalising agriculture, building infrastructure (railroads, highways, processing plants, etc.), which could spur long-term economic growth and create jobs, and building of institutions that will stabilise the process of democratisation.

But we cannot be wishful in our thinking. While Indian intervention in Afghanistan must be increased, this may not be easy. **If the security situation worsens, we may have to be selective in our programmes.** We must contribute to institution building. We should also have a regular political dialogue with the Afghan government to ensure that it adapts to the changing political scenario and adopts correct policies. India should take care that its role is not misconstrued as interference. We can increase the number of Indian developmental interventions in Afghanistan, offer more number of scholarships to Afghan students, relax visa procedures for Afghan businessmen, students and patients seeking medical attention in India, and encourage the private sector to invest in areas related to education, IT, healthcare systems, aviation, mining, media and communication.

India should also be part of multilateral efforts, particularly the SCO, CSTO, NATO etc. Since China is looking towards increasing its profile in Afghanistan, India should have a dialogue with China (and even with Iran and Russia) on the nature and scope of our future engagement with Afghanistan.

India must not get bogged down by Pakistan. India's policy in Afghanistan must be Afghan-centric and not be concerned about Pakistani efforts to gain strategic depth. In fact, by getting involved in Afghanistan, Pakistan is likely to endanger its own security and stability.

Diplomatic

- New Delhi must vigorously strive for and support a stable, democratic, multi-ethnic Afghan government. This requires a consultative approach with all regional players, particularly with Iran and Russia, to ensure that Pakistani proxies do not successfully come to the centre stage in a post-ISAF political order in Afghanistan.
- Strengthen ties with the all ethnic groups, viz., Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras, in Afghanistan. Reengaging the Northern Alliance will also significantly address India's apprehensions with regard to Pakistan.

Military

- *Establish an Indian Military Training Team in Afghanistan (IMTRAT-Afghanistan).* Large scale military training of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) needs to be institutionalized through the establishment of an Indian Military Training Team in Afghanistan, if requested by Afghanistan. Given India's rich experience in handling insurgencies, such a training establishment will significantly bolster the capacity of the ANSF to deal with internal challenges themselves.
- *Deployment of Indian Military Observers.* Indian Military Observers can be deployed as part of a future UN/Regional Military Observer Group in Afghanistan post ISAF withdrawal in 2014.
- *Military Deployment.* It would be more prudent to Wait & Watch. Should the situation stabilise with a stable National Unity Government, the deployment of up to a Battalion Group (in the time frame 2017-2020) and a Brigade Group (in the time frame of 2020-2025) only as part of a UN-mandated Peacekeeping Force may be considered.
- *Military Equipment.* Small arms, artillery guns, tanks, ammunition, vehicles, helicopters & Tactical Communication Equipment, etc. can be gifted to the Afghan National Security Forces.

Economic & Developmental Assistance

- Besides the promised economic aid, deployment of Civil Reconstruction teams, establishment of hospitals and other mega projects like road-rail network, schools, telecommunications, airlines, food storage, electricity, water, sanitation, etc. need to be given a fillip. In the longer run, besides ensuring development, these projects would generate employment and wean the Afghan youth away from the fundamentalist ideology.

Highlights of Salma Dam Project

- *India aided the reconstruction of Salma Dam built across the Harirud River at Chist-e-Shariff in Herat province, at a cost of over Rs1,400 crore.*
- *It is expected that the dam will generate 42 Mega Watt of power, besides irrigating 75,000 hectares of land.*
- *The Minister of Energy and Water of Afghanistan has proposed that the Salma dam should be renamed as Afghanistan-India Friendship Dam.*
- *India is the largest regional donor for Afghanistan; in 2014, US \$2 billion was earmarked as development aid.*
- *Even the Afghan Parliament Building is being constructed with Indian assistance.*
- *Afghans carried a 100 metre long Indian flag, along with their own national flag on the streets of Afghanistan as a thanksgiving gesture.*

Conclusion

The Afghanistan conflict reflects **long-standing rivalries among the different ethnic and tribal groups within the country, but it has long been exacerbated by outside powers seeking to protect or advance their own interests.** New Delhi must not complicate matters further by viewing Afghanistan as a **battleground between India and Pakistan.** Instead, India, as a **responsible regional power, should steer Afghanistan towards political stability, security through an inclusive government, economic growth, reconstruction and regional integration, which is what that country needs the most.**