

Four Decades of India's Afghan Policy: Still Looking for a Direction

Dr. Shasanka Sekhar Pati

Abstract

Since the last four decades, India's Afghan policy continues to be in a state of flux. New Delhi has attempted to provide some sort of consistency and continuity to its Afghan policy in the last forty years by collaborating twice with both the Super powers, but unfortunately both the times it could not yield the desired outcomes except leaving it in lurch. In 1980s, India has to compromise with her policy of Non-alignment and support Soviet intervention to remain an active player in Afghanistan. But this Indian policy could not be sustained for long because of Soviet Union's withdrawal in 1989 and the subsequent assassination of President Najibullah and the ensuing chaos as Afghanistan fell into the hands of the hard-line Islamist forces. On Taliban's assumption of power in 1996, New Delhi lost whatever little footprint it had in Afghanistan. India could not gain much by supporting the Ahmed Shah Masood led Northern Alliance which was fighting against the Taliban. In 2001, once again the Indian government got the opportunity to restore its age old civilizational ties with Afghanistan when the US and its allies militarily intervened to oust the Taliban from power. India seized the opportunity and actively supported post-2001 Bonn agreement and subsequent efforts made by the US and the international community to restore peace and stability in Afghanistan. During the period, New Delhi followed a 'Soft power' approach and desisted from any kind of political or military involvement in the peace process. She invested more than 3 billion dollars in developing the vital infrastructure and other developmental projects. But the sudden US withdrawal from Afghanistan following the Doha deal and the subsequent recapture of political power by the Taliban forcing the Ghani administration to flee the country once again left India's Afghan policy in quandary.

Keywords: India, Afghanistan, Taliban, US, Foreign Policy

1. Introduction

Unfortunately, India's Afghan policy continues to be in doldrums despite the fact that New Delhi shared a cordial, friendly and strong relationship with Afghanistan based on historical and cultural links.¹ Till Soviet intervention, both the countries enjoyed a normal and healthy relationship being the supporters of non-alignment. But when the Soviet Union militarily intervened in Afghanistan in 1979, India supported it on the ground that outside powers are trying to destabilize the region. Throughout the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, India continued to be an active player there till 1989 when the Soviet forces were finally withdrawn in a super hurry. Losing Soviet support proved India costly as the outside Islamist forces were able to penetrate into the Afghan society and government in 1990s leading to a horrific end to the

¹Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) of India, India-Afghanistan Relations, Aug. 2012, <http://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/afghanistan-aug-2012.pdf>

Soviet backed Najibullah regime. In order to preserve its footprint and to counter Pakistan's influence, India ended up supporting different Islamist factions who captured different provinces in Afghanistan. Taking advantage of the ensuing chaos, Pakistan was able to successfully prop up its own supported fundamentalist regime- the Taliban in 1996 to gain the much sought 'strategic depth' against its arch rival- India. Keeping in view New Delhi's historical anti-Pakistan stand, many Indian policy makers were averse to recognize and maintain any relationship with this Islamist regime. So, India ultimately ended up losing its footsteps in Afghanistan till 2001 when the US and its allies militarily intervened and removed the fundamentalist regime from power. This provided India with the much needed opportunity to register her presence in Afghanistan once again. So, the Indian government strongly supported the US and the international community sponsored Bonn agreement of 2001 and for the next two decades the subsequent governments in New Delhi spent millions of dollars to support Afghan society and government. But the sudden withdrawal of the US and its allies from Afghanistan and the subsequent recapture of Afghanistan by the Taliban once again rendered Indian investments in both man and material at risk. So, India's Afghan policy once again became the victim of circumstances.

In order to study the evolving trajectory and the corresponding difficulties faced by India in Afghanistan, this paper is divided into three different sections. Section I discusses India's engagement in Afghanistan during the period of Soviet intervention from 1979-1989. Section II explains another period of uncertainty India's policy makers faced in sustaining the momentum of past engagement after the departure of the Soviet forces, that is, from 1990-2001 amidst a tumultuous domestic environment. Finally, Section III attempts to explain India's two decades of engagement with Afghanistan in post-9/11 period, commencing from the Bonn agreement 2001- August 2021 when the Taliban bounced back to power by crashing the doors of the Ghani administration.

Section I

India and Afghanistan shared civilizational ties even before India's emergence as an independent nation-state. Loosing no time, soon after independence, the new government in India took initiatives to further bolster this historical and civilizational relationship. As part of this initiative, a Treaty of Friendship was signed between the Government of India and the Royal Government of Afghanistan on 4th January, 1950.² This treaty provided a strong foundation to further institutionalise and develop the civilizational relationship between the two countries. India enjoyed a healthy relationship with Afghanistan starting from King Zahir Shah to the successive regimes, encompassing to the governments that came to power even after the Soviet invasion of 1979.

India was one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War and Afghanistan also followed a non-aligned policy. This similarity in their foreign policy postures provided a sturdy ground for further development of their relationship. Moreover, this was further supplemented by certain historical factors. Since both India and Afghanistan had territorial disputes with Pakistan, so there is no reason why they should not enjoy a good relationship. Afghanistan's support to India's stand on Kashmir further strengthened this relationship. Building on these historical and political

² Treaty of Friendship Between The Government of India and The Royal Government of Afghanistan (1950) Available via Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/6584/Treaty+of+Friendship> Accessed 23 July 2023.

coincidences, India continued to assist Afghanistan in the field of infrastructure development, irrigation, agriculture and hydroelectric projects even during the tumultuous decade of the anti-Soviet war.

A massive USSR intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979 amidst the impending change of government in India posed a grave foreign policy challenge to Ms. Indira Gandhi, who just assumed power after a landslide victory. However, she met this challenge in Afghanistan quite boldly though she was out of office for the past three years. India's policy of non-alignment faced its most difficult test here. The key question faced by the Indian policy makers was whether to remain neutral honouring the principles of non-alignment or face the Soviet issue in Afghanistan in realistic terms by supporting USSR intervention and thereby prevent Pakistan from taking advantage of the situation. With active US support, both political as well as military, Pakistan was busy in arming the Mujahideens in Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet troops. The battle lines thus were clearly drawn in South Asia. Fearing shifting balance of power in favour of Pakistan in the region, Ms. Gandhi's government finally decided to support USSR intervention and accordingly she instructed Brajesh Mishra, the then Indian envoy to the United Nations to convey New Delhi's stand in favour of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Majority of nations in the United Nations condemned the Soviet action in Afghanistan in January and December 1980, but India abstained from voting.

For India, the most troublesome issue was not only the large scale US military assistance to Pakistan, but deliberately turning a blind eye to Pakistan's clandestine nuclear weapons programme. Thus, to gain her geopolitical leverage over Pakistan, India has no options but to support Soviet intervention by departing from the policy of non-alignment. Most of the countries in the Islamic world and Non-Aligned Movement resented Indian stand on Soviet issue. In fact, outside the Warsaw Pact, India was the only country that enjoyed cordial ties with the USSR.³

Thus, India's Afghan policy during the period was guided by the geopolitical realities in the region and not the principle of non-alignment. Revitalization of security ties between Pakistan and the US shaped India's Afghan policy during this decade. This shift in India's foreign policy posture on Afghan issue received domestic support, but drew international condemnation.

Section II

India continued to actively support the subsequent governments in Afghanistan even after the final departure of the Soviet troops in 1988 following the signing of the Geneva accord. New Delhi had a good relationship with the Najibullah government (the last of Soviet-installed regimes) and even the Mujahidden dispensation in Kabul. However, the execution of Najibullah by the hard-line Islamist forces led to civil war in Afghanistan. This chaotic situation forced New Delhi to recalibrate its Afghan policy once again. Thus, the government in India came up with an Afghan policy which is more realistic and also principle-less to secure her core security interests. The then Indian Prime Minister Narashima Rao laid down the essential outlines of this policy that continued to inform India's Afghan policy till the Taliban's assumption of power in 1996. The core elements of this policy are:

³Rais, RB. 1993. Afghanistan and the Regional Powers, *Asian Survey*, 33(9):pp. 905-922.

1. India's doors shall remain open to deal with any Mujahideen group notwithstanding their militant Islamism.
2. New Delhi expressed its readiness to deal with any government in Kabul subject to the condition that it is sensitive to India's vital security concerns.
3. India would continue to maintain a good relationship with any government in Kabul irrespective of the latter's proximity to Pakistan.
4. India would desist herself from either arming any Mujahedeen groups in Afghanistan or ostracizing any such groups.
5. India would continue to contribute to Afghanistan's capacity-building within its capabilities and resources.⁴

The government in India opted for this policy keeping in view the fluidity of Afghan situation and continued disorder and uncertainty. However, this policy posture did not help India much as violence and mutually destructive conflict between different Mujahideen factions made it very difficult to go for any meaningful engagement. Growing violence and heavy shelling in and around Kabul forced Indian government to close down its embassy on several occasions. Amidst this disorder and chaos, an Islamic fundamentalist group of students named 'Taliban' backed by Pakistan swiftly assumed political power in Kabul. Keeping in view its historical anti-Pakistan and anti-fundamentalist stand, Indian government was averse to continue its engagement with the Taliban regime. As a result, India's relations with Afghanistan came to a complete halt during the first innings of the Taliban regime in 1996. According to some experts, India's complete disengagement with Afghanistan during the Taliban era (1996-2001) marked a diplomatic black hole in the history of India-Afghanistan relations.⁵

New Delhi's stand against the Taliban regime was based on its core security concerns over Jammu and Kashmir. Indian government believed that Pakistan has deliberately propped up the fundamentalist regime (Taliban) in Afghanistan to further its efforts to fight the ongoing proxy war against India using terrorist outfits like the Harkat-Ul-Ansar and Jaiesh-E-Mohammad. According to New Delhi, these Islamist terrorist groups are trained in the bordering areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁶ In view of this, India extended active support to the anti-Taliban faction, the United Front (UF), popularly known as the Northern Alliance (NA) along with Russia and Iran. Thus, India's Afghan policy in 1990s is termed as a zero-sum game of influence with Pakistan.⁷

Section III

In the post-9/11 period, following the ouster of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan by the US and its allies in late 2001, New Delhi once again got the opportunity to restore its cordial ties with Afghanistan. The government in India seized the opportunity by declaring its support in favour of the US and the international community mediated Bonn agreement of 2001. India thus extended its full support to the Interim government in Afghanistan led by Hamid Karzai. Jaswant Singh, India's Minister for External

⁴Bhadrakumar, M.K., 2011. Manmohan Singh Resets Afghan Policy. The Hindu.

<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/manmohan-singh-resets-afghan-policy/article2021653.ece>

⁵ Paliwal, A. 2015 'India's Taliban Dilemma: To Contain or to Engage?', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 40(1-2): pp. 35-67.

⁶ Swami, Praveen. 2013. *India, Pakistan and the Secret Jihad: The Covert War in Kashmir, 1947-2004*, London: Routledge.

⁷ Ganduly, Sumit and Nicholas Howenstein. 2009. 'India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan'. *Journal of International Affairs*, 63 (1): pp. 127-40.

Affairs participated in the inauguration ceremony of the Interim government in Kabul and also reopened the Indian embassy which was closed since 1996 because of Taliban's assumption of power. In this phase, India adopted a policy of 'soft engagement' and thus extended generous humanitarian, economic and infrastructure-related assistance to Afghanistan. New Delhi stayed away from providing any kind of military assistance as a matter of policy not to jeopardize the process of peace reconciliation and also to allay the security concerns of Pakistan. India's policy during this period was completely in sync with the Bonn agreement. Most of the members of the Karzai government were the supporters of the Northern Alliance in 1990s which was fighting against the Taliban.⁸ So, India found it quite handy to deal with the Karzai government in Kabul.

Immediately after the assumption of power by the Interim Government of Kabul, the then Indian Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee quickly announced US\$100 million aid to Afghanistan. Thereafter, India continued to further her engagement with the subsequent governments in Kabul. According to sources, India has already pledged more than US\$3 billion to Afghanistan for various infrastructure projects and developmental schemes that cover health and education.⁹ New Delhi's civilian-centric approach has succeeded in building mutual trust between both the countries and at the same time also won the hearts and minds of the common Afghans. By developing the Chabahar port in Iran, India has helped Afghanistan to reduce its dependence on the Pakistani ports of Gwadar and Karachi. Development of this port has also opened up possibilities for India to reach out to Central Asia bypassing Pakistan. It has also helped in conducting direct trade between India and Afghanistan bypassing Pakistan. Construction of Afghanistan's new parliament building, the Afghan-India Friendship Dam (formerly known as Salma Dam) and renovation of the damaged Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health are some of the other important accomplishments of India in Afghanistan during this period.

Since 2001, several high level visits by the leaders of both the countries further strengthened their multidimensional engagement. During Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Kabul in 2003, both the countries signed a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) and this made India Afghanistan's largest trading partner. Both the leaders agreed to further expand their bilateral engagement to other areas that include combating terrorism, trade, energy, education and defence. India also facilitated Afghanistan's entry into SAARC as a full-fledged member hoping that it would open up the doors for Kabul for a more meaningful engagement with South Asia.¹⁰ With a view to further revitalize the ties, India and Afghanistan signed a landmark agreement on 'Strategic Partnership' in October 2011, that covered provisions for economic and security cooperation, training and equipping of Afghan National Security Forces, development of mining and energy production, provision of economic aid and assistance and also establishment of 'strategic dialogue' between the national security advisors of both the countries.¹¹ India also assisted Afghanistan in institutional capacity building by training Afghan doctors, diplomats, entrepreneurs, judges, lawyers, paramedics and government officials. In a meeting in November 2012,

⁸ Pant, H.V. 2011. 'The Afghanistan Conflict: India's Changing Role', *Middle East Quarterly*, 18(2): 31-39.

⁹ Business Standard, 2018, India fifth largest donor to Afghanistan: official. https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/india-fifth-largest-donor-to-afghanistan-official-118062001344_1.html. Accessed on 25 July 2023.

¹⁰ Chandra, A. 2007. *India and Afghanistan: Renewing Economic Relations in Warikoo K (ed), Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities*, Vol. 2. Pentagon Press, New Delhi, pp. 182-183.

¹¹ Wright, T., Stancati, M. 2011. 'Karzai Sets Closer Ties with India on Visit'. *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203791904576610923980017098>. Accessed on 25 July 2023.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh agreed to further deepen economic cooperation between both the countries. Participation of Afghan President Hamid Karzai in the inaugural ceremony of Narendra Modi as the new Prime Minister of India in 2014 also symbolizes the good relationship that existed between both the countries. During his official visit to India in April 2015, leaders of the two countries ‘expressed their determination to work together, along with the international community, to combat and defeat the scourge of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations’.¹²

In 2017, the first shipment of wheat was sent to Afghanistan by India through the strategically located Iranian port of Chabahar. According to a statement released by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, this is the first in a series of six shipments that will be delivered to Afghanistan over the next few months.¹³ Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, India extended generous humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. These include support in ensuring food security, supply of 5 lakh tablets of Hydroxy-chloroquine, 1 Lakh tablets of Paracetamol and 50,000 pairs of surgical gloves.

Thus, it would be no exaggeration to say that the post-Bonn engagement of India qualitatively opened a new era of multidimensional engagement with Afghanistan and this continued uninterrupted till Taliban’s comeback to power in Kabul in August 2021.

But Taliban’s unexpected return to power in August 2021 by forcing the de facto Ghani administration to flee the country suddenly changed the geopolitical scenario in the region to the utter dismay of India. Once again, India found itself at the receiving end in Afghanistan as it could respond adequately to the changing geopolitical dynamics in Kabul to protect and preserve its core interests. Though a bit hesitatingly, Indian government tried to reach out to the Taliban leadership using informal channels and also got success in it, yet for New Delhi it is going to be a tight rope walk as it could not fully engage with the new regime the way it used to with the previous Afghan governments. Thus, it is following a policy of ‘limited engagement’ with the new Taliban regime and is trying to protect its investments and secure its other interests, albeit in a constrained environment. So, in order to retain its relevance in Afghanistan and ensure consistency in its Afghan policy, New Delhi needs to adequately appreciate the truth that it is responding to an environment shaped by others in Afghanistan.

¹² Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2015. [Joint Statement during the State Visit of President of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to India \(April 28, 2015\) \(mea.gov.in\)](http://mea.gov.in), April 28 2015. Accessed on 26 July 2023.

¹³The Diplomat, First Indian Shipment Leaves for Afghanistan via Iran’s Strategic Port. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/first-indian-wheat-shipment-leaves-for-afghanistan-via-irans-strategic-chabahar-port/>