

**INDIA’S “LOOK WEST” – POST TALIBAN INDIA’S  
ENGAGEMENT WITH AFGHANISTAN**

By

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Historically India and Afghanistan have shared very close political and cultural ties. Contacts between Afghanistan and India date back to 6 BC, since the inception of the Gandhara civilization. Present day Afghanistan came into being after the Third Anglo-Afghan War of 1919. Post India’s independence and partition, India and Afghanistan have shared very close ties. In 1947, Afghan king, Zahir Shah had opted for friendship with India over Pakistan. Pakistan and Afghanistan then had extremely troubled relations over border issues with regard to the Durand line separating the two countries. All throughout the 1950s and 60s New Delhi and Kabul shared very good relations. During the reign of the Afghanistan Prime Minister, Sardar Mohammad Daoud, Kabul and New Delhi came still closer.<sup>1</sup>

The 1970s was a watershed in Afghanistan politics and subsequently also in India – Afghanistan relations. In 1973 Zahir Khan was overthrown by a coup led by Mohammad Daoud Khan. This was followed by the 1978 Saur Revolution led by the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan culminating in the extermination of the entire Daoud family. This further led to intense fractional struggle within Afghanistan finally leading to the 1979 Soviet intervention. The 1979 Soviet intervention proved to be decisive in the

history of Afghanistan and also for India –Afghanistan relations. Though India did have reservations about Soviet invasion but it did not outrightly condemn it. However, one must point out here that India's stance of not condemning the Soviet intervention should not be understood as a function of the Soviet Union's influence over Indian decision making, given India's heavy military and diplomatic dependence on Soviet, at that time<sup>2</sup>. According to J.N. Dixit, India had her own reasons for doing so. First, India did not want to interfere in the internal matters of Afghanistan. India's policy was to deal with whichever government was de facto in power then. Future Indian attitude towards Afghanistan exhibits the same to a great extent. Secondly, India considered Soviet intervention to be favourable for modernisation of Afghanistan. An Islamic extremist dominated Afghanistan was never conducive to India<sup>3</sup>. The Geneva Accords of 1988 marked the end of the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. India supported the successive governments that came to power in Kabul until the rise of the Taliban. After the withdrawal of the Soviets, India was among the first non – Communist states to recognize the Soviet aided Najibullah government, which came to power immediately thereafter. Thus till the time the Najibullah government was in power, though the earlier bonhomie was lost, yet a degree of good relation continued to exist between Kabul and New Delhi. The rise of the Pakistan backed Mujahideen, and subsequently the 1992 collapse of the Najibullah government led to deteriorating India – Afghanistan relations. Finally in 1997 with the Taliban regime's overtaking Kabul, India sapped all her relations with Afghanistan.

The US's war on terror, the consequent US attack on Afghanistan and the ouster of the Taliban regime led to a new phase of bonhomie in India Afghanistan relations marked by renewed attempts on part of India to engage with Afghanistan. The current phase of engagement has primarily been in the form of post war reconstruction in Afghanistan.

The post Taliban Indian engagement with Afghanistan can be said to be propelled by primarily four interests on the part of India.

First is economic. Afghanistan, as the 'geo- economic watershed' of Central and South Asia, holds for India two fold economic opportunities. India sees Afghanistan first as a potential market and secondly as a way to access Central Asian oil<sup>4</sup>. This explains the nature of India's heightened involvement in Afghanistan's post war developmental project; infrastructural development and capacity building projects. India has undertaken massive investment in Afghanistan's infrastructure development, with the intention of fastening the consolidation of an emerging local market, eyeing the 300 million low to middle income Afghan consumers.<sup>5</sup> India since 2006 has committed \$750 million as aid, which is the second largest foreign aid commitment to Afghanistan. In August 2008, India pledged an additional \$450 million<sup>6</sup>. This further explains India's signing the Preferential Trade Agreement with Afghanistan in 2003, and hosting the second Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan in 2006. Bilateral trade between India and Afghanistan has been rising considerably and was around \$216 million in 2007<sup>7</sup>.

Also, involvement in Afghanistan is marked by India's interest in supplementing its energy sources by cultivating Afghanistan's geo- strategic position to explore Central Asian oil and mineral.

This takes us to the second factor. Afghanistan for India is the gateway to the Central Asian Republics and to a large extent West Asia. In India's own vision of itself as an emerging major power, consolidating influence over its extended neighbourhood plays an absolutely important part, both economically and militarily. Central Asia, particularly, has become an extremely vital zone of operation in India's post Cold war foreign policy scheme. And Afghanistan holds the key to that. India gave \$17 million grant to Tajikistan for the modernisation of a hydropower plant. India has set up a military base in Farkhor in Tajikistan. That apart, India has signed a memorandum of understanding with Turkmenistan for a natural gas pipeline which will pass through Afghanistan<sup>8</sup>. Hence, as Prof. Partha Pratim Basu points out, the great strategic significance attached to Afghanistan as the 'land bridge' between South Asia on the one hand and Central Asia on the other<sup>9</sup>.

The third objective behind India's renewed engagement with Afghanistan in the post Taliban era has been to contain Pakistan. Pakistan has always looked for 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan vis- a- vis India. As noted Afghanistan commentator, Barnett Rubin, has said "Pakistan's military establishment has always approached the various wars in and around Afghanistan as a function of its main institutional and national security interests: first and foremost, balancing India..."<sup>10</sup> Pakistan has always worked towards establishing a client government in Afghanistan to keep Kabul away from New Delhi's influence. Therefore, it is in India's best interest to have a friendly regime in Kabul which would not fall pray to the strategic depth Pakistan has always wanted in Afghanistan against India. The present administration led by Hamid Karzai fits the bill for India. The Karzai administration has a substantial presence of the Northern Alliance in its cabinet, a force India duly supported in the battle against Taliban and has maintained good terms with, all along.

The fourth objective underpinning India's renewed engagement with Afghanistan follows the previous factor – checking the rise of militant Islam in Afghanistan and ensuring the prevention of any future Taliban/ Talibal- like force from coming to power. Rise of militant Islam in its western neighbourhood is always a matter of grave concern for India. Any such rise would automatically mean Pakistan manipulating it to spread militancy in Kashmir. Under the tutelage of the ISI, the Taliban regime did enough to breed terrorist outfits active in Kashmir. It is now known that terrorists from Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Jaish-e- Muhammad and Lashkar-e – Toiba operating in Kashmir received training in Taliban ruled Afghanistan. The hijacking of the Indian airlines to Kandahar in December 1999 to secure the release of Harkat chief, Masud Azar proved Taliban's role in sponsoring terrorism in Kashmir beyond doubt. Hence a presence in Afghanistan and support to an anti- Taliban regime is of primarily interest to India.

A US favourably disposed towards India has helped India to strengthen its post Taliban engagement in Afghanistan. This explains why, despite Pakistan's reservations about India's military presence in Afghanistan, it was still able to do so. It is needless to say that the present state of Indo- US relations is the best that the two countries have shared

since 1947. Though initially sceptical, off late, the US does not seem to be averse to India's increasing role in Afghanistan's security. As a matter of fact Hamid Karzai has apparently asked for the Indian army's assistance in building the Afghan National Army (ANA)<sup>11</sup>. But the real problem lies elsewhere. Much of India's hopes in Afghanistan are based on the perpetuation and stability of the Karzai government. The stability and the extent of its hold in Afghanistan is the critical factor. Any realistic assessment of the prospects of India's engagement with Afghanistan has to be made in the backdrop of the fact that the Karzai government is not in complete control of the entirety of Afghanistan. And his control is being increasingly challenged with the ever increasing militant incidents taking place within Afghanistan. A resurgent Taliban in Pakistan has only added to the insecurities.

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#### End Notes/ References

<sup>1</sup> Partha Pratim Basu, "India and Post Taliban Afghanistan: Stakes, Opportunities and Challenges", *India Quarterly*, New Delhi, Vol. LXIII, No.3, July – September, 2007, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Kanti Bajpai, "India: Modified Structuralism" in Muthiah Alagappa ed. *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideational Influences*; Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998; pp. 157-197.

<sup>3</sup> J.N. Dixit, *My South Block Years*, UBS Publishers, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 105-106.

<sup>4</sup> Partha Pratim Basu, *op. cit.*, p. 90-98.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> T. Sreedhar, 'India's Afghan Policy' in *The Hindu*, Chennai, 7 March 2003.

<sup>7</sup> "India – Afghanistan Relations", by Jayshree Bajoria, October 23, 2008, available at *Council on Foreign Relations* web site, accessed electronically at [http://www.cfr.org/publication/17474/indiaafghanistan\\_relations.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/17474/indiaafghanistan_relations.html), April 13, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Partha Pratim Basu, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Barnett Rubin, Saving Afghanistan, *Foreign Affairs*, New York, Vol. 86, No. 1, January - February 2007, pp. 57 – 78.

<sup>11</sup> Partha Pratim Basu, *op. cit.*, p.113.