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Abstract

This article explains the history of relations between India- Afghanistan and the prospects for any future engagement with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, considering the recent developments in Afghanistan. It investigates how the two countries can find common grounds for economic, political, and social cooperation and what role India could take in helping stabilize Afghanistan and ultimately the region. The paper also elaborates on potential security threats to India in Afghanistan after the U.S withdrawal; Afghanistan-India entanglements post 15th August 2021 and concludes with recommendations for future engagement between both countries underpinned by secondary sources which include books, research papers, policy briefs, and articles from renowned newspapers.

Keywords: Afghanistan, India, Taliban, south Asian regional security, terrorism, IS-K.

Introduction

The history of India's engagement in Afghanistan began after the end of the cold war. Even though they do not share a border, but India and Afghanistan have a long relationship based on historical and cultural links that can be traced back to the Indus Valley civilization. Over the last two decades, the friendship between Afghanistan-India encompasses an estimated \$3 billion in development assistance. The bulk of that Indian investment targeted infrastructure in Afghanistan, including building roads, dams, electricity transmission lines and substations, schools and hospitals. India is one of the six-largest donors in Afghanistan, as it has chosen humanitarian and development aid over military support.¹ India was one of the few countries that supported the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979, which significantly damaged its reputation within the international community.² India also welcomed the subsequent Soviet regime in Afghanistan out of recognition its disregard for Islamist ideology. During the 1990s, India's policy towards Afghanistan aligned with Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, both of which viewed the Taliban as a serious threat to their respective national security. Hence, the three countries helped the Northern Alliance against the Taliban regime.³

¹ Aryal, Saroj Kumar, and Simant Shankar Bharti. "Post-Taliban takeover: What is at stake for India in Afghanistan?" South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF), 2021.

² Pant, Harsh. "India challenge in Afghanistan: With power comes responsibility, CASI working paper series No. 10-02." (2010).

³ Paliwal, Avinash. "New alignments, old battlefield: Revisiting India's role in Afghanistan." (2017).

After the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001, India moved to strengthen its relationship with the new government. However, India did not maintain parallel relations or back-channel contacts with any political figures or non-state armed groups at that time. All interactions were coursed through diplomatic, formal and other recognized channels between Kabul and New Delhi.⁴ Although India did not have a military presence in Afghanistan, New Delhi sent military equipment, such as Mi-25 armed helicopters, fortified check posts and watch towers to the Afghan National Army.⁵ Indian technicians maintained the Afghan Air Forces fleet of MiG-21 fighters and other military equipment. In one rare situation, India deployed a small number of Indo-Tibetan border police commandos to protect road construction personnel working with the Border Roads Organization in 2007.⁶

In 2011, the governments of India and Afghanistan signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement on cooperation in security, law enforcement and justice. Both countries agreed to collaborate to fight international terrorism, organized crime, narcotics trafficking and money laundering. The agreement also committed India to provide training, capacity-building workshops and equipment to the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces. Although India trained many Afghan security forces and technicians over the past two decades, to build up the capacity of the Afghan security forces. Support measures were never part of NATO or other joint collaborative programs.⁷ Although India has long advocated an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled reconciliation and peace process, it was a strong supporter of the American and NATO mission in the republic and opposed their military withdrawal. It expressed concerns about the recent expeditious withdrawal of the United States and NATO forces from Afghanistan, which would enable its adversaries, such as Pakistan and China, to step in and exploit the vacuum in their favour.⁸ The West undermined the Afghan government in the Doha negotiation partly due to Pakistan's lobbying and its influence on the United States and the Taliban. India remained out of the US-Taliban talks, officially stating that it would only participate in talks that are Afghan-owned and Afghan-led. Despite the skepticism and coming late to the process, India's foreign minister attended the inauguration ceremony of the intra-Afghan talks in Doha in September 2020, which is at a stalemate since the Taliban takeover in August 2021.⁹

This paper is divided into 5 sections with section 2 explaining the implications of the United States and NATO withdrawal for India-Afghanistan relations; section 3 presents recent Afghanistan-India entanglements primarily focusing on emerging challenges and proposing a way forward and section 5 outlines the broad conclusions and policy recommendations. The kinds of sources used in this study are secondary sources, which include research papers, policy briefs, and articles from renowned newspapers.

2. Implications of the United States and NATO Withdrawal for India-Afghanistan Relations

⁴ Rizwan, A., Taieb, R., & Jami, M. (n.d.). Reset or rivalry? India and Afghanistan post (2021).

⁵ Pant, Harsh V. "India's 'Af-Pak' conundrum: South Asia in flux." *Orbis* 56, no. 1 (2012): 105-117.

⁶ Pant, Harsh V. "India in Afghanistan: A test case for a rising power." *Contemporary South Asia* 18, no. 2 (2010): 133-153.

⁷ Pant, Harsh V. "India's changing Afghanistan policy: Regional and global implications." (2012).

⁸ Paliwal, Avinash. "A cautious balance-explaining India's approach toward Afghanistan's peace process." *Asian Security* 16, no. 2 (2020): 263-280.

⁹ After the Taliban: Implications for India-Afghanistan relations, *Hudson Institute*, January 4, 2021.

From the Indian perspective, a minimal presence of the United States and NATO in Afghanistan would be a stabilizing influence. Although there is no direct threat to India's national security from the Afghan conflict, but there are concerns that a proxy war could surface between elements involved in the ongoing conflicts. Afghanistan under Taliban control could become a base for militants in Kashmir who are allied with Pakistan in its fight against India.¹⁰ After the American and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, India's role has been shattered. It no longer has direct access, and its development projects have been paused in the meanwhile. Nonetheless, Afghanistan will remain a significant point on India's foreign policy agenda, and India is unlikely to abandon it.¹¹ It was believed that in the wake of the American and NATO withdrawal, militant groups may become more active under the Taliban. Indian stakeholders fear that these factors will conspire to ultimately destabilize Afghanistan and the region. Another fear of the impact of the Taliban takeover is that militants or extremists may become more active in the region. The takeover of Afghanistan could also be an inspiration for other Jihadi groups. Among them, the anti-India actors could become more active due to the broad support they receive from Pakistan. It was believed that the Taliban takeover will enable Pakistan to use such groups against India as leverage on the long-running dispute over Kashmir. For the moment, India is pursuing a "wait and see" strategy with the Taliban. India's engagement with the Islamic Emirate will rely on the Taliban's foreign policy and whether or not it commits to the social development and democratic values achieved in the past two decades. New Delhi has already decided to restart cooperation with the new government in Afghanistan conditional on a political settlement and assurances of distance from regional extremist groups. However, the humanitarian assistance would not be conditional and India would continue to provide basic aid to the people of Afghanistan through its food and medicine supply.¹²

India is expected to continue with trade cooperation, scholarship programs, and medical assistance; if the security issues are sorted out. Although India want to continue efforts to stabilize the country and support an inclusive reconciliation process acceptable to all stakeholders, it appears that the Taliban are incapable to bring any substantial stability on their own. Considering the ambiguities of the political situation in Afghanistan, it is not easy for India to persistently engage with the Taliban, yet, it has no option. Each year, a vast volume of India's trade transits to Central Asia through Afghanistan. The former's strategic location is crucial for regional connectivity, and it is central to India's New Silk Road project to connect with trade, transit and energy in the Central Asia region.¹³ For instance, transit through the Chabahar port gives India the leverage to transform trade in South and Central Asia.¹⁴ The considerable investments of India in Afghanistan include the Salma Dam in western Afghanistan, the *Delaram-Zaranj* highway and the construction of the Afghanistan Parliament.¹⁵ The Taliban appear not completely opposed to Indian engagement. The latter reached out recently to the Indian authorities to facilitate the

¹⁰ Manhas, Neeraj Singh. "India's Stakes, Challenges and Strategy in the Aftermath of Talibans in Afghanistan." In *Analysing the Current Afghan Context*, pp. 41-59. Routledge, 2022.

¹¹ Harsh V. Pant, *India's 'Afghanistan-Pakistan' Conundrum: South Asia in Flux* (Elsevier Limited, 2012)

¹² "With the Taliban's rise, India sees a renewed threat in Kashmir", NPR, 14 September 2021.

¹³ U.S.-India cooperation in Afghanistan: Is India's "strategic autonomy" sustainable?", *Truman Center*, undated.

¹⁴ Omid, Ali, and Gauri Noolkar-Oak. "Geopolitics of chabahar port for Iran, India and Afghanistan." *South Asia Research* 42, no. 1 (2022): 21-39.

¹⁵ Ahmad, Peerzada Tufail. "An analysis of India's soft power policy in Afghanistan." *India Quarterly* (2022):

departure of Afghan students to India and to resume commercial flights between the two countries.¹⁶ India's cooperation with the Taliban might be conditional on a political settlement whereby all people of Afghanistan see themselves in a government that ensures distance from the regional and international extremist groups. Should cooperation also reach the area of security policies, India would require the Islamic Emirate to ensure no links between the Taliban and extremist elements in the Indian mainland, especially in Jammu and Kashmir.¹⁷

3. Afghanistan-India Entanglements: Post 15th August 2021

Afghanistan's strategic value to India is mostly of geopolitical importance because it is located in the south of the *Hindukush* that goes into the Indian subcontinent. However, it also routes north, from the *Hindukush* mountains into India's extended neighbourhoods.¹⁸ India's participation in Afghanistan is motivated by a desire to boost its energy supplies by using Afghanistan's geostrategic location to seek Central Asian oil and minerals.¹⁹ Since, the Taliban took over the control of Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, and announced their government as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA),²⁰ most of the countries in the region closed down their embassies. Since the takeover, the relations between Kabul-New Delhi are not stable as before however, recently for the first time, on June 02, 2022, India dispatched a team of foreign ministry officials to Afghanistan. During the meeting with the Afghanistan foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Indian foreign ministry delegation led by senior official J.P. Singh (Joint Secretary of MoEA), discussed matters such as bilateral diplomatic relations, trade and humanitarian aid.²¹ Moreover, on 03 June 2022 in another meeting with Afghanistan Deputy Foreign Minister, Abbas Stanikzai, J.P. Singh described the two nations' connections as "historic," adding that India wants to help with infrastructural projects, capacity building, educational scholarships, and humanitarian aid.²² The delegation also aimed to oversee the latest India aid delivery. The former has already dispatched several shipments of humanitarian assistance consisting of 20,000 MTs of wheat, 13 tons of medicines, 500,000 doses of COVID Vaccine and winter clothing since the Taliban takeover. In addition, the team also visited several places where Indian programmes or projects are being implemented.²³ The Indian government also announced financial assistance of USD 27 million to Afghanistan in its 2022-2023 budget.²⁴ Following these meetings, Afghanistan acting Defence Minister, Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob Mujahid in an interview with an Indian TV channel (CNN News 18), claimed that they want "cordial relations with all countries of the world, especially the surrounding countries, including India."²⁵ He expressed his willingness to send Afghan army troops to India for military training,

¹⁶ Laskar, Rezaul H not just flights, Taliban wants scholarships to resume too. India is in no hurry, *The Hindustan Times*.

¹⁷ Commuri, Gitika. "Mulling the Contours of India's Taliban Policy: Past, Present and Future Prospects." *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* (2022)

¹⁸ Aaron, Sushil J. Straddling faultlines: India's foreign policy toward the Great Middle East. No. id: 1970. 2009.

¹⁹ Scott, David, ed. *Handbook of India's international relations*. Routledge, 2011.

²⁰ One month since Taliban takeover: Here's everything that has happened in Afghanistan, *The Indian Express*, September 16, 2021.

²¹ Anjana Pasricha, Indian officials in Afghanistan for first meeting with Taliban, VOA, June 02, 2022. ≥

²² Today, IEA acting deputy of foreign minister Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai met with Indian MEA joint secretary J.P. Singh and accompanying delegation, *MFA-Afghanistan*, 3 Jun 2022.

²³ MEA-media centre, India's humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, June 02, 2022.

²⁴ Patil, Sameer. "India's strategy towards post-august 2021 Afghanistan." (2022).

²⁵ Farshad Daryosh, 'We want cordial relations' with the world: Mullah Yaqoob Mujahid, *Tolo News*, 03 June 2022.

only until they have good political and diplomatic relations with India which could pave the way for defence relations. This embarks also the beginning of a new chapter in India-Afghanistan relations.²⁶

3.1 Emerging Challenges: From Hiccups to the Way Forward

Over the last two decades, Kabul-New Delhi had unparalleled relations and engagements with each other, however, their relations broke down with the return of the Taliban. From the takeover of Kabul in August 2021, India's strategic stance demanded to pursue its Afghan policy keeping the regional sensitivities onboard, but it will not be an easy move. India has always been in favour of stability in Afghanistan because only through a stable Afghanistan New Delhi's purpose will be served. However, the senseless violence which Afghanistan is witnessing from the 'Islamic State of Khurasan' (*Daesh*) is a major hindrance to its stability, and civilian casualties are rising. In recent findings, U.N. experts claimed that since the Taliban consolidated their rule over Afghanistan, the 'Islamic State of Khurasan' (*Daesh*) and the resistance front – which includes former Afghan government security personnel and northern alliance backing – are their main military threats.²⁷ Thus, these issues could further deteriorate the security situation in Afghanistan. The worsening of the security situation coupled with the US withdrawal precipitously from Afghanistan will have far-reaching consequences for India. New Delhi faces emerging situations that can pose different challenges for India in Afghanistan.²⁸

As such, two scenarios are visible, and thus India in such dire situations could face illusions and need to act cautiously. In Scenario I, India with timely active diplomacy and continuing its previous policies can redefine its position in Afghanistan, otherwise, the efforts of India over the past two decades, especially its huge investments in Afghanistan, will be atrophied; and in Scenario II the phenomenon of the Islamic State of Khurasan is another concern for India. The former has announced its expansion to the Khorasan (the word derives from the Persian language and means 'where the sun arrives from') region in 2015 which historically encompasses modern-day Iran, Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan.²⁹ Despite initial scepticism from analysts and Afghan government officials about the existence of the group, IS-K has been responsible for nearly 100 attacks against civilians in Afghanistan as well as roughly 250 clashes with the U.S and Afghan security forces since January 2017.³⁰ The map released by the IS-K had Kashmir as a part of Khorasan and there have been instances when the flag of the former has been found in Kashmir. Reports also suggest that the IS-K has secretly unveiled the '*Wilaya al-Hind*' branch in Kashmir. The killing of the militant Ishfaq Ahmad Sofi in a gun battle with security forces in Shopian in South Kashmir revealed that he was an operative of the Islamic State of Jammu and Kashmir (IS-JK). So, there is always a possibility of IS-K expansion in Kashmir and that can be worrying. If India ignores its existence, it can only worsen its security situation.³¹ Since the return of the Taliban, the relations between Afghanistan-India

²⁶ Taliban willing to send Afghan troops to India for training: Mullah Yaqoob, by *News Desk*, June 05, 2022.

²⁷ Edith M. Lederer, Taliban faces threat from Islamic state, new resistance, *The Diplomat*, June 03, 2022. >

²⁸ UNAMA, "Human rights in Afghanistan, 15 August 2021-15 June 2022", UNAMA Human Rights Service, (2022).

²⁹ Nolan, Markham and Gilad, Shiloach, 'ISIS statement urges attacks, announces Khorasan State', *Vocativ*, January 26, 2015.

³⁰ Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), *CSIS*. >

³¹ Ahlawat, Dalbir, and M. Raymond Izarali. "Security implications for India and Pakistan from the Taliban Regime since the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 16, no. 5 (2022): 20-33.

were completely severed. India has not yet recognized the Taliban regime, but fortunately, there were some signs of the beginning of relations between both countries, as discussed above. For instance, the arrival of a delegation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of India to Afghanistan and the TV interview of the Afghanistan Minister of Defense, Mullah Muhammad Yaqoob, and his statement that emphasized the comprehensive establishment of cordial relations with India. India's humanitarian aid and all the above discussions highlight that a new chapter of relations between the two countries is underway.

3.2 Future of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and India: The Way Forward

By observing the ongoing situation in the regional political atmosphere, the Taliban might strike a deal with India. Taliban had their reasons to engage with India and so it is not one-way traffic. For instance, the spokesperson of IEA Foreign Ministry Mr. Abdul Qahar Balkhi in August 2022 said, Taliban wants India to complete their development projects in Afghanistan that have been postponed post- August 2021, like the Shahtoot Dam in Kabul.³² From the fall of the Taliban in 2001 to their return in August 2021, Afghanistan and India have had relations and engagements in various areas such as political, economic, cultural and even military, but as mentioned in the previous sections, India's greatest focus has been on the economic aspect in Afghanistan.³³ Contemporary with the return of the Taliban to power, New Delhi is not clear whether to establish its relations with Taliban or not. Notably, if India establishes relations with Taliban, what kind of relations it would be? This is the question that will be answered in the following lines of this paper. Since 2001, India has spent over three billion dollars on various projects such as dams, roads, trade, and infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, of which many have been completed while some are yet to complete. One of the completed significant projects is the *Zaranj-Delaram* highway which spans over Southwest Afghanistan. India also invested \$150 million in this roadway project in 2009.³⁴

India was able to conduct business or trade with Afghanistan via Iran's Chabahar port. Given that Pakistan forbids New Delhi from transporting products through its borders to Afghanistan, the road connection is important for India.³⁵ The International Transport and Transit Corridor, commonly known as the Chabahar Agreement, aims to provide a reliable transportation route for the efficient transit of products and services between Afghanistan, Iran, and India. The three nations' relevant ministries signed the Chabahar Agreement in May 2016.³⁶ First and foremost, the deal aims to make it easier for businesses to reach global markets by using Chabahar Port for land, sea, and/or air transportation. Second, it will standardize, unify, and simplify processes controlling the passage of people and things. The Chabahar Free Trade Industrial Zone has already been offered to several Afghan companies.³⁷ India spent USD 90 million to build the Afghan parliament building, which was inaugurated by Prime Minister Modi on December 25, 2015, in Kabul. This project was a visible sign

³² *Ibid*

³³ India invested more than \$3 billion in Afghanistan: MoS Muraleedharan, *Business Standard*, February 05, 2022.

³⁴ Nirupama Subramanian, explained: What are India's investments in Afghanistan? *The Hindustan Express*, Mumbai, July 16 2021.

³⁵ Majumdar, Roshni. what is the future of Indian investment in Afghanistan? *DW News*, 13.10.2021.

³⁶ Chabahar agreement, legal treaties document, Ministry of External Affairs, 23 may 2016.

³⁷ *Ibid*

of India's support for the strengthening and rebuilding of Afghanistan's democracy.³⁸ A cricket stadium built to international standards was inaugurated on April 2, 2018. The project is being funded by the Indian government. The stadium's construction, in the province of Kandahar, cost 698,000 US dollars and took 16 months to finish.³⁹ The symbolic \$290 million Afghan-India Friendship Dam (also known as Salma Dam), in Afghanistan's Herat province has reduced Kabul's dependence on its neighbours for electricity and is irrigating around 75,000 hectares of land. However, it has revoked Iran's anger. The dam reduced the flow of water into Iran – it used to receive 30 percent of the Harirud River's waters but is getting just 13 percent after the Salma Dam's construction.⁴⁰ India needs to withstand and reap the dividends by completing incomplete projects like the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Gas Pipeline project (TAPI). Also known as the Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline, is one of the largest gas transportation projects in the area. The TAPI project's goal is to export about 33 billion cubic meters (BCM) of natural gas per year from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India via an 1,814-kilometer pipeline.⁴¹

The initiative benefits Afghanistan both internally and externally. Externally, TAPI pipeline project strengthens regional collaboration between central and south Asian nations. The initiative will pave the way for prospective energy, communication, and transportation cooperation, which will benefit Afghanistan economically, politically, and diplomatically. Afghanistan's economic significance in the area has been eclipsed by its reputation for war and terrorism on a global scale; however, with the execution of the TAPI Project, Afghanistan's economic significance will be restored, which will be followed by internal peace and stability. While internally, by creating millions of dollars in revenue, offering both direct and indirect job opportunities, building infrastructure, and producing energy, the TAPI Project significantly will contribute to the internal growth of Afghanistan's economy. This project will provide an extra \$400 million in revenue for Afghanistan per year and thousands of direct and indirect job possibilities for Afghans.⁴² An earlier estimate put the cost of the pipeline project at US\$7.6 billion, but a more recent estimate put it at \$10 billion.⁴³ In addition, the *Shahotoot* Dam will be built in Kabul. In February 2021 in a virtual summit in the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and former Afghan President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and his Afghan counterpart Mohammed Haneef Atmar signed the agreement.⁴⁴ According to Afghan authorities (pre-2021), the dam would cost around \$236 million and will take approximately three years to build.⁴⁵ If this project is completed, the dam would contain 146 million cubic meters of clean water for two million people in Kabul and the dam would also enable irrigation systems to cover 4,000 hectares of land in the districts of *Charasiab* and *Khairabad*.⁴⁶

³⁸ Singh, P. K. "Peacebuilding through development partnership: An Indian perspective." In *Rising Powers and Peacebuilding*, pp. 69-91. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2017.

³⁹ Cricket stadium in Kandahar opens, *Afghanistan Times*, April 2, 2018.

⁴⁰ Ramachandran, Sudha. "India's controversial Afghanistan dams." *The Diplomat* (2018).

⁴¹ Mehmood-Ul-Hassan, Khan. "Tapi: A new silk route of regional energy cooperation." *Defence Journal* 22, no. 11 (2019): 29-42.

⁴² *Ibid*

⁴³ Graeber, Daniel J. Kazakhstan keen on Tapi gas pipeline, *United Press International UPI*, 3 December, 2014.

⁴⁴ India, Afghanistan sign MoU to build Shahotoot Dam in Kabul, the Times of India, ANI, February 9 2021.

⁴⁵ India, Afghanistan Sign Agreement to Build Dam, *Tolo News*, 9 February 2021.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*

4. Conclusion

Despite being a landlocked country, Afghanistan has never been isolated historically. In reality, it served as the hub for Indo-European trade for centuries as well as a crossing point of the Silk Road from China to the Middle East. Although Afghanistan and India physically do not share borders, India sees Afghanistan as a significant neighbour and as a vital member of the 'South Asian' community. It serves as a bridge or link between India, Central Asia and Iran. Afghanistan is crucial from a security perspective for both the rest of South Asia and other surrounding regions. India's Afghanistan policy in the post-Bonn period has been driven by three major objectives: to counter the Pakistani influence in Afghanistan because it will neutralize India's security threats; to maintain strong economic relations with Afghanistan as it is rich with natural resources; and finally, to use Afghanistan as a gateway to connect Central Asia. However, due to inherent hostility between India and Pakistan, the focus of New Delhi has particularly remained on isolating Pakistan from Afghan politics. So, it will not be an exaggeration to state that it has comparatively undermined the other objectives. In other words, as both India and Pakistan wrestled to exert influence in Afghanistan, New Delhi's primary focus was to counter Pakistan and economic interests remained almost sidelined.

During the Taliban regime (1996 - 2001), Pakistan's long-cherished craving for a friendly government in Kabul became a reality. India along with other countries chose not to engage with the Taliban as they considered it to be a complete Pakistani proxy and closed its embassy and left Afghanistan. Instead, New Delhi chose to help the Northern Alliance to resist the Taliban's influence. But after the 9/11 incidents, the situation changed as the US intervened in Afghanistan leading to the fall of the Taliban regime. New Delhi started re-engaging with Kabul after the signing of the Bonn agreement in 2001. India's policy in the post-Bonn period reveals continuity on the ground with the primary focus to engage with the government in Kabul. India's good relations with the Afghan people during the pre-Bonn phase helped New Delhi to engage successfully and develop people-to-people contacts with more or less all the Afghan communities in the post-Bonn period. Pre-Bonn policies helped build post-Bonn relations. Since 2001, New Delhi has invested billions of dollars in reconstruction and development aid in Afghanistan and has generated significant goodwill among the masses. Its soft power diplomacy has achieved success and it is considered a friend by the Afghan government and the people. India's policy in this period is more of continuity (especially in the economic sphere) and certain shifts (in the political sphere) keeping its focus on exerting its influence in Afghanistan. India has invested in the Chabahar port and built the *Zaranj Delaram* Highway to connect Afghanistan with Iran that offering a new gateway to the sea, overlooking the Karachi port.

From 2001 to August 2021, Afghanistan has been the ally of India, and New Delhi's policy of maintaining steady relations with whosoever ruled in Kabul has provided it with an edge over Pakistan. While after a complete political upheaval occurred and the formation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the relationship between both countries was damaged once again, and India's rival or enemy, Pakistan gained a lot of influence in Afghanistan, which is always against one of India's objectives. India's Afghanistan policy in the post-Bonn period by far has been the biggest foreign policy endeavour. It is nearing two decades that India is trying to exercise its influence in Afghanistan but whether the campaign has been successful (till now) is the question that is looming large over the Indian policymakers, analysts and researchers. As the

word, 'success' is a relative term and is completely based on objectives; it must be considered based on the three major objectives mentioned before. After considering these objectives it will not be an exaggeration to state that by far India's policies in Afghanistan can yet be termed successful. Though it has been able to expose the role of Pakistan as a spoiler of peace in Afghanistan that was not enough to isolate it. Pakistan remains a crucial player in Afghanistan with the Taliban on the negotiating table with the US who wished to leave and they did; its role was heightened. India has not been able to utilize the Afghan natural resources especially due to depleting security situations. Even though the *Hajigak* iron ore mining project was given to seven Indian companies led by the Steel Authority of India (SAIL), in 2015 it decided to abandon the project. The Indian Ministry of Steel had confirmed in a letter that the consortium members of those companies were apprehensive about the security situation.⁴⁷ Even though Karzai had requested Indian companies not to shy away from Afghanistan and offered special treatment but it did not bore fruit.⁴⁸ The celebrated TAPI project remains a golden dream with no immediate prospect. Though India has been trying to project the Connect Central Asia policy as an antidote to China's One Belt, One Road initiative (OBOR), yet no significant progress has been made in this field. Instead, China has been making inroads in Central Asia and strengthening its relations with Afghanistan.⁴⁹ There is no doubt that India has an important role to play in Afghanistan and its capacity to deal with the instability in its backyard will determine its calibre as a major global player. The attitude of India and Pakistan toward each other is unlikely to dramatically change shortly. Undoubtedly, Pakistan is a significant player in South Asia and India cannot choose to overlook it if it wants to ensure stability in the region.

Although after the Taliban took over control of Afghanistan and they announced the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, India diplomatically disconnected from Afghanistan and closed its embassy. But India continued its diplomacy and sent over Pakistan land route to Afghanistan several shipments of humanitarian assistance consisting of 20,000 MTs of wheat, 13 tons of medicines, 500,000 doses of COVID Vaccine and winter clothing.⁵⁰ Although on October 7, 2021, India made a request to Pakistan asking for permission to transfer 50,000 tons of wheat and life-saving medications to Afghanistan via Pakistani land, on November 24, 2021, Islamabad responded. The Taliban have welcomed India's wheat diplomacy. The Taliban leadership had praised India for its humanitarian aid when they received a new shipment of medications on January 7. Zabiullah Mujahid, the Taliban's centrally appointed official spokesperson, tweeted at the time, "The Islamic Emirate is thankful to India for its humanitarian help and cooperation".⁵¹ Modi in his first term has more or less continued the soft power policy which his predecessors had designed for Afghanistan. But it remains to be seen whether India continues to exercise the same policy in the current era of Taliban rule and the government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan or it will adopt an increased military engagement as a necessary supplement to deal with the instability in

⁴⁷ No contract was signed with the Indian, *The Natural Resource Governance Institute*, 12 September 2018.

⁴⁸ Karzai asks India Inc not to shy away from Afghanistan, cites early bird China, *India Today*, November 10 2012.

⁴⁹ Chaudhury, Dipanjan Roy. India and China new players in Central Asia's great game, *The Economic Times*, July 12 2018.

⁵⁰ India's humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, Indian Ministry of External Affairs, Media Center, June 02, 2022.

⁵¹ Sinha, Rhea. Indian wheat diplomacy in Afghanistan, Observer Research Foundation, February 25 2022.

Afghanistan and to increase its influence once again in Afghanistan. Although, the recent visit of official delegations from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs to Afghanistan and their meetings with officials of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and more importantly, following the remarks of the Afghan acting Minister of Defense (Mullah Yaqoob) regarding India-Afghanistan relations, both issues indicate that the new chapter of relations between the two countries is opening in the not-too-distant future.

Policy Recommendations

India may undertake to increase its influence in Afghanistan; by engaging in massive reconstruction work in Afghanistan and completing its projects that are under process like the *Shahtoot* Dam, thereby enhancing the goodwill of India in Afghanistan. India should encourage its corporate sector to engage in Afghanistan and also tie up with foreign investors (an Indian consortium and a Canadian company have won the tender for the *Hajigak* mines project) to utilize the Afghan resources that the Chinese companies are successfully undertaking. The need of the hour is to strengthen the Strategic Agreement with Afghanistan and provide defence assistance. In this changing dynamic, India must continue its cooperative endeavours with Russia, Iran, and the CARs to maintain its influence in the post-US phase in Afghanistan. India must also engage with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan through Multi-Track Diplomacy while promoting high-level official visits between the two countries, encouraging Indian private industry to invest in Afghanistan, and fostering track II diplomacy. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan needs to assure India and Pakistan of a trilateral agreement that Afghanistan is no more used as a proxy for their conflicts/politics. India has been providing scholarships and fellowships to Afghan students. Though it has been useful, it is insufficient to successfully address the educational needs of the several thousand Afghan youths. India, in its capacity, may think of establishing more schools and colleges in Afghanistan. It can also provide incentives to governmental universities and urge private universities to collaborate with Afghan public universities or set up their centres there. It would be a more viable option and would allow more Afghans to attend universities in their own country. In addition, a more practical and achievable option for India would be to support initiatives to provide humanitarian aid to the people of Afghanistan.

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