



India Adopts a Cautious Middle Path in Afghanistan



Dr Shalini Chawla

Distinguished Fellow, CAPS

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Indian delegation from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) visited Kabul in early March and held meetings with the senior members of the Afghanistan administration. The visit generated curiosity regarding the India-Afghanistan relations and is seen as a crucial step by New Delhi. The visit signifies India's sustained approach towards Kabul, which has traditionally focused on the people of Afghanistan. According to the MEA spokesperson, the visit focused on two critical issues: humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and the use of Chabahar port by the Afghan traders. Two and a half years after the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan (August 2021), we have witnessed a gradual shift in India's position towards the Taliban. From a complete closure of the Indian consulates in Afghanistan in 2021 owing to security concerns based on New Delhi's past experience with the Taliban regime (in the 1990s), to a gradual engagement with the Taliban now is part of India's efforts towards bringing stability in Afghanistan. While India has not recognised the Taliban regime, it is engaging with the Taliban to facilitate humanitarian assistance.

India-Afghan relations have gone through changes owing to strategic developments in the past. Post-2001, the two countries shared a cordial relationship (till August 2021), which was not limited to governmental exchange but was also driven by strong people-to-people contacts. India's position has been of a supporting actor focused on development and capacity building in Afghanistan. India has deep-rooted civilisational ties with Afghanistan, and both countries have historically shared a good relationship. The bilateral ties did suffer a major blow during the Taliban rule in the 1990s when India continued to support the Northern Alliance. Post-2001, the focus of Indian activities was on developmental projects, including industrial, hydro, education and health sectors, as well as humanitarian assistance. India was a key donor to Afghanistan, and the

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cumulative level of commitment of Indian assistance to Afghanistan amounted close to US\$3 billion. The Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between India and Afghanistan in 2011 provided a further boost to the relationship.

Most of India's development projects in the past could be broadly divided into four categories:¹

a) Large Infrastructure Projects: India initiated several medium and large infrastructure projects in its assistance program to Afghanistan, including the construction of a 218 km road from Zaranj to Delaram, a 220/110/20 kV sub-station at Chimtala and 220kV DC transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul.² The inauguration of the new Afghan Parliament (2015) and the Salma Dam (2016), known as the Afghan-India Friendship Dam, located in the Herat province in western Afghanistan, were significant initiatives that were part of the Indian assistance.

b) Humanitarian Assistance: Indian efforts included the supply of wheat and commitment to regularly contribute to the Afghan Red Crescent Society for the treatment of Afghan children with Congenital Heart Disease.³

c) Capacity Building Initiatives: This was a significant area of Indian assistance to Afghans, and critical initiatives included Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC) courses for Afghan Government officials, training via telecommunication at medical facilities, and Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) fellowships for Afghan students.⁴

d) Small Development Projects: These were initiated in the fields of agriculture, rural development, vocational training, health, education, etc.⁵

India's engagement focused on improving the lives of the Afghans, and owing to its developmental role, India continued to wield a considerable amount of soft power in Kabul. Although India shared a cordial relationship with the Afghan Republican government, it did feel the constraints of Pakistan's approach, which aimed at deterring India's engagement in Afghanistan.

Engagement Post-2021

New Delhi's immediate reaction post-August 2021 was to close the consulates and ensure the safe return of its people. There were apprehensions regarding the Taliban's approach towards India, as the Taliban has traditionally been seen by India as Pakistan's proxy and anti-India. Afghanistan has witnessed curious developments post-2021. The Taliban have very much monopolised power as they have moved from an insurgent movement to a functional government. While there have been reports regarding dissension and fissures amongst Taliban's top brass, power appears to remain consolidated under the leadership of reclusive Supreme Leader, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, sitting in Kandahar. According to a World Bank report, there are indications of meek economic recovery, but around 50 per cent of households struggle to maintain their livelihood and meet their basic needs. The country remains highly dependent on external economic assistance, and formidable economic and humanitarian challenges question the long-term survival of the state. The Taliban have evolved in terms of their willingness to stay connected to the world, and they extensively use traditional and social media to appeal for recognition across the globe.

New Delhi has been keen to address the instability in Afghanistan and safeguard its security and strategic interests. In November 2021, India hosted a regional security conference on Afghanistan. Pakistan declined to attend the conference, and China too skipped the meeting. New Delhi opted for a collaborative approach at the regional level to address common challenges emerging from the instability and security situation in Kabul. In December 2022, India's National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval, hosted a special meeting with his counterparts in Central Asia. The security situation in Afghanistan was one of the most critical focus areas of the talks. A joint communiqué that focused on regional security issues, including Afghanistan and counterterrorism, was issued after the meeting. The second meeting was held in Kazakhstan in October 2023, and Afghanistan was one of the key issues discussed in the meeting.

At the bilateral level, India took a rather bold decision to take a step forward and engage with Kabul in June 2022. This decision was primarily due to two factors: the intensifying humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and not to allow India's previous investments in Afghanistan to go in vain. The Indian embassy in Kabul was reopened, and a technical mission was assigned to oversee the distribution of humanitarian aid.

The Taliban have refrained from anti-India statements and consistently assured India that the Afghan soil will not be used against India. They have been extremely keen for India to expand engagement in Afghanistan. Until now, India has focused on humanitarian assistance, food security, medical supply and education. New Delhi has offered 50,000 metric tons of wheat and 300 tons of life-saving medicines.⁶ Apart from this, medical equipment is likely to be supplied to Kabul. For drug addicts, India is helping the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and assistance has been offered in terms of medical kits, clothing, etc.⁷ India's role in education has formed a critical area of its engagement in the past. So, last year, in 2023, India offered 1000 scholarships entailing an online educational scheme for Afghans. The programme gives priority to the students living in Afghanistan, and reportedly, out of the 1000 scholarships, approximately 300 have been granted to Afghan girls.⁸

India has also been pushing to develop the Chabahar port project to boost regional trade and encourage Afghan traders to use the port. The port would facilitate India's assistance in reaching Kabul, bypassing Pakistan. Chabahar port is also seen by New Delhi as a critical hub for the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a 7,200 km long multi-mode transport project to facilitate trade amongst India, Iran, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Central Asia, Russia and Europe.

The Afghan embassy in New Delhi continues to function and is being operated by the Consul Generals appointed by the Ghani regime. India's engagement with Afghanistan does not imply India's recognition of the Taliban regime. New Delhi is very much in consensus with the international community (on the recognition of the Taliban regime), which has based recognition (and further assistance) on two critical conditions: inclusive government in Kabul and girls' education and employment.

The Taliban have welcomed India's approach and have been keen for India to expand its assistance into the domain of development. While India has been extending its support in humanitarian assistance, it is likely to move ahead with a well-considered approach, given its historical and cultural linkages with Kabul, its commitment to support the Afghans, and, very importantly, the evolving regional, strategic and security dynamics.

* Parts of the article have been published in Shalini Chawla, "Afghanistan: The Taliban and the world nations finds a way to engage, without recognition", *Moneycontrol*, August 22, 2023, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/opinion/afghanistan-the-taliban-and-world-nations-find-a-way-to-engage-without-formal-recognition-11234031.html>

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes:

¹ Embassy of India Kabul, Afghanistan, “Indo-Afghan Relations: Development Partnership”, <http://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0707?000>. Accessed on March 20, 2024.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Interaction with the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi on March 13, 2024.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.