



Vivekananda International Foundation

Indian Engagement with Afghanistan: An Economic Perspective

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Indian Engagement with Afghanistan:

An Economic Perspective

By the turn of the century, India's involvement in the Afghan reconstruction effort, gradually but surely, began to gain an upward trajectory. Today India is one of the highest providers of aid to Afghanistan. The striking feature of Indian assistance is, the focus on, 'Afghan led, Afghan owned and controlled,' projects. Mention must also be made of the Indian support to Small Development Projects (SDP) spread all over the country including remote border areas. India's objective is the stabilisation of Afghanistan through economic growth and development, which takes care of the Afghan diversity. India's vision of a stable, independent sovereign, secure and a modern nation is also shared by the Afghan government. The fulfilment of this future goal necessitates enhanced and sustained engagement in all areas of the economy and governance. However, the biggest impediment India faces in this task is the absence of direct land connectivity with the landlocked nation.

Historically, Afghanistan was at the hub of the ancient trade and transit route. The route from the Indian subcontinent branched off in three different directions from north to Central Asia; the west to Europe via the Caspian Sea; and south to Iran and westwards. The fabled silk route of the fifth century traversed Afghanistan. In those days Afghanistan was the connector of regions, i.e. Central Asia, West Asia and South Asia. Over the years India's interest in Afghanistan and the Central Asian region has grown phenomenally. Presently, Afghanistan and the region are witnessing the increasing presence of major and regional powers, primarily because of its geo-strategic location and its wealth of natural resources.

In the present day globalised world order, one of the dominant trends is for overland connectivity across the vast Eurasian landmass. Building of transport corridors and export pipeline infrastructure have come to occupy the centre stage in international politics. In the process, the region is witnessing shifting alignments among the nations. The major and regional powers that are involved in constructing transport corridors and pipeline infrastructure, are also striving to create interdependencies and enhancing their respective influences, if not control the countries. The trend undoubtedly points to the return of the British geographer, Halford Mackinder's theory of geo-politics, which described Eurasia as the 'Heartland' and 'Pivot of History'. Eurasia, as is well known attracted the world's attention because of its abundance of natural resources, especially energy resources. The emerging ma-

trix of regional dynamics is indeed reminiscent of the nineteenth century 'Great Game' between the empires of the day, for influence and control.

Over the years, Indian interest in Afghanistan and the region, as noted earlier, has not only deepened but sharpened as well. By the beginning of the present century, India's international profile was rising, leading to a broadening of its strategic vision. India aspired to play a bigger role beyond South Asia. In the changing perspective India will have to craft its policy against this backdrop. In Afghanistan, the aim of its strategy is to stabilise Afghanistan through economic development. Thus the Indian involvement in the reconstruction effort is likely to go up, especially after the signing of the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) in 2011. Capacity building in security, skill development, infrastructure development, apart from other important sectors of Afghan economy, have been on the Indian agenda for the reconstruction and reintegration of the country. The recent US policy on Afghanistan and South Asia has accorded primacy to India - an encouraging factor. Besides, the changing regional dynamics will impinge on India's strategic and security interests, hence from the long term perspective, sustained economic engagement will have a salutary impact on Afghanistan's stability and security, which in turn will have a positive impact on Indian security interests.

Success of Indian efforts will, however, depend on another critical factor - the prevailing widespread insurgency and challenges to Afghanistan's transition as a nation state. Several attempts at reconciling the two antagonistic sides have been made by the stake-holders of peace and stability in Afghanistan but so far, in vain. The question is, can India carve a niche for itself through economic engagement and can it ensure its sustainability. Linked with the above are, the prospects of reconciliation and reintegration necessary for Afghanistan's stabilisation. These questions would be explored in the article.

Economic Dimension

After the defeat of the Taliban by the forces of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in 2001 and the launch of the 'war on terror' the international community also initiated a massive effort for the reconstruction and stabilisation of Afghanistan. Though independently, India was also involved in the effort which has been growing in the more than one and a half decade. In this effort, India accorded high priority to connecting with Afghanistan through the overland transport corridor in order for its strategic and economic cooperation to be meaningful.

Regional Connectivity Options

The best option for India would have been to revive the ancient trade and transit route, which in the present circumstances would have passed through Pakistan. In view of the troubled relations between India and Pakistan this option is untenable. Even the Trade and Transit Agreement of 2010 allows Afghan goods to reach the Wagah border (the land border crossing point between India and Pakistan), but Indian goods are not allowed to go through Pakistani territory. Reportedly, at times Afghan goods are also held up at the border on the Durand Line, causing delays.

In the present situation, the best option would be to send goods via the Iranian port of Chabahar. India's search for a land opening to the landlocked nation coincided with Iran's aim to rejuvenate its economy. As a consequence, a landmark tripartite agreement between Afghanistan, India and Iran on the connectivity issue via the Chabahar port was signed. The Trilateral Transport and Trade Agreement of 2016 was a milestone development not only for Afghanistan, but for the Central Asian region as well. Afghanistan's quest for a steady, secure, corridor opening on to the Indian Ocean has been its top most priority. The Tripartite Agreement was the answer to Afghanistan's aim to reach out to other countries. These aspirations were shared by both India and Iran as they were of the view that enhanced Afghan economic interaction with other countries could lead to peace and prosperity in the country.

Briefly, the Trilateral Transport and Trade Agreement envisages development, upgradation and operationalisation by India of two terminals and five berths at the Shahid Behesti Port at Chabahar. A deep-water port, Chabahar opens directly into the Indian Ocean. Moreover, it is a mere 1000 km from Kandla on the Gujarat coast. Another advantage for India is that its ships can bypass Dubai avoiding transit fees and reach Chabahar directly. From Chabahar there is an operational road link to the Iran-Afghan border, and thence into Afghanistan.

On October 23, 2017 the first consignment of 1.1 million tonnes of wheat reached Afghanistan, thereby operationalising the Tripartite Agreement(Chabahar) for a strategic link on a regular basis. This transit route constitutes a major stimulus for the Indian effort to enhance engagement with Afghanistan. In November 2017, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani inaugurated the first phase of the Chabahar development project. India was represented by Nitin Gadkari, Minister for Shipping And Highways. It is expected that India and Japan would jointly develop the second phase of the Port, which will include the setting up of a special economic zone. India would be investing \$235 million in the project. From the long term perspective,

Chabahar has the potential to emerge as a major transport hub and could possibly prove to be a ‘game changer’ for the region.

Air Freight Cargo

A small window of opportunity to connect directly with Afghanistan opened up with the commencement of air freight cargo between Kabul and Delhi. The decision to establish an air freight corridor between India and Afghanistan was taken during President Ashraf Ghani’s visit to India in September 2016. The first cargo flight carried pharmaceuticals, water purifiers and medical equipment, from Delhi to Kabul, and the return flight brought high grade asafoetida (heeng), medicinal plants, fresh and dried fruits. Besides other items that have a market in India are carpets, saffron, natural resources for medicines and semi-precious stones. The air cargo service will give Afghan farmers quick and direct access to the Indian market for their perishable produce. It is hoped that the new corridor will increase the annual trade from \$700 million to a billion dollars in three years and give a boost to Afghanistan’s agriculture and carpet industry.¹

Sceptics doubt the feasibility of the air cargo service because of its high cost. In their view, the service had greater symbolic rather than pragmatic value. While commenting on the commencement of the service an influential Chinese newspaper the *Global Times* described it as, ‘India’s stubborn geo-political thinking’. But significantly for India and Afghanistan it proved to be a triumph, as they were able to circumvent Pakistan’s obduracy of refusing to allow its territory for transporting goods between the two countries. Afghanistan’s ambassador to India, Shaida Mohammad Abdali, in an interview spoke of “standardisation of items” – Afghanistan has fruits and number of items but the price is not as good because of lack of value addition.² It is therefore possible that the two countries could sign a special Memorandum of Understanding on capacity building and other logistical issues. Subsequently, the next consignment of asafoetida (heeng) will be sent to Delhi to be followed by fresh produce from Kandahar.

The second air cargo service linked Kabul with Mumbai in December 2017 and carried 40 tons of dried fruits. In view of the positive response to the service, a similar service to other destinations is being considered. Possibly Hyderabad and Amritsar could be the next destinations. According to Afghan officials, 10,640 tons of fresh produce, fresh and dried fruits, medicinal plants and handicrafts, worth more than \$20 million, had been exported to India since the launch of the first corridor.

A salutary outcome of the service could be an impetus to set up auxiliary industries, such as cold storage facilities for fruits and vegetables, and maintenance of refrigerated vans to carry the produce to other cities and towns. The service will enable Mazar-e-Sharif, Herat, and Jalalabad to leverage Indian markets. An equally promising possibility is the setting up of facilities for polishing of carpets, which would be a major value addition to the product. At present the air freight cargo needs the support and encouragement of the two governments, to become commercially viable. The trend at present is undoubtedly positive.

International North South Transport Corridor

Although the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is a circuitous route for connecting with Afghanistan, it is nevertheless an option. Now that Turkmenistan has accorded a high priority to regional and domestic connectivity, reaching Afghanistan may not be such a cumbersome option. The projected Lapis Lazuli Transport Corridor will connect Afghanistan to Europe via Turkmenistan. New options are opening up and India should seize the opportunity.

Apart from regional connectivity issue, it is equally essential for India to invest in provincial and district roads in Afghanistan. It would be an enabling factor for linking agricultural industrial areas with the market. Besides these efforts, India is also actively participating in regional initiatives such as the Heart of Asia and the 2011 Istanbul Process. The Istanbul Process envisages Afghanistan as the 'Land Bridge' to Eurasia. Since the establishment of this Forum, regular meetings have been held both at the official and foreign ministers' level. However, the main concern of the members is security and narco-trafficking, rather than economic development. India is a participant in the Regional Economic Comprehensive Cooperation (RECCA) and has held investment summits and trade exhibitions. In September 2017 India organised a three day exhibition on trade and investment.

Small Development Projects

An innovative element of India's assistance is, its focus on Small Development Projects (SDP). Initiated in 2006 the SDPs relate to quick impact small scale projects in agriculture, rural development, education, health, vocational training etc. that have a budget of less than a million dollars. The objective is to create a sense of partnership and ownership among the local communities. The local community identifies its priorities from the above mentioned areas. Each community is building an irrigation channel in villages to bring water from a mountain stream to the fields.³ The SDPs were launched in three phases and today 300 such SDPs are operational.

India merely provides the finance and expertise for the projects chosen by the local community. Each project is allocated up to a million dollars for health, education or rural development; each is building an irrigation for a village to bring water from a mountain stream to the fields. In the field of agriculture and veterinary facilities numerous SDPs are being implemented. These include the setting up of a demonstrative nursery at Dih Bala district in Nangarhar province, establishment of a veterinary clinic in Khas Kumar district of Kunar province, providing equipment in Gubuz district of Khost province, and of equal importance, the establishment of veterinary clinics, and construction of canals in Mohammad Umar and Anjirman Karez villages in the Arghandab district of Kandahar province. These SDPs supported by India have reached the villages and districts of the provinces. A perceptive academic noted, “This method of project implementation has its roots in the Gandhian way of encouraging community ownership of projects and building self-reliance through indigenous methods ...”⁴

During the second meeting of the Strategic Partnership Council in New Delhi on September 23, 2017, both countries agreed to embark on a New Development Partnership in tandem with Afghan priorities. India agreed to implement some important new projects such as: the Shahdoot Dam; a drinking water project for Kabul that would also facilitate irrigation; water supply for Charikar city; road connectivity to Band-e-Amir in Bamiyan province that would promote tourism; and low cost housing for returning Afghan refugees in Nangarhar province to promote resettlement. Over and above these high impact projects, India also offered assistance for six new projects under the aid grant and assistance from India. Importantly, India agreed to further extend its assistance for the Afghan defence and security forces for fighting the scourge of terrorism, organised crime, trafficking of narcotics and money laundering. In the security sphere, India could also assist Afghanistan in setting up academies and military institutions for training, so as to make the Afghan security forces an efficient force.

Possibly the strategic understanding between the US, Afghanistan and India may have encouraged the latter to enhance its scale of engagement. Although the Afghan government has put in place the necessary legal framework and rules, it would be worthwhile to set up an empowered coordination committee comprising of both Afghan and Indian officials to oversee the implementation of the SDPs. This would facilitate quick decision making and resolve any differences and obstacles that may arise.

Economic Interaction in Other Sectors

Apart from the major emphasis on regional connectivity issues and SDPs, other areas of equal importance are: the construction of provincial and rural roads that would provide connectivity with domestic market as well as ports; agriculture; harnessing the potential of mineral wealth; power generation; and construction of dams. In the field of capacity building some of the projects underway are: (1) Deputation of 20 Indian civil servants as coaches and mentors under capacity building for Afghan Public Administration (CAP) programme supported by UNDP and the Governments of India and Afghanistan; and, (2) India-Afghanistan Vocational Training Centre for training Afghan youth in carpentry, plumbing, welding, masonry, and tailoring undertaken by the Confederation of Indian Industries. The scope for engagement is indeed vast. It ranges from: the setting up of poultry farms; drinking water facilities; enhancing irrigation facilities; providing high yield seeds and medical plants; aiding the light machinery industry sector which includes packaging for juices and fresh fruits, among other agricultural produce; dairy production; processing of high quality karakul wool; construction of cold storage facilities etc. However, it is the cottage industries such as garment making and accessories for clothes and handicrafts that have made their mark, apart from the hand woven carpets that are world famous. There is an opportunity to introduce non-traditional designs and improve the marketing of these hand-made carpets.⁵ At the commercial level the bilateral trade for 2016-17 was \$800 million approximately and the potential to expand it is indeed immense. Some of the Indian companies doing business in Afghanistan are: KEC for electrical transmission lines; AIPL for building of a hydro power project in Helmand province; and, Gammon India for installing power transmission lines and power substations. The private Indian airline Spice Jet operates flights to Kabul.

In short, the potential to expand and develop the economic base is real, and will make Afghanistan an export oriented country. In the words of President Ashraf Ghani, “As long as we are not an exporter country, then poverty and instability will not be eliminated”.⁶ In order to emerge as an exporter country it is firstly essential to improve the existing condition of provincial and rural roads. Dr. Shanthie Mariet D’Souza, a well-known scholar has opined, “... Only 7 percent of roads are paved. Four provincial capitals remain disconnected from the regional network and thus lack access to domestic and regional markets and more than 70 percent of inter provincial and inter district roads remain in a poor state. Many roads are inaccessible to motor vehicles”.⁷ It is hoped that in due course this situation will improve. An efficient network would ensure the viability of SDPs. Secondly, in order to ensure the com-

petitiveness of Afghan goods, value addition is also necessary. In this regard, improved packaging and certification of products to international standards is important. For instance, Afghan carpets well-known for their quality are produced at a competitive price. However, this industry is for the most part stuck at the lower end of the value chain – much of the value addition is done in neighbouring Pakistan, where the cutting and washing of the carpets takes place. India could assist in the value addition by imparting requisite skills to Afghan workers and the air freight cargo service the carpets would find a huge market for them.

At the same time India's soft power is all pervasive. It encompasses areas such as education, health care, agriculture, infrastructure development within the country, so as to connect producing centres with dry ports. India has offered 1000 scholarships to students to pursue studies in Indian universities. During his visit to Kabul In May 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced an additional 500 scholarships for the children of martyrs of Afghan security forces in schools and colleges both in Afghanistan and India. In the sphere of health 27 SDPs have been initiated. These include: setting up of a Basic Health Clinic in the Musa Khel district of Khost province; setting up of Comprehensive Health Centre in the Gayan district of Paktika province; and, construction of a Gynaecology Clinic in the Rodat district of Nangarhar province. Water and Sanitation are other important areas where India is involved in setting up projects. Some of the 22 such projects launched are: setting up of 35 water points (bore wells) in various villages of the Shinkari district in Zabul province; construction of eight public toilets in Shibirghan in Jawzhan province; and, construction of a 40 metre girder bridge in the Wakhan district of Badakhshan province. Another important field of engagement is education. In this field India has initiated 22 projects. These include four schools in border districts (Wama, Noorgram and Wegal) of Nooristan province; three schools in Nimroz province and in Lalpura district in Nangarhar province. In order to empower one of the projects there is establishment of Vocational Training Institute (carpet weaving) in the Zawol and Pusht-e-Koh region of Shindad district in Herat province. An integrated approach to economic development will contribute to the wellbeing of the people and lift the country out of its present situation.

India has already invested two billion dollars in the country and this figure is likely to go up in the years ahead. In the long term it would enable Afghanistan to emerge as a land bridge to Eurasia but only if measures are taken to remove the prevailing uncertainty. Peace and stability are essential to inspire investor confidence. This brings us to another issue: the challenges on the road to stability.

Political Stabilisation

Political stability is an essential prerequisite for sustainable economic development. Afghanistan is a resource rich country and its geopolitical location as the hub of trade and transit has attracted empires in the past and in the contemporary period. Afghanistan has been a connector of three major regions. However decades of uncertainty caused by non-traditional threats, have been a major setback to economic development. Today Afghanistan and its border with Pakistan have the highest concentration of extremist groups and organisations such as the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, the Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda. Consequently, measures to ensure stability hinges on the ongoing insurgency against the Government which is still continuing. What all these extremist outfits have in common is that they are all fiercely opposed to the existing regime. The antagonism is ideological in nature - it is the liberal democratic values versus a system based on the Sharia espousing Islamic values. Even after the defeat of the Taliban, the insurgents were not marginalised, in fact they are in resurgent mode. According to Professor Rajen Harshe, a reputed scholar, “At this juncture according to the Taliban’s own version, which is supposed to be almost accurate, the Taliban controls 34 districts fully and in another 167 districts they are contesting the government ...”⁸ The insurgents have vowed to continue the struggle against the Government and to rid the country of foreign troops. In view of the “war on terror” going nowhere and a resurgent Taliban, it was felt by all the stakeholders in peace and stability in Afghanistan, that reconciliation between the two sides was the only way out of this quagmire. Although not a feasible proposition, it was perhaps the only way forward.

Attempts at reconciliation are not new. The former President Najibullah initiated his policy of national reconciliation in December 1986. The policy failed because of two factors: the President sought to end the Afghan conflict by a state-run reconciliation programme; and secondly, the supporters of the Mujahideen groups based in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the US and Iran were extremely distrustful and hostile towards President Najibullah.⁹ Subsequently President Hamid Karzai also favoured reconciliation and strengthening the peace programme. In this regard, he established the Independent National Commission for Peace and Reconciliation (INCPR) in May 2005. Sebghatullah Mujaddadi, the leader of INCPR, claimed that over 10,000 Taliban and Hezb-i-Islami militants were successfully integrated into a peaceful life.¹⁰ During this period President Karzai formed a High Peace Council in 2010, which proved to be a non-starter. Its first president Rabbani was assassinated and the next president was unable to achieve much.

Later, President Ashraf Ghani Ahmedzai himself initiated steps to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table but success eluded him. Subsequently in the backdrop of the violent killing of nearly 200 civilians, the President once again renewed his offer of peace. This time the terms even more generous than the earlier one. The package unveiled at a peace conference in Kabul in March 2018 included ceasefire, release of prisoners, the promise to recognise the Taliban as a legitimate political force and a review of the constitution, among others.¹¹ President Ghani also travelled to Pakistan in search of a solution to the continuing violence. Reportedly, the response of the Taliban has been lukewarm. Instead, the Taliban have shown their willingness to talk directly with the US President Donald Trump who has refused to talk with them, unless they engage in talks with the Afghan authorities. In view of this impasse the Afghan situation remains fluid.

Meanwhile, efforts to bring the Taliban to the table have also continued at the international level. The Doha Peace Process was initiated by the US and Qatar in 2010, for talks between the representatives of the Taliban and the US. The negotiations proved fruitless, probably due to decades of mistrust. Reportedly the two sides could not even agree on a common agenda for discussion. Later several Western governments established the Peace and Reconciliation Fund. In July 2015, Pakistan initiated the Murree Peace Process between the Afghan government and the Taliban. During the first round of talks both the sides presented their respective positions on the prevailing situation. It was absolutely clear that due to diverse visions about the future political order, the prospects for reconciliation were limited. In June 2013, the Taliban opened the office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, in Qatar. In a tough statement, the Taliban stated unambiguously that they would continue the struggle against the Afghan Government. Regarding the second round of the unofficial Doha Dialogue, which was held recently, and Taliban as well as US official representative said it was productive, however, no further details are available. Therefore what can be said with certainty is that the Taliban seem to have given up its earlier obduracy and seemed willing to talk to the US.

Among Afghanistan's neighbours, China has been keenly promoting talks with the Taliban to bring about stability in the country. In December 2016, a dialogue between China-Afghanistan was held in Beijing. The focus was on economic cooperation. Russia-China-Pakistan also held a tripartite meeting in Moscow in February 2017 to discuss the security situation in the region, but it yielded no positive result, as Afghanistan was not a party to these diplomatic parleys. Subsequently an expanded tripartite meeting was held on April 2017, to which India and Afghanistan were invit-

ed. The meeting ended without any outcome due to diverse views of the actors. India and Afghanistan held near similar views and insisted that safe havens should be destroyed and that “we underline that it is up to the Government of Afghanistan to decide whom to engage in direct talks. These efforts can only be facilitated by friends and well-wishers”.¹²

These regional initiatives are likely to yield limited results, as all actors view these efforts through the prism of their national interests. For instance, for China, stability in Afghanistan is essential for its economic goals that include resource extraction as the country is rich in minerals and raw materials and the key position of Afghanistan in its infrastructure projects. As is well-known, President Xi Jinping has initiated the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Maritime Silk Route as it is mentioned in Chinese documents in pursuit of his Chinese Dream, the defining feature of China’s foreign policy in the contemporary phase. Among the BRI, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the most prestigious and runs nearly parallel to Afghanistan’s eastern border with Pakistan. China is keen to involve Afghanistan in the CPEC and thereby ensure its stability. In the years ahead the significance of Afghanistan as hub of trade and transit is bound to expand trade for China as its infrastructure projects reach fruition. Initially Russia was reluctant to engage with the Taliban. However, after the draw-down of coalition forces from Afghanistan, Russia has taken on a more active role. It is willing to engage with the Taliban as it perceives that the Taliban could play an important role in checking the advance of the IS, as in its view both the groups are inimical to each other. Indeed it’s a fallacy. Pakistan has a dual approach towards the extremist and terrorist groups located on its soil; some groups are perceived to be dangerous, while some are considered to be strategic assets. The West believes that the issue of stabilisation should be resolved at the regional level, and it supports all positive steps. Thus attempts at reconciliation and reintegration will continue. The process could be a long drawn one, but not intractable.

In our understanding, it should be remembered that there is no commonality of strategic vision between the Afghan Government and the various insurgent groups. The two sides are not only antagonistic to each other, but are violently opposed to each other. Besides the only advantage that the Taliban have been able to secure is the release of their brethren from Afghan jails, infiltrating the state security structure and other bodies, and extending the reach of their propaganda and influencing the popular perception of security.¹³ An important factor is that there is a huge trust deficit between the two sides. It would perhaps take time as well as patience to hammer

out a modicum of trust. On the other hand, some see a glimmer of hope for the negotiations.¹⁴ It should be noted that there is no coordinated approach to the issue of stability in Afghanistan. Attempts at the bilateral level are limited in scope.

Another dimension is that Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic society where ethnic affinities and tribal loyalties play a decisive role. The nation building process is in its nascent stage. The Afghan leadership will have to make a concerted effort to pursue its national strategy of ‘winning the minds and hearts’ of the people. For this to happen Afghanistan must project a cohesive image with economic development and the well-being of its citizens as its primary objective. The people are weary of war and desire a peaceful life. An efficient police force with a professional outlook has also to be created.

The Indian Position

The Indian position on the issue of reconciliation is clear. It was earlier uncompromising on the question of violence and international terrorism. It could not accept the proposition of ‘good and bad’ Taliban. It seems that now India has diluted its stand. At a pragmatic level India could hardly overlook the fact the Taliban has more than 60,000 armed adherents and occupies almost 40 percent of the land in Afghanistan. In May 2017, India’s envoy to Pakistan, Manpreet Vohra, met Gulbuddin Hekmatyar of the Haz-e-Islami faction and discussed peace and stability.¹⁵ As President Barack Obama underlined, “What Pakistan does not want as a matter of faith, is a unified Afghan Government that is led by a Pashtun sympathetic to India”.¹⁶ On the other hand, it has been largely assumed in India, both at the official and non-official level, that the Taliban comprising mostly the Pashtuns are hostile to India and pro-Pakistan”. According to Ajai Shukla, “The Taliban field commanders and fighters I have met, who many assume would be hostile to India owing to the support they receive from Pakistan, display the same disdain for Pakistan and affection for India as the average Afghan”.¹⁷ In fact, India’s soft power has endeared it to the people and the government.

Indian presence in Afghanistan rests on deeper cultural foundation than the US support. The traditional friendship towards India among Afghans of every stripe – Pashtuns, Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbek, Communists, Islamist, everyone, stems from the soft power that India projects.¹⁸

Concluding Observations

A cohesive nation able to unify all sections of the society is essential for countering the formidable challenges facing the country. It is for the people to bring about

unity. External actors particularly China and Pakistan have a role in Afghanistan, albeit a limited one. Sustainable economic development will complement Afghan efforts for stability and security. Afghanistan's economic development has to be owned, led and controlled by them - a point emphasised by Indian policy makers. In the context of economic development, connectivity with an opening in the southern direction is of utmost importance. Iranian cooperation is essential for ensuring the smooth functioning of its newly opened Chabahar port. It will enable not only India, but other powers in South East Asia and Japan to reach out to Afghanistan and beyond.

End Notes:

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About the VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

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