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INDIA'S POSITION ON THE CRISIS IN AFGHANISTAN- Soumya Verma¹**ABSTRACT:**

This research paper examines India's position on the crisis in Afghanistan from 1990 onwards. It analyses India's evolving approach towards Afghanistan, highlighting diplomatic, economic, and security dimensions. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of India's policy objectives and actions throughout the Afghan crisis by examining key events and factors that shaped its stance. Additionally, the paper explores the implications of India's position on regional stability and its aspirations for greater influence in Afghanistan.

Keywords: India, Afghanistan, crisis, diplomacy, security, regional stability, influence

INTRODUCTION:

Afghanistan and India have a long-standing historical, cultural, and economic relationship. Over the years, Afghanistan has faced many difficulties, including terrorism, foreign interventions, and civil war. India has played a significant role in reconstruction and rehabilitation of Afghanistan. Moreover, the Strategic Partnership Agreement reinforced strong, vibrant and multi-faceted relations between the two countries. This research paper explores India's viewpoint on the Afghan crisis, with a particular focus on the years 1990–1999, when the country experienced increased instability. By looking at diplomatic, economic, and security aspects, the paper aims to shed light on India's evolving strategy towards Afghanistan and the effects of its stance on regional dynamics.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

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A. Traditional and historical ties between India and Afghanistan

India and Afghanistan share **deep-rooted historical and cultural ties**. The connection between India and Afghanistan is complex, involving aspects of history, culture, and diplomacy.

1. Ancient Connections:

- The relationship between the people of Afghanistan and India traces back to the **Indus Valley civilization**.
- The **Gandhara** area, which today includes portions of Pakistan and Afghanistan, was regarded as one of the **sixteen Mahajanapadas** of ancient India during the Vedic era.²
- The **Seleucid Empire's** successor state ruled the Afghanistan region following **Alexander the Great's** short stay.
- They signed an alliance pact in 305 BCE, ceding some territory to the Indian Maurya Empire.

2. Hinduism and Buddhism:

- During the **Mauryan period**, parts of modern-day Afghanistan were under Indian control.
- **Hinduism and Buddhism** prevailed during this time.

3. Recent History:

- India was the only nation in South Asia to recognise the **Democratic Republic of Afghanistan**, which was sponsored by the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Nonetheless, tensions arose between the Taliban regime and the Afghan civil war in the 1990s.
- India emerged as a significant donor of **humanitarian relief and reconstruction materials** to Afghanistan after playing a pivotal role in the **overthrow of the Taliban**.
- Over **200 schools** have been constructed, **1,000 scholarships** have been sponsored, and **16,000 Afghan** students have been hosted by India.
- Afghanistan and India inked a **strategic partnership deal in 2011**, which marked a major improvement in their ties.³

² Vajiram and Ravi, <https://vajiramandravi.com/quest-upsc-notes/india-afghanistan/> (last visited Feb 22, 2024).
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- India is still dedicated to promoting the stability and prosperity of Afghanistan in spite of the recent difficulties.

4. Recent Developments:

- **Student visas** were revoked after the **Taliban takeover** of Afghanistan.
- India's position on the **Afghan Taliban** has undergone a shift, with a quiet delegation visiting Doha to engage with the Taliban leadership.
- India does not recognize the **Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan**.
- In **June 2022**, India sent a "technical team" to its embassy building in Kabul, although the embassy was later closed due to lack of support.

B. The Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989) and its aftermath

The **Soviet-Afghan War**, which lasted from **1979 to 1989**, was a protracted armed conflict fought in the Soviet-controlled **Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA)**.

1. Conflict Overview:

- The conflict, which constituted a significant part of the Cold War, included intense combat between the **Afghan mujahideen** and the **DRA**, which was backed by the Soviet Union and a number of international fighters.
- The majority of the fighting in the 1980s took place in rural Afghanistan.
- At least 1 million civilians were killed, **90,000 mujahideen** fighters died, **18,000 Afghan** troops lost their lives, and around **14,000 to 15,000 Soviet troops** also perished.⁴
- Millions more fled their homes and sought safety in nearby nations like **Pakistan and Iran**.

2. Soviet Involvement:

- In **December 1979**, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan with the intention of supporting **Babrak Karmal's** communist regime.

³ Gopala, Bhagyamma & M., Kanchana, SHADOWS OF THE PAST: INDIA-AFGHANISTAN FRIENDSHIP THROUGH THE AGES, Volume 1, Issue 1, ILE Journal of Governance and Policy Review, 128-139, 2023, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376514336_SHADOWS_OF_THE_PAST_INDIA-AFGHANISTAN_FRIENDSHIP_THROUGH_THE_AGES.

⁴Veteran Life, <https://veteranlife.com/military-history/soviet-afghan-war/> (last visited Feb 22, 2024).

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- The Soviets' battle turned into a maze, depleting their resources and inciting retaliation from throughout the world.
- Afghan mujahideen forces, led by figures like **Gulbuddin Hekmatyar** fiercely resisted Soviet soldiers.⁵

3. Mujahideen Victory:

- Despite their superior military strength, the Soviets struggled to gain control.
- The mujahideen received support from various countries, including the **United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia**.
- In **February 1989**, the Soviets finally withdrew their troops, marking the end of the war.
- The Soviets found it difficult to seize power despite having a stronger military.
- The **United States, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia** were among the nations that supported the mujahideen.
- The conflict ended in **February 1989** when the Soviet Union withdrew its forces.
- The mujahideen emerged victorious, but Afghanistan was left devastated.

4. Aftermath:

- The Soviet exit left Afghanistan with a **power vacuum**.
- As competing groups of the mujahideen fought for dominance, a **civil war** broke out.
- There were warlords, tribal disputes, and instability across the nation.
- In **1996**, an extremist group called the **Taliban** rose to prominence and seized control of Afghanistan.

C. Rise of the Taliban and its impact on India's strategic interests

The **rise of the Taliban** and its subsequent takeover of Afghanistan have significant implications for India's strategic interests.

1. Historical Context:

- After the **U.S. ousted the Taliban in 2001**, the group's dependence on Pakistan grew significantly.

⁵Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Afghan-War> (last visited Feb 22,2024).

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- During this period, the Taliban strengthened ties with Pakistan-based outfits like **Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)** and **Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM)**.
- These ties led to **coordinated attacks against Indian security and interests**.

2. Changing Dynamics:

- The Taliban now understand that depending just on Pakistan is not viable as they want legitimacy both domestically and internationally. China has pledged to invest in Afghanistan, but details are yet unclear.
- India has gained the respect of the Afghan people by emerging as a significant **developmental partner** for Afghanistan.
- India's strategy emphasises a **people-centric approach** and strives on establishing an environment that is favourable for Afghan progress.

3. India's Leverage:

- Geographical proximity, economic size, military capacity, and a robust diplomatic network make India a crucial component in the Taliban's quest for legitimacy.
- India's engagement in Afghanistan is not narrowly defined; it aims to contribute to Afghan development.
- The Taliban's desire for autonomy drives them to engage in activities that challenge Pakistan's influence over Afghanistan.

4. Operationalizing the Triangle:

- The **India-Taliban-Pakistan triangle** provides insights into the Taliban's efforts to balance material and ideological interests.
- While Pakistan remains influential, the Taliban recognize the need to diversify their partnerships.
- India's position as a developmental partner and its goodwill among Afghans give it leverage in this complex triangle.

INDIA'S DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT:

A. Early Indian response and establishment of diplomatic relations with Afghan factions

Various elements have impacted India's historical connection with Afghanistan. India and Afghanistan have strong cultural and historical links that have persisted since India's

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independence. The two countries signed the "Friendship Treaty" in 1950 to further cement their relationship. In 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, India stepped up its spending in infrastructure. But the rising of the Afghan Mujahideen and their eventual establishment of a government resulted in diminishing Indian influence and diplomatic isolation. India persisted in its diplomatic efforts with Afghanistan in spite of obstacles, particularly under the Taliban regime. Following the 2001 invasion spearheaded by the United States, India provided assistance for reconstruction endeavours and forged diplomatic ties with the recently constituted democratic government.

B. India's support to the Northern Alliance

India played a **secret yet significant role** in supporting the **Northern Alliance**, led by **Ahmad Shah Massoud**, during the tumultuous period in Afghanistan⁶. Between **1996 and 2000**, India covertly provided military and medical assistance to Massoud's forces. This support included **uniforms, ordnance, mortars, small armaments, refurbished Kalashnikovs**, and other essential supplies. Despite limitations on sending heavy equipment, India's aid bolstered the Northern Alliance's resilience in their fight against the **Taliban**, which was backed by **Pakistan**. Massoud's unwavering commitment to defending his country earned him the nickname "Lion of Panjshir." India's assistance was crucial during this critical phase in Afghanistan's history.⁷

C. India's role in Afghan peace processes and regional initiatives

India plays a **crucial role** in the Afghan peace process, aiming for stability and reconciliation in the region. Here are some key points:

1. **Uniform Approach:** India is a member of the United States President's New Peace Initiative, which suggests holding a regional meeting under UN authority. A single strategy for peace in Afghanistan will be discussed by the foreign ministers of China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, India, and the United States. India backs inclusive, Afghan-led initiatives towards peace.

⁶Thomas Withington, The early anti-Taliban Team, Vol.57, No. 6, The Sage Journal, 13-15 (2001), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2968/057006004>.

⁷TheHindu, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/how-india-secretly-armed-ahmad-shah-massouds-northern-alliance/article29310513.ece>, (last visited Feb 21,2024).

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2. **Investment in Afghanistan:** India has made large infrastructural development, security force training, and equipment delivery. India's commitment to Afghanistan's stability is exemplified by projects like the Afghan Parliament, the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, and the Afghanistan-India Friendship Dam (Salma Dam).⁸
3. **Strategic Interest:** Afghanistan provides access to the Central Asian nations that are wealthy in minerals and oil. For India's geopolitical and commercial interests, control of road routes that link it with Central Asia via Afghanistan is essential.
4. **Terms Concerning Terrorism and Women's Rights:** India aims to have a say in setting terms related to **terrorism, violence, women's rights, and democratic values** in Afghanistan.

India's involvement reflects its commitment to regional peace and development, emphasizing an Afghan-led process and stability in the region.

ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE AND DEVELOPMENT:

A. India's role in humanitarian aid and post-war reconstruction

India has played a **significant role** in **humanitarian aid** and **post-war reconstruction** in Afghanistan. Let's delve into the details:

1. Humanitarian Assistance:

- India's contribution to Afghanistan's civilian reconstruction efforts has been **well-received** and has contributed to the famed goodwill for India among Afghans.
- Key areas of humanitarian assistance include:
 - **High-Protein Biscuits:** India provided high-protein biscuits to nearly **2 million children**.
 - **Wheat Supply:** Provision of food assistance of 11 lakh tonnes of wheat, both as grains and biscuits, was distributed to approximately 1.5 million school children.⁹

⁸Drishti Ias, <https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/india-in-afghan-peace-process>, (last visited Feb 21,2024).

⁹Ministry of External Affairs, India-Afghanistan Relations, <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0354?000>, (last visited Feb 23,2024).

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- **Medical Aid:** A Medical Diagnostic Centre in Kabul was set up in 2015. The Centre provides latest diagnostic facilities to children of Afghanistan thereby generating goodwill for India
- **Local Governance Support:** Provision of vehicles for local governance purposes.
- **Infrastructure:** Construction of **public toilet and bathhouse complexes** in Kabul¹.

2. Major Infrastructure Projects:

- India has undertaken significant infrastructure projects in Afghanistan:
 - **Zaranj-Delaram Highway:** A crucial road link connecting Afghanistan to Iran.
 - **Pul-e-Khumri Transmission Line:** Enhancing electricity distribution. It will provide a link between Afghanistan's energy system and the central Asian and Uzbekistan energy systems.
 - **Salma Dam (Afghan-India Friendship Dam):** Providing irrigation and power generation.
 - **Telecommunication Infrastructure Restoration.**
 - **Afghan Parliament Building:** Constructed by India.
 - **Television Network Expansion:** Across the country.

3. Small and Community-Development Projects:

- These projects focus on local ownership and management:
 - **Agriculture, education, rural development, health, vocational training, and solar energy initiatives:** On an average, more than 3,500 Afghan nationals undergo training/education in India every year. More than 15,000 Afghan students pursue education in India on self-financing basis.¹⁰
 - Ongoing efforts to empower local communities.

4. Education and Capacity Development:

- **Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health:** Reconstruction and support.

¹⁰Ministry of External Affairs, India-Afghanistan Relations, <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0354?000>, (last visited Feb 23,2024).

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- **Habibia School:** Following the reconstruction and renovation of Habibia School in Kabul, India extended assistance for training and maintenance of the school.¹¹
- **Scholarships:** A Special Scholarship Scheme of 1,000 scholarships per annum to Afghan nationals (administered by ICCR) with 100% utilization in most years.
- **Training Scholarships:** For Afghan public servants.
- **Capacity Building:** In various sectors like media, health care, education, and more

B. Trade and investment opportunities: the Chabahar Port and India-Afghanistan air corridor

India has **invested significantly** in Afghanistan, creating trade and investment opportunities despite the challenges posed by the recent return of the Taliban to power. The total bilateral trade between India and Afghanistan for CY 2019- 20 was at US\$ 1.5 billion.¹²

1. Chabahar Port:

- India invested in the **\$150 million Zaranj-Delaram highway**, connecting Afghanistan to Iran's Chabahar port.
- This highway allows India to **trade directly with Afghanistan**, bypassing Pakistan's restrictions on transporting goods across its territory.
- Chabahar port serves as a crucial **land-sea trade corridor**, benefiting both countries.
- The Port has so far handled over 5,000 containers ferrying over 110,000 tons of wheat and over 2,000 tons of pulses sent by India as assistance to Afghanistan via Chabahar.¹³
- In 2019, Afghanistan shipped around 700 tons of agricultural and mineral products to India through the Chabahar Port, clearly demonstrating the

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Ministry of External Affairs, India-Afghanistan Relations, <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0354?000>, (last visited Feb 23, 2024).

¹³*ibid.*

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feasibility of Chabahar Port as a transit point for Afghanistan and eventually to Central Asia.¹⁴

2. India-Afghanistan Air Corridor:

- **Establishment:** In 2017, India and Afghanistan established an **air corridor** to enhance trade and connectivity.
- **Trade Boost:** The new land-sea route complements the air corridor, further boosting trade between the two nations.
- **Exports to India:** In 2018, Afghanistan exported **US\$740 million** worth of goods to India, making it their largest export partner.
- **Economic Cooperation:** The Chabahar Port and the air corridor contribute to regional cooperation and help reduce Afghanistan's deficit.
- **Strategic Importance:** India's investment in Chabahar ensures economic growth and strengthens ties with both Iran and Afghanistan¹.

In summary, the Chabahar Port and the India-Afghanistan air corridor create vital trade links, foster economic growth, and enhance regional cooperation. India's far-sighted investment in Chabahar is beginning to yield positive results for trade with Central Asia and beyond.

SECURITY COOPERATION:

India has also taken a proactive role in enhancing Afghanistan's security capabilities by providing Afghan security personnel with training and equipment. India has sent Afghanistan military hardware such as trucks, small guns, and helicopters. Afghan military and police officers have received counterterrorism and intelligence gathering training from Indian security professionals.

Some in the area, especially Pakistan, are concerned by India's security cooperation with Afghanistan. Pakistan has accused India of using Afghanistan as a base to promote separatist activities in the area and views India's presence there as a danger to its own security interests. India, meanwhile, insists that the goal of its security cooperation with Afghanistan is to create a stable, safe nation that is equipped to repel terrorist attacks.

¹⁴ *Supra* note 8.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA:**A. India's competition with Pakistan for influence in Afghanistan**

The India-Pakistan rivalry in Afghanistan is a consequential regional competition for influence. Let's delve into the dynamics:

1. Objectives:

- India aims to cultivate Afghanistan as a natural partner and a reliable bulwark against Islamic militants, including Pakistan-backed groups.
- Pakistan, on the other hand, seeks to counter what it perceives as an Indo-Afghan nexus that could encircle and weaken Pakistan.¹⁵

2. Strategies:

- Pakistan leverages militant groups, including the Afghan Taliban, as strategic proxies.
- India, instead, places considerable weight on its soft power influence among Afghans.

3. Misreadings and Exaggerations:

- Pakistan misreads and exaggerates India's activities in Afghanistan.
- India believes that supporting the existing Afghan system best serves its interests, given the lack of plausible alternatives.

4. Influence and Proxy Warfare:

- Pakistan holds the most influence in Afghanistan due to its patronage of a resilient Taliban insurgency.
- India's support for the Afghan system is informed by practical considerations.
- If the U.S. abruptly withdraws without a broad-based intra-Afghan peace deal, Pakistan may intensify proxy warfare against India in Afghanistan¹.

5. Prospects for Peace:

- An inclusive Afghan settlement could reduce prospects for violence between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan.

¹⁵Zachary Constantino, The India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan, United State Institute of Peace (Feb 22,2024, 22:34), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/01/india-pakistan-rivalry-afghanistan>.

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- However, means for Pakistan to conduct proxy violence against India are likely to persist.

B.Threat of Taliban resurgence and its implications for India's security

The **resurgence of the Taliban** holds **serious security implications** for India, particularly in the context of **Jammu and Kashmir**. Here are some key points:

1. Jammu and Kashmir Security Concerns:

- The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan raises apprehensions that the country could become a **terror hub** used by **anti-India elements**.
- The porous border between Afghanistan and Jammu and Kashmir poses security challenges for India.¹⁶

2. Potential Escalation of Radicalism:

- The Taliban's ideology and history of supporting extremist groups may lead to the **escalation of radicalism** in the region.
- India must be vigilant about the potential spillover effects on its internal security².

3. Pakistan's Role and Proxy Warfare:

- Pakistan's historical support for the Taliban and its links to terrorist groups pose risks for India.
- The Taliban's resurgence could embolden **Pakistan-based terrorist organizations** to launch attacks against India³.

4. Strategic Calculations:

- India must carefully assess the situation and formulate a **judicious stance** towards the Taliban.
- Balancing security concerns with diplomatic engagement is crucial.
- The Taliban's actions and policies will significantly impact India's security landscape.¹⁷

¹⁶ The Telegraph Daily online, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/jk-security-worry-about-taliban-resurgence-implications-for-india/cid/1828976> (last visited Feb 22,2024).

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In summary, the Taliban's resurgence has **far-reaching implications** for India's security, necessitating strategic vigilance and proactive measures.

CONCLUSION:

India's position on the crisis in Afghanistan has evolved significantly since 1990. In response to emerging security challenges and regional dynamics, India has demonstrated diplomatic, economic, and security engagement with Afghanistan. By fostering ties with diverse factions and supporting infrastructure development, India aims to project influence and ensure a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. However, India's policy choices also face challenges due to regional competitions and the threat of Taliban resurgence. Future endeavours may require India to maintain its delicate balancing act while navigating the complex Afghan landscape to safeguard its strategic and economic interests.

¹⁷ Dalbir Ahlawat and M. Raymond Izarali, Security Implications for India and Pakistan from the Taliban Regime since the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan, Volume 16, Issue 5, universiteitleiden, 20, 2022, <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2022/issue-5/ahlawat-izarali.pdf>.

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