



## POST AFGHANISTAN 2014 OPTIONS FOR INDIA AND IRAN

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Today, Afghanistan is in a state of transition. While international support has been forthcoming, both in terms of financial aid and military assistance, it is Afghanistan's close neighbours who become crucial to the country's future. Pakistan, Iran and the Central Asian Republics (CAR) share borders with Afghanistan, forming the immediate neighbourhood, while China (though connected directly via the narrow Wakhan corridor), India and Russia form the extended neighbourhood.

Russia, owing to the bitter experience of its occupation during 1979-89, is unwilling to get

directly involved in Afghanistan, and China appears focussed only on the economic arena. The CAR, themselves weak and prone to various threats are in no position to provide any direct help. Pakistan, with its known links to Taliban, its role in numerous terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, its quest for a weak and pro-Pakistan regime in Afghanistan, and its known involvement in harbouring top Taliban leaders, does not invoke confidence amongst Afghan policy makers.

This leaves India and Iran – both nations that have cordial relations with Afghanistan and are counted as reliable allies. As Afghanistan looks forward to 2015, two critical events take place this year: the presidential elections, and the security transition.

The present standoff with the US does not auger well for Afghanistan, for in the midst of all this, the Taliban remains strong and resolute. They have rejected peace talks stating that there cannot be any peace talks as long as foreign troops are present on Afghan soil.

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While hoping that the US and its allies will not abandon, Afghanistan has started considering the option of long term cooperation with India and Iran. Afghanistan considers India as its “most trusted ally and an all-weather friend” and Iran is a part of its political and cultural history. Both countries enjoy cordial bilateral relations and share similar interests and concerns with regard to Afghanistan. With the signing of interim deal on Iran’s nuclear program, there are indications of India shedding some restrictions and restraint in conducting business with Iran. Apart from the usual India-Iran oil and natural gas trade, Afghanistan could act as a crucial link in Indo-Iran relations – one that could offer opportunities for both countries and more importantly, lend a crucial lifeline to an Afghanistan that is currently desperately seeking support in the region.

This essay attempts to look at India and Iran’s interests, concerns, vulnerabilities and options for engagement with Afghanistan in the coming decades.

## I Iran and Afghanistan

Iran and Afghanistan share a 930 kilometer border and until the 1857 Treaty of Paris, Herat was an integral part of Iran. Given the history of cultural, economic and religious bonds between the two nations, a crossover of influence across either side is natural. Also, the legacy of the Persian Empire has left marks of influence in Afghanistan, especially in the western provinces. Religiously too, both nations enjoy proximity as Islamic

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nations. Although Afghanistan has a Sunni majority population (80 per cent), it does have a sizeable Shia minority (19 per cent) with the Hazaras, a Persian-speaking ethnic group constituting the majority Shia group. Iran and Afghanistan also share common languages. Dari, the Afghan version of Persian is one of the two official languages in Afghanistan.

Both nations witnessed turbulent histories in contemporary times. As the war in Afghanistan winds down and the ghost of economic and political sanctions on Iran promise to get diluted, both nations have the opportunity to emerge with new hope in coming times. In this context, Iran has the opportunity to open out towards Afghanistan, exploiting its past historical linkages and build a new partnership of mutual growth and prosperity. The journey, however, will be difficult and will come with its share of obstacles.

### Iran and Afghanistan: A SWOT Analysis

As stated earlier, apart from sharing a common border with Afghanistan, Iran shares a rich history and cultural heritage with Afghanistan. Linguistic ties and a significant Shia Muslim population give Iran the required presence and acceptance within Afghanistan.

The common border is a source of major strength, especially as the two countries do not share any major border dispute. Also, Afghanistan’s border management with Iran has always been better as compared to that with Pakistan. It could be attributed to better terrain on the Iran-Afghanistan border and to the efficient border control on the Iranian side. While Afghanistan’s border with Pakistan has been notoriously porous and has facilitated easy infiltration/exfiltration of terrorists, its Iranian border has stable and peaceful for most part.

In 2001, Iran aided the Northern Alliance that overthrew the Taliban regime. Iran was also a significant actor in the Bonn I conference which led to the establishment of an interim

government in Kabul. Tehran pledged \$560 million at the 2002 Tokyo Conference on the Reconstruction of Afghanistan, and \$100 million at the 2006 London Conference. Most of the aid has been spent on reconstruction projects, especially in Herat. Tehran has also endeavoured to create road links between Iran, Afghanistan, and the CAR – which includes a 120 kilometre-long road linking Herat in Afghanistan to Dogharoun in Iran. Iran is also in the process of linking Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Chabahar, which will provide access to maritime routes and also reduce Kabul's dependence on Pakistan. The Afghans acknowledge this assistance and aid and it acts as a major confidence-boosting measure in the future Iran-Afghanistan relations.

As a result of its support to the Northern Alliance, Iran has cultivated good relations with the Tajiks in Afghanistan. The Tajiks, who form the second largest population group in Afghanistan and dominate most positions in the government services, could become a good support base for Iran along with the Hazaras and other Shia communities in Afghanistan.

Iran and India share good relations and are likely to see greater bilateral engagements in the coming years. In the absence of any transit routes via Pakistan in the near future, India considers Iran as its gateway to Afghanistan and the CAR. Iran too appreciates Indian efforts towards stabilising Afghanistan. Both countries acknowledge that their national interests are better served with a politically stable and secure Afghanistan. These common concerns and interests could be a major motivation for Iran's outreach towards Afghanistan in coordination with India.

Iran's support to the Taliban is a major weakness in its efforts to coordinate efforts with India in Afghanistan. It is a paradox that Iran supported the Taliban, given its anti-Shiite ideology and the fact that the Taliban had killed nine Iranian diplomats in 1998, almost bringing Iran to war with the

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extremists. However, the Tehran-Taliban relationship had more to do with Iran despising the presence of the US to its Eastern flank.

The absence of a consistent policy towards Afghanistan has been another weakness. Again, Iran's on and off support to the Taliban is a major factor and is seen as adversarial by the Afghan government. It also fails to provide Iran the required leverage in Afghanistan despite the huge amount of economic aid and reconstruction projects undertaken by Tehran in the country.

The lack of resolve to take the lead in the resolution of the Afghan crisis is also seen as a weak spot in Iran's engagement with the country. While the Iran-US standoff over the nuclear issue can be attributed as one reason, Iran could have undertaken a more proactive role in the Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the lack of robust security cooperation with Afghanistan has been a hiccup for Iran in developing better bilateral relations with Afghanistan. It is only in August 2013 that the two countries signed the 'border and security agreement'.

The current Iran-US rapprochement on the Iranian nuclear program could be a great opportunity to enhance Iran's engagement in Afghanistan. Better ties with the US could open new, shorter routes for international aid and supply via Iran as an alternative to the presently used circuitous route through the CAR or the terror-infested routes in Pakistan. It would save money for the US and its allies,

generate transit revenue for Iran, and ensure a healthy rate of supplies in Afghanistan.

With a possible deal on the nuclear issue and the retraction of sanctions, Iran and Afghanistan could also explore greater security cooperation, including possibly providing military equipment to the ANSF in at a later stage.

Iran's efforts in economic aid and reconstruction projects have been viewed positively, especially the western regions like Herat province. Iran could in fact be termed as critical to the economic revival of Afghanistan. Iran could well exploit this by pumping in more money and projects to win goodwill in Afghanistan.

Additionally, Iran has traditional ties with the CAR. With a significant Shia Muslim population, especially in Tajikistan, Iran has always strived to enhance its cultural ties with CAR. With Afghanistan as a bridge, it could well use good relations and connectivity to enhance not only cultural and religious ties but also use the territory to connect oil and gas pipelines towards China and to the Persian Gulf.

Prominent among the threats is the security and welfare of the Shiite population in Afghanistan. Iran has not forgotten the 1998 massacre of the Hazaras in Mazar-e-Sharif that almost led to a military conflict with the Taliban regime. Cases of Hazaras being targeted and prosecuted in Afghanistan remain a threat, especially so if there is a return of Taliban to Kabul post the withdrawal of international troops.

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Also, Afghan refugees in Iran have been for long been a point of conflict between the two countries. According to the UN, there are over 2 million refugees in Iran. It is said to have an "adverse social and economic" impact on the Iranian society by draining Iran's economy by a sizeable measure, coupled with the threat of Taliban-like elements infiltrating into the country.

Water-sharing has been another point of contention between the two nations. With Afghanistan building a number of dams on Helmand River, the water supply into Iran, especially its southern and eastern provinces is threatened, which could be a cause of friction in the future.

Drug-trafficking is another source of friction and a real threat to Iran-Afghanistan relations. Afghanistan is one of the largest producers of opium in the world. Iran, with its easy connectivity to Europe via Turkey is said to be a safe and convenient route of transit for almost 50 per cent of Afghan drugs. Drug addiction among Iranian youth too is becoming a major social problem and the Iranian government is reported to be incurring a loss of up to \$10 billion in its anti-drug campaign.

Iran, unlike the US and its allies, does not have the luxury of leaving Afghanistan given the geographical construct. It equally realises Afghanistan's multiple and complex problems and the fact that they cannot be resolved soon. As Iran hopes to emerge from the shadows of international sanctions, Afghanistan presents an excellent opportunity to not only expand its influence eastwards but also be seen as a responsible regional player. Weaknesses in Iran-Afghanistan relations hover around Iran's on-off support to the Taliban. This too, in the context of the US withdrawal, would become redundant. The threats too, though significant, are not big enough to derail their bilateral relationship. On the contrary, Iran, building on its existing strengths, has a host of opportunities to be viewed as a major ally in Afghanistan.

## II India and Afghanistan

India and Afghanistan share a long history of cultural, civilizational and economic ties. Both countries shared borders till 1947 when Pakistan was carved out of British India. Among the Afghan population, even today, India is considered the most popular country with most opinion polls giving over 70 per cent votes to India. India's support to the Afghan government and its consistent anti-Taliban stance has been always appreciated in Afghanistan.

Like Iran, India supported, funded and armed the Northern Alliance in the fight to overthrow the Taliban in 2001. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has called India as the "most trusted ally and an all-weather friend," and giving credence to the confidence that Kabul has in New Delhi, India was the first country Afghanistan signed its Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) with. India is popular not only among the Hazaras and Tajiks, but also among a large number of Pashtuns. It's over \$2 billion aid to Afghanistan in reconstruction and welfare projects too have been well received.

Both nations share their concerns over terror and have been equally inflicted by it in the past decades; Afghanistan through the Taliban and India through Pakistan-sponsored terrorists in Jammu and Kashmir. Despite not committing militarily in Afghanistan, India has suffered from Taliban terror more than once, whether it was the hijacking of the Indian Airline flight IC814 to Kandahar in 1998, the multiple times the Indian embassy and missions have been targeted in Kabul, or even the attacks on Indian engineers working on reconstruction projects in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan appreciates the Indian sacrifices and commitment to the Afghan cause.

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takes place in Afghanistan. India thus has the opportunity to enhance its engagement with Afghanistan, building on its goodwill and support and create a new partnership. With no common borders and Pakistan in between, the journey is going to be difficult. It is therefore essential to run a SWOT analysis to examine India's future engagement with Afghanistan.

### India and Afghanistan: A SWOT Analysis

India's historical links, its goodwill across the length and breadth of Afghanistan, as well as its reputation of being a benign power with no extra-territorial ambitions is the biggest strength in India's relations with Afghanistan. As mentioned above, the government and people in the country appreciate India's support to Afghan peace processes and the generous aid and assistance in reconstruction projects.

India's consistent stance vis-à-vis the Taliban is another source of strength in bilateral relations. India, despite being side-lined in the London Conference in 2010 for not recognising the difference between good and bad Taliban, has maintained its consistent anti-Taliban position, something that is well appreciated in Afghanistan.

India's aid to Afghanistan, and reconstruction projects too, are a major factor in the bilateral relationship. India is the fifth-largest donor in Afghanistan after the US, UK, Japan and Germany, and is the largest non-traditional

donor in Afghanistan. This, coupled with the sacrifices made by Indians in building these projects too is great source of strength.

The absence of direct land or maritime connectivity with Afghanistan is perhaps the biggest obstacle to enhancing bilateral engagement between India and Afghanistan. With an unrelenting Pakistan and an isolated Iran given the international sanctions, India has felt often felt handicapped in transporting basic supplies, and/or equipment and manpower for reconstruction projects.

Another weakness labelled against India is that India has not been able to leverage its goodwill in Afghanistan. “Sitting on the sidelines,” “service provider rather than a stake holder” are some of the accusations labelled against India.

India’s failure to protect its embassy and missions in Afghanistan too has often been quoted as its weaknesses. India’s reluctance to send regular troops after attacks on its embassy in 2008 and 2010, even to protect its mission, has been interpreted as a weak Indian stand.

India’s formulation of its Afghan policy via the Pakistan prism is also seen as a weakness. Often, India has ceded to Pakistan’s concerns not only in India’s security engagement in Afghanistan, but also in its overall Afghan policy.

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The SPA signed with Afghanistan is key opportunity for India. While signing the SPA, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated that India would “stand by Afghanistan” when foreign troops withdraw from the country in 2014. The SPA promises to provide an institutional framework towards India’s assistance towards Afghan capacity building in the areas of education, development, and people-to-people contacts, as also in the training, equipping and capacity building programmes for the Afghan National Security Forces. The SPA also promises a new dimension in economic relations. India has already started working on it by enhancing the scope of military assistance to Afghan Armed forces in the form of training and equipment.

India’s investments in Afghanistan are another great opportunity in enhancing bilateral relations. The winning of the contract for estimated reserves of 1.8 billion tonnes of iron ore at Hajigak by a consortium of Indian firms led by the Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL), as well as other projects and investments are ideal opportunities to galvanise Indian support in Afghanistan. The ‘Heart of Asia’ initiative by India to draw global finances and investments for Afghanistan presents one such opportunity.

India has for long sought good relations with the CAR. With Iran under sanctions and Afghanistan embroiled in war, India found it difficult to enhance its engagement with the CAR. With the possibility of both the issues to get resolved in the coming years, it presents an excellent opportunity for India to enhance its engagement with the CAR, especially in the context of energy supplies.

The ‘New Silk Route’ initiative proposed by the US to make Afghanistan a bridge for trade and transit between South, Central and West Asia offers a great opportunity for India. India has always felt left out in the great

game of energy trade and transit of Central Asia, especially as the China-funded Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) corridors (roads and pipelines) bypass India. If and when the New Silk Route initiative takes off, it would provide India an opportunity to seek its share in the Central Asian energy resources.

As mentioned in context of Iran too, good traditional ties between Iran and India coupled with possibility of lifting restrictions on Iran present a good opportunity to leverage their combined support in Afghanistan.

India has major concerns regarding the future of peace and security in Afghanistan. A weak government in Afghanistan is a threat to Indian interests. It may result in fragmented control of the government over the country, with parts of the country, especially the South and East under the Taliban influence. In the absence of US-led troops in the country, an unrelenting Pakistan and a resurgent Taliban, it could become a major concern for India, not only for its assets in the country, but also its spill over effect on Indian territory. A political and security vacuum would thus constitute a direct threat to India.

Any major attack on Indian missions or projects akin to the July 2008 attack on the Indian Embassy may force India, under pressure at home, to send an armed force contingent for protection or a decision to scale down its presence in Afghanistan. Both will not be in long term Indian interests in Afghanistan.

A return of the Taliban to power, though rather unlikely, could threaten Indian interests and result in an influx of foreign fighters and an upsurge in violence in Jammu & Kashmir, like in the 1990s. Also, any collaboration between the Taliban and Pakistan could relieve Pakistani forces deployed along the Af-Pak border, enhancing Pakistan's conventional military readiness and availability across Indian border.

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India, like Iran does not have the option of abandoning Afghanistan. Despite the potential threats listed above, it is unlikely that the threats would manifest in the stated manner in near future. Afghanistan has come a long way since the days of the Taliban rule of the 1990s. The US and its allies are unlikely to abandon the country, and more importantly, Afghanistan as a nation has moved up in improving its socio-economic indicators to a degree that the return to the dark days of the Taliban rule is an unlikely option. India has the advantages of numerous opportunities, some already being implemented and some in the offing. The SPA with Afghanistan and the prospects of India and Iran jointly assisting Afghanistan hold promises for the future.

### III

#### **Policy Options for India and Iran in Afghanistan**

Afghanistan presents a good opportunity, both for India and Iran. While India looks at Afghanistan more from the prism of regional peace and security, for Iran, Afghanistan presents an opportunity to establish its credentials as a responsible regional player. With Pakistan unlikely to provide direct land transit to Afghanistan, Iran becomes crucial to India's engagement in Afghanistan. Thus Iran, India and Afghanistan could engage fruitfully in a constructive regional engagement in the Afghan context, beyond

2014. Some of the policy options for India and Iran could be:

- India has already signed the SPA with Afghanistan. With the possible easing of economic sanctions as also rapprochement with the US, Iran could expedite the signing of a SPA with Afghanistan.
- India and Iran could then jointly work out a security cooperation arrangement for Afghanistan which could entail training, equipping and maintenance of the ANSF. With Iran in the loop, the question of connectivity would be overcome while India could get the required space to assist Afghanistan as per the SPA. Any tacit or overt support from the US would be welcome too. It could also result in exerting pressure on Pakistan in its support of the Taliban or efforts to undermine future Afghan governments.
- Iran and India could also explore a trilateral trade and transit agreement with Afghanistan. It would not only facilitate movement of goods through the Iran-Afghanistan land route but also make Pakistan's efforts to restrict the movement of Indian goods through Pakistani territory to Afghanistan, irrelevant.
- India and Iran could cooperate to expedite the development of Iran's Chabahar port as also the missing road link from Chabahar to Afghanistan that would facilitate quicker and efficient trade. India has already committed \$100 million towards the development of the port.
- The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline and the Iran-Pakistan-India oil pipeline have been non-starters for India due to the Pakistan factor. With the existing dynamics unlikely to change soon, India could look at a new alignment to get Turkmen gas via Iran – explore a Turkmenistan-Iran-India (TII) pipeline. While

Turkmenistan and Iran are connected in the wider pipeline network across West Asia, this connectivity would require an additional loop towards Chabahar which India and Iran could jointly explore. This would provide India with the CAR energy and Iran with an additional revenue from transit fees.

- India and Iran could also develop a rail link from Chabahar to the Afghan border and further on to Hajigak mines in Bamiyan province. This 900-kilometer rail link would help India transport iron ore from Afghanistan and earn Iran substantial transit revenue.
- Both Iran and India have an excellent track record of reconstruction aid in Afghanistan, as well as cordial relations and good will among the population. As a conscious effort, India and Iran could, in conjunction with the Afghan government, identify suitable provinces or parts of them in Central, North or West Afghanistan, which could then be taken up by India or Iran or collectively for all round development. International aid, Afghan governmental support and aid from India and Iran could be routed through a consortium which will then undertake development projects and implement it as a model for modern development.

While Afghanistan looks at 2015 with cautious optimism and perhaps apprehension, India and Iran stand out as the best allies for the country.

Together, India and Iran can forge a long term partnership with Afghanistan which would not only ensure peace and security in the country, but also promote Indian and Iranian interests in the region. An India-Iran collaboration in Afghanistan could be a win-win situation for all.

