

A See-Saw Relationship: An Overview of Afghanistan's Ties with India and Pakistan

Written by Hargun Sethi

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HARGUN SETHI, AUG 6 2020

Afghanistan has been a key player in Asian geopolitics owing to its geostrategic and geopolitical location. Being situated at the crossroads of the Middle East, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, it has been a transit and transport hub since the ancient Silk route. In the context of global affairs, its central location and borders with six other nations including Iran, Pakistan, China, Turkmenistan have made it a hot-bed for conflict and cooperation. In this regard, the withdrawal of Soviet forces from the Afghan Civil war has considerably changed Afghanistan's role and position in the whole of Asia. Moreover, the emergence of various Mujahidin parties sponsored by neighbouring countries and interference from outside powers has turned Afghanistan into total havoc.

Amidst all the chaos, both the neighbouring countries of India and Pakistan have been vital for Afghanistan in restructuring and changing its political landscape. From providing military, diplomatic and financial support on part of the Indian side, to attempt to hold peace talks between insurgent groups and the government, while at the same time providing a safe haven to these extremist groups on the Pakistani side; the bilateral relationship with each of the two nations have been of prime importance in Afghanistan across various regimes since the late 1990s.

On this subject, the paper seeks to analyse the inversely proportional trend in Afghanistan's bilateral relationships with India and Pakistan across different governments. In this respect, the paper will elucidate and describe the evolution of Afghanistan's relationship with both India and Pakistan across three major governments since 1996; starting from the Taliban rule (from 1996 to 2001) followed by the Karzai government (from 2001 to 2014) and finally reaching the current government under Ashraf Ghani (2014 onwards). The paper will carry out this analysis by reviewing various agreements, deals and statements offered by heads of all the three countries in different phases. By doing this the paper will conclude validating the main argument of uniquely contradicting bilateral ties of both the countries with Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's relationship with India and Pakistan can be best described through the metaphor of a see-saw; where an improvement in the relationship with one of them comes with a trade-off with the other. With regards to this when it comes to Afghan's foreign policies with India and Pakistan, looking through the prisms of bilateral relations is not enough. There is always an inherent connection and correlation which deeply influences its policies with the latter two. From the post-Cold War era through modern-day, Kabul has varied in its closeness to India and Pakistan, with gains by one side coming at the expense of the other.[1] It is because of this swinging orientation that Kabul's Indo-Pak policy has been one of the most debatable topics in Afghan foreign policy. Several discussions and dialogues have surfaced within Afghan governments over how to best balance between Delhi-Islamabad. Whether it's more beneficial to tilt towards India or approach Pakistan for peace and security in order to safeguard and cope up with its internal issues. The shifting patterns between the two policy paths have gone through numerous variations with each government. However, in theoretical terms, the Indo-Pak policy can be labelled as a mix of idealism, pragmatism, and realism.[2] This can be illustrated by examining the following phases of Afghanistan's domestic politics.

First Phase: Taliban Reign (1996-2001)

The first phase is characterised by the rule of one of the most prominent Islamic, fundamentalist, insurgent

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organizations- the Taliban, which is often regarded as the heart of the resistance against the establishment of a democratic Afghan government. The Afghan Taliban emerged in the Afghan political landscape after capturing major districts of Kandahar, Herat and Kabul, and thereafter declared Afghanistan as an Islamic emirate ruled by Mullah Mohammed Omar – the commander of Afghan Taliban[3] which changed the international position of Afghanistan drastically.

In terms of India, the ties were close to zero. From the Indian viewpoint, Taliban was a Pakistani-backed Islamic extremist militant group which threatened the basic tenets of democracy and freedom for the people of Afghanistan and denied them any humanitarian rights. This was seen as a hindrance to Afghanistan's path to democracy and peace; something that the Indian government had hoped for after the Soviet withdrawal.[4] Moreover, its close association with the Pakistani Army and the ISI made Indian security and military experts suspicious of its intentions concerning India, particularly regarding the long-standing Kashmir issue with Pakistan. Thus, India did not recognize the Taliban as a legitimate government in Afghanistan and therefore, did not extend a diplomatic arm towards its regime. Similarly, the Taliban government failed to develop diplomatic relations with Delhi. This was because, since 1994 when the Taliban started to gain power in Afghanistan, India continued to support Jamiat-e-Islami and the Northern Alliance.[5] As the Taliban was in direct battle with the Northern Alliance, India's stance made the Taliban excessively hostile towards it. This, in turn, affected the Taliban's mindset with regards to India. As a result, Indo-Afghan relations suffered a backlash during this period.

On the other hand, this period marked the first time in Afghan history that Kabul's bilateral relations with Islamabad were at a much higher precedence than with New Delhi. In accordance with this, after Taliban came to power, the first direct military contacts between the ISI's Afghan Bureau and the Taliban were reportedly established with the dispatch of a small team of Pakistani military advisers to the former Afghan Army base of Rishikor, southwest of Kabul.[6] Many such bases were formed along the porous Afghan-Pak border, popularly known as the Durand Line. This border, thus, became a significant aspect for both Afghanistan and Pakistan during the Taliban rule. Likewise, Pakistan provided "military, diplomatic, and financial assistance to the Pashtun Taliban government." [7] In return, Pakistan used the Afghan soil as a launching pad and a training centre of extremists for its covert operations especially against India. Therefore, this period saw blooming bilateral ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan owing to their prolonged affiliation since Taliban's first military operation in 1994 along the Pakistani border, for which it enjoyed extensive support from the Pakistani government and military. Comprehensively, this period witnessed a negligible and unpleasant relationship between Afghanistan and India, whereas an extremely prosperous partnership between Pakistan and Afghanistan, thus, justifying the claim of an inverse association between the two relationships.

Second Phase: Karzai Government (1996-2014)

The second phase started after the U.S. toppled the Taliban regime in 2001 and installed a new government headed by Hamid Karzai. During his term, there was a complete shift in Kabul's Indo-Pak policy which turned out to be very much pro-India. Military relations between the two nations started gaining significance in 2007 with the deployment of a military team. Further in 2009 Afghanistan signed one of its first strategic agreements with India, which included the acceptance of Afghanistan's nearly six-year-old request for India to train Afghan security forces.[8] Kabul also approached India with a request for the purchase of weapons and other military equipment. This included "150 battle tanks, 120 (105 mm) field guns, a large number of 82 mm mortars, one medium-lift transport aircraft (AN-32), two squadrons of medium-lift and attack helicopters and a large number of trucks." Moreover, more than 1,400 Afghans were sent to India for military training.[9] In addition to this, India began offering significant bilateral aid to Afghanistan. As of 2012, India had spent USD\$1 billion in development funds, with a promise to spend an additional USD\$1 billion in the years to come.[10] This has placed India among the top five bilateral donors to Afghanistan, which far exceeds the outlay offered by Pakistan. Owing to India's attempt of establishing a democratic government in Afghanistan, it also provided extensive financial aid for the construction of the new Afghan parliament in 2005 under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.[11] The building was later inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in December 2015; linking the site of Afghanistan's nascent democracy to India and the Indian people. All these policy measures taken forth by both India and Afghanistan hinted at the beginning of a thriving relationship during Karzai's government with foreign aid and military-to-military diplomacy being at the forefront.

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Contrary to Indo-Afghan relations, the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship moved from being robust to a total mess. This was because both the countries had provided breeding grounds to terrorist/militant groups opposing each other's government.[12] This, in turn, affected the strategic mindsets amongst leaders in both the countries; who became wary of each other's actions. In this regard, as mentioned by Ahmed Rashid, Pakistan actively blamed Afghanistan for being involved in supporting insurgencies among the Pashtuns in Balochistan and Tribal Belt of Pakistan, through its consulates in Kandahar and Jalalabad.[13] Pakistan also complained against Afghanistan for not taking any action against the leadership of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), "an entity which facilitates, executes and controls terrorist attacks in Pakistan from Afghanistan controlled territories." [14] On the other hand, the Karzai government accused Pakistan of playing a double game by being an ally of the US/NATO combined operation of the Global War on Terror, and at the same time nurturing, launching and harbouring an insurgent/resistant Taliban within its territories. Owing to these reasons, a proxy war started between Afghanistan and Pakistan in the Af-Pak region during the Karzai era which exists even today. Even in Karzai's second term, Afghan-Pak relations suffered significantly. This was primarily because of Afghanistan's rosy and romanticised relationship with India, especially in terms of their security and strategic relations.[15] As a consequence, in retaliation to Afghanistan's cold behaviour towards Pakistan and the opposite with regards to India, Pakistani officials began taking an aggressive stand against moderate Taliban leaders who initiated and opened peaceful talks with Karzai's government. This further deteriorated the bilateral relationship between Islamabad and Kabul from the period of 2001 to 2014. Therefore, by evaluating the tenure of Karzai's government, it is safe to say that there was a role reversal in Afghanistan's Indo-Pak policy; where New Delhi and Kabul hit it off with an expansive and strong relationship, while Kabul and Islamabad hit a rock bottom.

Third Phase: Ghani's Presidency (2014-present)

The last and contemporary phase of Afghan politics began in 2014 after the formation of the National Unity Government under the Presidency of Ashraf Ghani. Ghani's policy towards India and Pakistan can be classified into two stages which are illustrated below.

In the pursuit of pleasing Pakistan to stop insecurity and bring enduring peace to Afghanistan, Ghani compromised Kabul's relationship with New Delhi for a few initial months after he came to power. This marked the first stage of his policy towards Modi's newly elected government. He did not visit India for 7 months and also declined the provision for heavy Indian weaponry which was much welcomed by the previous government.[16] He finally paid his official visit to India in 2015, way after visiting Pakistan, China and the US. This delay was interpreted as a reprioritization in Afghanistan's foreign policy calculus towards India.[17] Furthermore, during his visit to Beijing Ghani indicated "that he viewed India's role in Afghanistan as an aid-provider, but not in the sphere of security." [18] This came as a surprise to India as it marked a sharp contrast to the warmth and emphasis laid down by his predecessor, Karzai, who in turn considered India as a critical security partner. India, in return, refused to invest more in the trilateral transport infrastructure project in Chabahar, Iran due to the situation in Afghanistan. India also sent a low profile delegation to the Heart of Asia Conference in Beijing in 2014 and then to the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference for Afghanistan (RECCA) 2015 in Kabul.[19] These limited interactions between India and Afghanistan suggest a steady decline in their relations caused due to desperate efforts by Ghani's government to mend ties with Pakistan.

However, in the second stage, things changed significantly due to Pakistan's inability to abide by its promise to take concrete measures against the Taliban or bring them to the negotiating table. As a result, Kabul tried to again reach out to New Delhi to put their bilateral relationship back on the strategic track. It, thus, repeatedly requested the Indian side to hold meetings of the Strategic Partnership Council under the Strategic Partnership Agreement.[20] Though India was reluctant in the beginning, it did give in and held prominent meetings with officials from Afghanistan. This resulted in a revival of smooth relations between the two countries. Ever since then, substantial discussions have ranged on cooperation and assistance in various sectors including the health, education, agriculture, disaster management, power sector and electoral management.[21] Moreover, in a meeting in 2015 both sides "expressed determination to work together, along with the international community, to combat and defeat the scourge of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations." [22] Recent incidents of terrorist activities such as the rise in insecurity within Afghani territories, highest-ever number of civilian casualties, the fall of many Afghan districts into Taliban hands,

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and the attacks on Pathankot airbase and Uri army base in India have become magnetic reasons for increased Indo-Afghan partnership against Pakistan's vicious role behind such instances. The bilateral exchanges between Kabul and Delhi have also increased since December 2015. Both the heads- Ashraf Ghani and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, have met more than five times. For trade, both the countries have been working "on strengthening alternative routes, including the air cargo corridor launched in June 2017, as well as the development of the Chabahar sea route connecting India, Iran and Afghanistan with Central Asian countries." [23] In terms of security cooperation, India has "delivered four Mi-25 (Mi-24D) helicopters and three HAL Cheetah light utility helicopters to the Afghan Air Force (AAF) in December 2016 and has already signed deals for future supply of arms and ammunition." [24] Looking at these developments, it is clear that Indo-Afghan relations have reached greater heights and have been successful in living up to the expectations of the people of India and Afghanistan.

Moving to the other side, when Ashraf Ghani took office in 2014, he made genuine efforts to resume the cordiality and brotherhood of Afghan-Pak relations. Subsequently, there was a tilt towards Pakistan with an aim to boost their bilateral relationship. Because of this, during Ghani's visit to Pakistan in November 2014, he commented that "the hostility between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been buried in the past two days" and also avoided making any adverse comments on ISI's support to the Afghan Taliban and the anti-India terrorist outfit, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). [25] Economic cooperation was also enhanced between the two countries with the signing of several trade agreements aimed at reducing tariffs and granting each other preferential trade status. [26] Ghani also sought close ties with Pakistan's security establishment and instituted specific initiatives to alleviate Pakistani concerns over cross-border terrorism. Adding to this, Kabul started sending Afghan soldiers to Pakistan Military Academy for training and signed a memorandum of understanding on intelligence sharing with Pakistan's Intelligence Service (ISI). [27] In cooperation with ISI, it worked hard to crack down Afghanistan-based groups targeting Pakistan and launched military operations against Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Afghanistan and killed many of its leaders. Pakistan, in turn, managed to bring Taliban representatives to the negotiation table in Murree on July 7th 2015; denoting Pakistan's first-ever attempt to bring peace to the Afghans. [28] Thus, in this stage due to Afghanistan's bold move of stepping away from India, bilateral visits between Pakistan and Afghanistan increased to a level never seen in the past 15 years.

This pleasant phase in Afghan-Pak relations did not last very long. The fledgeling Afghan government-Taliban peace process "immediately derailed after the announcement of the death of Mullah Omar." [29] This sabotaged any possibility of ensuring peace in Afghanistan and also became the starting point of the second stage of Afghan-Pak relations under Ghani's government which continues till today. This stage is characterised by a fresh and deadly wave of bloody attacks in Afghanistan, including attacks on Kabul Airport and the Afghan Parliament. Ashraf Ghani harshly criticized Pakistan for steering the attacks and renounced their relationship stating that "Pakistan is in a continuous unannounced war with Afghanistan" and that "the biggest challenge for Afghanistan is not the Taliban or al-Qaeda but the state-to-state relations with Pakistan." [30] Pakistan did not respond well to these accusations and as a result, serious skirmishes between the two border securities forces resurfaced. Besides, frequent allegations were exchanged pertaining to the illegal border crossing or illegal rising of structures on either side of the border. In the recent sixth Heart of Asia Conference held in Amritsar, Ghani rejected \$500 million in aid from Pakistan and further commented that "We want dignified relations, not charity." He also added that "If we are allowed [to live] peacefully we can find \$500 million and if [there is peace] for five years we would be in a situation to give others \$500 million." [31] In response, Sartaj Aziz, Pakistan's foreign affairs adviser and top representative at the conference, denied Ghani's remarks as "baseless accusations" and said that Ghani's statement was meant to please India. Such statements and actions by officials from both sides indicate the lowest ebb of bilateral relations between Kabul and Islamabad in the last 15 years, particularly during the rule of the National Unity Government in Afghanistan. Hence, in the second and current stage of Afghan-Pak relations, there is a growing rift between the two due to the building up of mistrust and frustration against one another. After analysing Ghani's Indo-Pak policy, a trade off-trend is evident between Afghanistan's relationship with India and Pakistan. It started with determining rapprochement towards Pakistan and subsequent estrangement from India. Thereafter, it changed 360 degrees with stronger and friendly relations with India and a weaker and hostile relationship with Pakistan.

Conclusion

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In conclusion, after a thorough analysis of each phase in Afghan politics since 1996, it can be said with conviction that Afghanistan's policy towards India has always been the antithesis of its approach towards Pakistan. In this regard, this paper has highlighted numerous policies that indicate such a distinctive and interesting trend in Afghan's Indo-Pak policy. One of the reasons that can be attributed to this pattern is the dynamics of international rivalry between India and Pakistan. In this respect, it can be argued that all the disparate tensions and disputes between the two have led to contradicting and opposing interests in Afghanistan; leading to inversely proportional bilateral relationships with the two nations with a general pattern of India being in the 'good books' and Pakistan juggling between the 'good and the bad'. However, as this paper focused on a historical review of the policies with the two nations from Afghanistan's standpoint, the possible reasons explaining the same can inspire further analytical and in-depth research in Afghanistan's tangled history with India and Pakistan.

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