

## **INDIA AND IRAN'S AFGHANISTAN PLAN**

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### **Abstract**

As Afghanistan has been victim of long and destructive Taliban movement, it is directly as well as indirectly influenced by external and powerful actors of the world like US and others which not only influenced its internal politics but also influenced its foreign engagements. Being at the pivotal junction of the West Asia, Central Asia and South Asia, Afghanistan has acquired an important place in the foreign policy framework of its neighbouring nations. Being Iran's natural neighbour Afghanistan is one of the integral part of its foreign policy, however for India Afghanistan not only stands as an important neighbour but also as an essential junction of its foreign policy towards the region and beyond. The problem of Taliban and the subsequent circumstances has altogether brought India and Iran on one board i.e. reconstruction and development of Afghanistan. Today for India Afghanistan is not just a material producer but also a regional balance equalizer, to counter the influence of China and Pakistan, trading partner and most importantly the essential element of its anti-terrorism policy. Therefore India has always maintained to keep Indo-Afghanistan relations at peace and pace. For such an adventure of India, Iran stands a natural partner who not only shares Afghanistan boundary but regards Afghanistan peace and development a part of Iran's National interests. Since the 2014's US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Iran has showed hope and interest in supporting the Afghanistan's development initiative wherein India is a major contingent. India and Iran are widening their sphere of involvement in the Afghanistan region on their basic essentialities. The paper analyses the importance of Afghanistan for both India and Iran and the hindrances thereof. The focus of paper will be to discuss in detail the developmental efforts of both nations and their level of involvement in the Afghanistan region and most importantly highlight their future possibilities as well.

**Key Words:** Geo-strategic, Bilateral, Belt and Road Initiative, Reconstruction, South Asia, US withdrawal.

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## Introduction

Afghanistan has a unique strategic location surrounded by India, Pakistan, Iran, Central Asian deserts and China in the Hindu Kush region. Afghanistan once regarded to be the buffer state in the 'Great Game' between British Empire (from Indian Territory) and Russian Empire in its region as well as still continues to exist as a gateway to Central Asia. Besides being strategically located Afghanistan holds a special importance as far as its natural resources are concerned. Afghanistan contains a vast range of minerals like copper, iron, gold, cobalt, rare earth metals, lithium and others. According to Ex-US Central Command General David Petraeus there is a stunning potential (referring to the natural assets) in Afghanistan and will remain centre of interest of both near and proximate neighbourhood (Antony Loewenstein, 2015). Such factors accompanied by the national impediments of its neighbours make Afghanistan an integral part of their respective foreign policies as well. However due to decade long instability (internally as well as externally) Afghanistan had witnessed great loss be that Humanitarian or economic. The civilian population had suffered widespread human rights abuses as a result of continuing conflict (UNHR, 2017).

From conquerors, wars, agreements to famine, economic turbulence, Taliban movement and external interventions Afghanistan has witnessed them all. Thus rendering Afghanistan not only economically weak, more dependent, and prone to external influences, but also makes it more vulnerable nation in the region. After US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 arguments were mixed i.e., some regarded it a necessary as well as better option for the sovereignty of Afghanistan as an individual nation and for others Afghanistan became more vulnerable with respect to its internal stability and national security. And the post 2014 Afghanistan is the reflection of combination of good and the bad, even in existence of conflict Afghanistan is gradually although not rapidly moving towards development. Afghanistan has managed to make strong, sustained health gains despite continuing insecurity (WB, 2018). Afghanistan's economy is the world's 108<sup>th</sup> largest with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of \$64.08 billion (IMF, 2016). Due to its geo-strategic location Afghanistan has a unique place in the foreign policy framework of its neighbourhood like India, Iran, Central Asian States, Russia, Pakistan and others. Especially India and Iran have developed a special bond with Afghanistan in the varied dimensions and this not only benefits them but also brings them together. This paper is an

attempt to outline this bond in line with the benefits that the involved nations attain along with the bond these nations develop while working together in Afghanistan (Chris Ogden, 2014)

### **1. India's Interests in Afghanistan**

India is an aspiring power in the South Asia and as of now has managed to be the fastest growing economy in the region (IMF, 2017). Besides gaining economic leverage, India has tried to maintain its relations as well as influence in the region and beyond for which India has developed its foreign policy so as to ensure the maintenance of age old relations along with establishing new relations. The present Indian Foreign Policy is a mixture of economic and strategic goals particularly for its engagement in West Asia and India has tried to strengthen its goal of 'extending influence' as well as securing economic interests on the side-lines of India's relations with the region. In these cross-lines Afghanistan stands as an inseparable junction in India's engagement in the West Asian region. As being an unexploited natural resource hub as well as an extremely volatile country Afghanistan has been an important part of Indian Foreign Policy as well and India has always maintained a friendly stand in favour of Afghanistan. India also has some interests and concerns pertaining to Afghanistan that are based on some 'Arcs' which are interlinked and interdependent, these include:

- Arc of Prosperity,
- Arc of Energy,
- Arc of Instability, &
- Arc of Communication.

Being the gateway for Central Asian States and the rest region and source of much unexploited natural resources is of great attraction for its neighbours. For India besides getting access to some natural bounties at cheaper rates Afghanistan can be a reliable and prospectus market for Indian goods. This is the strategic junction of Arc of Prosperity that highlights the regional importance of Afghanistan that directly benefits India by achieving trade/ exports surplus. India is highly economically active in Afghanistan since 2001 and is involved in investment in services (43%), construction (41%) and industries (16%) (MEA, 2017). The Arc of prosperity starts from Indian Territory from the North-West and gets extended to Afghanistan and its neighbourhood. India's trade engagements via this arc directly signify importance of Afghanistan as this country ensures

alternatives for India's economic adventures not only in Afghanistan but in Iran, Russia, Central Asian States and even Europe (Chris Ogden, 2014).

India being a fastest growing economy needs to expand its energy bonds beyond the West Asian region to the extreme of Caspian Sea region. All these nations are the essential points of Arc of Energy and even though Afghanistan being less developed lies in the middle of this arc therefore for India to keep Afghanistan on board is the essential foreign policy engagement (Rajiv Sikri, 2009).

Afghanistan has a long history of turbulence, vulnerability and instability. The country has faced the disastrous foreign interventions as well as violence due to non-state actors active in the country as within the region. Being one of the nearest neighbours of India, Afghanistan holds a special place in India's Strategic concerns. The threat of non-state actors added by Indo-Pak conflict makes it imperative for India to have a better relation with Afghanistan so as to remain vigilant on the insecurities that can evolve in the region (RSN Singh, 2010). This is the India's Afghanistan engagement via the Arc of Instability, which highlight the instability and volatility of the region starting from Afghanistan and has its imprints through the Middle East. India's Afghanistan vision is a long-term goal of its policy and stand on terrorism.

India's relation with Afghanistan is the outcome of combination of the factors and interests outlined on the basis of arcs of economy, energy and instability but the Arc of Communication completes all other arcs. India aims to connect to the rest of the region via the West Asia in which Afghanistan is the connector between South Asia, Central Asian States and West Asia. Henceforth Afghanistan is an integral element of arc of communication and connectivity in reference of India's foreign policy agendas.

### **Iran's Interests in Afghanistan**

Afghanistan share a 936kms long boundary line with Iran and there is a famous saying 'we can change the partner but not the neighbour', meaning there by that territorial neighbours are prone to be influenced by each other very easily. Afghanistan for Iran is a nearest, natural market for its goods. Iran exports a variety of essential goods to Afghanistan including food, medicine, oil and

cement; and also provides about \$50 million in annual anti-narcotic aid (Michael Kugelman, 2014). Iran's involvement in Afghanistan can alleviate economic and political pressures (like post US withdrawal from Nuclear Deal, US sanctions, domestic-economic requirements). Iran exports constitute about 75% of traded goods to Afghanistan (Hadi Soleimanpur, 2014).

The West Asian region is overwhelmingly covered by the rich energy reservoirs particularly Iran that constitutes to be one of the major oil producer, has 3<sup>rd</sup> largest oil reserves and also has 2<sup>nd</sup> largest natural gas reserves in the world and its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) constitutes its oil sector (Trade Economics, 2018). However Iran's constant battle on diverse issues including regional strife with its neighbours, its nuclear history, its opposition to US interests in the region and others has resulted in hindrances for Iran to use its natural assets more effectively that directly impacts its domestic scenario and economic strength as well. As Afghanistan exists at a unique triangle of energy producers-Iran, Qatar and Turkmenistan, it naturally becomes a part of current energy politics. Moreover for Iran Afghanistan exists as a corridor to China and South Asia to secure more markets and canalise its interests as well (Robert Toscano, 2012).

For Iran Afghanistan is not just its economic alternative but due to Afghanistan's geo-strategic location Iran's vital security issues are directly linked with Afghanistan and Iran's foreign policy has always given central interest and concern to it. Iran aims to ensure its regional aspirations that are also the outcome of its regional differences with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), to restrict Western influence in the region, counter balance the US influence in Afghanistan and also address perceived threats to its national security that are there due to its sensitive location and fickle neighbourhood (Bruce Koepke, 2013). Iran is critical to any long-term US ties with Afghanistan like US-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement, and regards US withdrawal and absence a necessary scenario for peaceful region in general and stable Afghanistan in particular.

Afghanistan is regarded to be the centre of narcotic business and its smuggling in the region that is a direct concern for Iran for being the nearest neighbour of Afghanistan and is more prone to get involved in the illegal drug trade. According to United Nations office of Drug and Crime there are as many as 1.7 million opiate addicts in Afghanistan and the easiest trade passage of this drug is Iran (Bruno and Beehner, 2009). Besides narcotic terror there are also imprints of

terrorist activities on the border lines of Iran via Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and others. For instance the incidents border aggression in the Iran's Sisten-Baluchistan provinces by terrorists and narcotic smugglers operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan respectively. In fact Iran's interest in Afghanistan is also depicted in its interest in the activities of Taliban and the subsequent support of Iran for Taliban in Afghanistan against ISIS group active in Afghanistan's Khosaran province (Stratfor, 2018). Therefore, Iran's interest in Afghanistan is more about security and stability than ideological conformity. Iran is an integral element in enduring solution to the problems and issues in Afghanistan (Ray Takeyh, 2009).

### **THE CONVERGENCE THEREFORE**

Afghanistan is an adventure for almost every nation and a stable Afghanistan is a pivotal dimension for the development and stability of the region. Therefore it is necessary for nations in the neighbourhood of Afghanistan to engage in the region by keeping Afghanistan in hand for the stability in the whole region. India and Iran both being the territorial neighbours of Afghanistan can jointly work for the betterment of Afghanistan, the region and their respective interests can also be accommodated effectively. Besides bringing India and Iran closer Afghanistan's partnership with India and Iran is not only the reflection of connection of three regions-South Asia, West Asia and Central Asia but connects the extreme region beyond these three regions. India and Iran have convergence of interests in Afghanistan on the basis of the interlinked Arcs of prosperity, energy, instability and communication.

Afghanistan is a reliable market for both India and Iran that is nearest and prospectus, this is the already described element of Arc of Prosperity that for India is just the reliable transit for a better export avenue and also enables India to have a greater chances of investment, increment and involvement (economically). Similarly for Iran Afghanistan is not just a natural and nearest market but also balances Iran's economic pressures.

India regards its growing energy concerns vital and aims to secure its energy alternatives in the West Asia, Caspian Sea region and Middle East as well and to secure this Arc of Energy Afghanistan interlink India and Iran together. Even though being an unexploited energy rich nation Afghanistan is an important transit country for Central Asian gas and oil to India and remains an integral part of Indian Foreign Policy (Vishal Chandra, 2014). Iran is one of the

leading energy producers and also India's 3<sup>rd</sup> major oil exporting nation, therefore both India and Iran seek to ensure a hassle-free, smooth oil/energy business via Afghanistan.

Both India and Iran aims to secure their regional issues of threat perception and without having Afghanistan in note their foreign policies are incomplete. India's geo-strategic imperatives like growing influence of China in the region, Indo-Pak conflict, and threat of terrorist activities through its boundary of North-West are some central interests and also bring Afghanistan in its foreign policy concerns. Similarly Iran also seeks to ensure its regional aspirations and stable region in which Afghanistan lies at an important junction. Both nations aspire for stable Afghanistan i.e. the important element of Arc of Instability. Therefore both nations-India and Iran can cooperate and counter balance the regional challenges together.

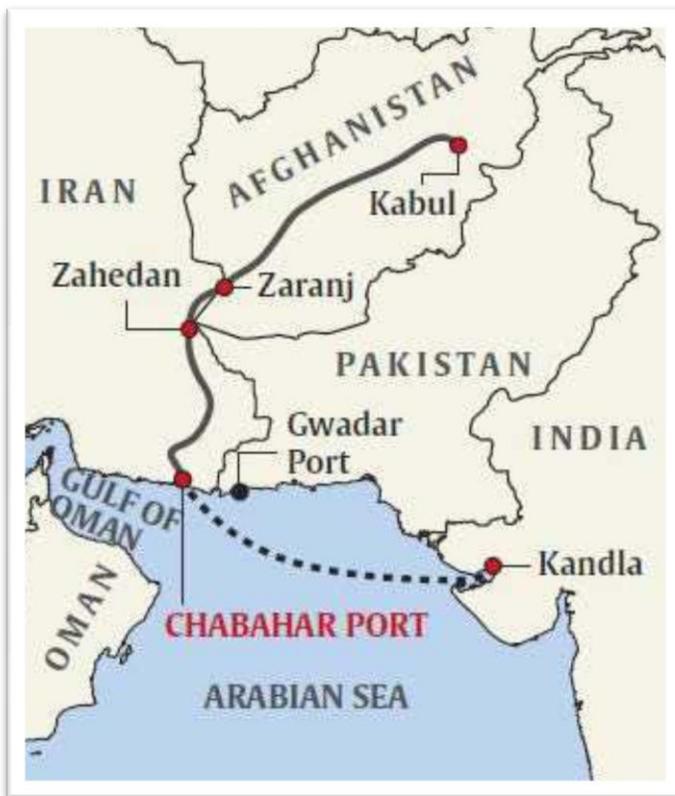
The Arc of Communication gives the geographical basis and background for India-Iran Afghanistan engagement. All the three nations –India, Afghanistan and Iran are geographically so connected that it is almost impossible for these nations to underestimate one another. Besides representing their respective regions these nations connect and encourage trade and transit for their respective regions and beyond as well.

India-Afghanistan-Iran partnership is an essential instrument for these nations so as to secure their interests and engage for development and prosperity. The development of Chabahar Port is the best reflection of this trilateral partnership.

#### The Chabahar Port Agreement

Located in the South-eastern of city of Baluchistan and Sisten province of Iran is the only Free Trade Zone Port of Iran and with a direct access to the ocean. It constitutes two separate ports namely Shahid-Kalantari and Shahid-Beheshti. During early 1990s Iran invited India to develop the port and also to get a secure access to Afghanistan. However after framing their (India and Iranian) respective Afghanistan Reconstruction Plan both nations incorporated Afghanistan in Chabahar Port Development in 2003 so as to encourage development, secure regional interests and at the same time give an economic boost to Afghanistan . Since then all these three nations are gradually working on the port development project. Even during international embargo on

Iran the Chabahar port developed continued without disruption and India agreed to extend Chabahar Port and to lay the railway junction between Chabahar and Zaranj. The major breakthrough to this partnership was the Chabahar Agreement signed by these nations during the historic visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Iran on 22-23 May, 2016, the agreement consisted of 16 Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) regarding the port development (Asif Shuja, 2016). The total capacity of this port is expected to reach up to 80 million tones and its existing capacity is about 2.5 million tonnes. As per the governmental statements the port was set operational from 29<sup>th</sup> October 2017 with the first consignment from India to Afghanistan and the port will be fully operational with greater Indian engagement by early 2019 (MEA, 2018).



Map1. Strategic Location of Chabahar Port (Indian Express, 2017)

The Chabahar Port agreement is not only benefiting India, Iran and Afghanistan economically but its geostrategic location enables all the three nations meet their respective strategic goals-for Iran Chabahar engagement is the nature's gift to sustain the regional rift, enlarge its sphere of interest and influence in the region; For Afghanistan it is a remark of connectivity and stability; and For India the Chabahar is a strategic answer to its competitors, a smooth transit to reach to

the European world and an important junction to secure its energy goals in the Caspian Sea Region as well (Behuria and Rizvi, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

The India and Iran's Afghanistan plan is a strategic Game plan with reference to the current geopolitical realities that not only determine the nature of their economic, regional or historical engagements but also outline the balance of power in the whole South Asia and West Asia. On the one side India counter-checks the regional competitors, ensures smooth economic involvement in the region that is just in the centre of direct as well as indirect influence of neighbourhood and on the other is the broad spectrum of opportunities for Iran like countering US imprints in region, encouraging easiest economic options to the region and beyond. This partnership is a blessing in disguise for all three partners that in the long run is going to be fruitful and need for these nations is to involve Afghanistan in other avenues as well so as to develop and reach the goal of stability. Both India and Iran have showed a continued interest in containing the pangs of terrorism in the region especially in Afghanistan, thus by partnering together to work for this purpose India and Iran can achieve better outcomes. Keeping in view the essence of all the Arcs- Arc of Prosperity, Arc of Energy, Arc of Instability and Arc of Communication India's cooperation and contribution in Afghanistan engagement can be better harnessed by keeping Iran in board and that will also enhance the scope of influence of India in the West Asia, Central Asia and beyond.

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