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THE GROWING FAITH IN INDIA-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS

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Under the premise of the India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) signed in 2011, the pace of Indo-Afghan bilateral cooperation in the political, security, development, and cultural areas has continued to accelerate. In response to and at the request of the Afghan government, the multifaceted aid programs provided by India has been immensely appreciated and welcomed by Afghans and their government. Being one of the leading donor to Afghanistan and by far the largest donor in the region, India's contribution in the form of small development projects has instilled faith in the hearts of every Afghan and has given an edge to India among other supporters.

The outcomes that Afghanistan and India mutually seek from this partnership aim at achieving regional economic integration and long-lasting security, whereby the entire region around them thrive in peace and stability.¹ In the recent past, demonstration of this faith has been visible in a number of joint working groups

under the SPA framework—covering infrastructure, human resource development, and cultural cooperation—which has been financed and implemented by India. It includes Indian-funded projects, namely the Afghan Parliament and the Afghanistan-India Friendship Dam (Salma Dam).

Furthermore, by reiterating the importance of connectivity and free-flowing trade, both sides have agreed to work towards expeditious operationalisation of the Chahbahar Port in Iran under the trilateral Agreement for Establishment of International Transport and Transit Corridor signed in May 2016.² They also highlighted the importance of joint efforts towards expeditious implementation of the Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline Project which stands as an example of connectivity and a trade set-off between Central Asia and South Asia. An initial investment agreement has been reached for the same, which is supposed to be completed by 2019. Under the Trade, Commerce and

Investment Cooperation, both the sides have welcomed the establishment of the Air Cargo Corridor between Kabul and Kandahar with New Delhi in June 2017.

Recognizing the bilateral development cooperation as a mainstay of strategic partnership, both sides have agreed to initiate an ambitious and forward looking next generation 'New Development Partnership'. Under the gamut of new development partnership, both India and Afghanistan agreed to build upon their economic and development cooperation. In this context, 116 new High Impact Development Projects will be jointly implemented that will bring socio-economic and infrastructure development, especially in the suburban and rural communities in 31 provinces of Afghanistan.³ The projects will be in the areas of education, health, agriculture, irrigation, drinking water, renewable energy, flood control, micro-hydropower, sports infrastructure and administrative infrastructure.

Among other fresh developments are road connectivity to Band-e-Amir in Bamyán Province that would promote tourism to the National Park and economic development, water supply network for Charikar city in Parwan Province, establishment of a gypsum board manufacturing plant in Kabul to promote value added industry, and construction of a polyclinic in Mazar-e-Sharif.⁴

Although there have been significant advancement in Indo-Afghan relation as discussed in the earlier sections, both India and Afghanistan are challenged by commonality of cross-border terrorism. During Afghanistan's Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah's visit to New Delhi in September 2017, both the countries have referred to these strong common challenges of terrorist activities in their land including the recent attack at the Kabul airport which had delayed the arrival of the CEO to New Delhi for India-Afghanistan Trade and Investment Show. During the visit both the countries condemned the continuing acts of terror and violence in Afghanistan, and it agreed that the issue of safe havens and sanctuaries needs to be addressed effectively. Views were also exchanged on regional and global developments of mutual interest. Military assistance to Afghanistan will help it eliminating the cross border terrorism, which will in turn be beneficial for regional peace and stability.

Afghanistan's stability is essential for India as instability in Kabul would undoubtedly have implications on Indian security. The Afghan CEO's discussion with Indian President Ram Nath Kovind and Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggests that Afghanistan will continue to hold discussions with India on defence cooperation. However, India in its statements stands strong in making it clear that no troops would land in Afghanistan for fighting "War on Terror" on the ground. Defence cooperation is important for

both the countries, although no agreements have been signed for the same; however, the talks have been under way throughout.

Nonetheless India has embarked on contributing towards the capacity build up of Afghan forces of Afghanistan's security by providing training to Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) and additionally will be assisting the Afghan National Police (ANP) from the coming years. The MoU on technical and training cooperation was signed during CEO Abdullah Abdullah's visit is an important step in the security sector. India's timely provision of four MI-25 attack helicopters, is a move ahead contributing to an enabling environment for stabilization, and development of Afghanistan. During President Ashraf Ghani's visit to India on October 24, 2017, both leaders agreed to further deepen their bilateral cooperation. Both sides agreed that the recent convergence and alignment of views at regional and international arenas have created opportunities for bringing peace, security and stability in Afghanistan.⁵ Furthermore, the Indian side has agreed to extend their assistance depending upon the needs of the Afghan defence and police forces.

The priority given to India-Afghan ties through high-level visits and recent development suggests the growing faith that Afghanistan imparts to its largest regional donor. As a result, to be able to mentor a nascent democracy like

Afghanistan, India's ability in doing so will go a long way to demonstrate to the world that India-Afghan ties has purely grown through a shared commitment to achieve peace and stability. In regional aspect, the U.S. policy seeks greater role for India, which already plays a pre-eminent role in the stabilization of Afghanistan. As such the new U.S. policy in Afghanistan comes at a time where it is an opportunity for India-U.S.-Afghanistan to cooperate on security as well on the development issues in Afghanistan.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ M. Ashraf Haidari, "Afghanistan Celebrates India's Post-Independence Achievements", *The Diplomat*, August 18, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/afghanistan-celebrates-indias-post-independence-achievements/>. Accessed on October 21, 2017.

² "Joint Statement on the 2nd Strategic partnership Council Meeting between India and Afghanistan", *Ministry of External Affairs*, Government of India Report, September 11, 2017, http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28936/Joint_Statement_on_the_2nd_Strategic_Partnership_Council_Meeting_between_India_and_Afghanistan_New_Delhi_September_11_2017. Accessed on October 6, 2017.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Shubhajit Roy, "India steps up development partnership with Afghanistan", *The Indian Express*, September 12, 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-steps-up-development-partnership-with-afghanistan-4839291/>, Accessed on October 4, 2017.

⁵ "Visit of President of Afghanistan to India", *Ministry of External Affairs*, Press Release, October 24, 2017, http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29045/Visit_of_President_of_Afghanistan_to_India. Accessed on October 27, 2017.