

The Churning of a Strategy:**The Indo-Afghan New Development Partnership in the Global Context**Arpita Basu Roy¹

External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Afghan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani in New Delhi

It is not a mere coincidence that within three weeks of President Trump announcing his Afghanistan policy envisaging a bigger role for India, that both India and Afghanistan have embarked on a New Development Partnership. President Trump, in his speech, had appreciated India's crucial contribution to the stability of Afghanistan and urged India to do more for its conflict-prone neighbour on "economic assistance and development". During the three-day tour of the Afghan Foreign Minister, HE Salahuddin Rabbani to New Delhi to address the India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Council talks, the Indo-Afghan partnership acquired renewed vigour. Arguably, projects were speeded up and finalised and the strategic and development partnership was firmed up after Trumps' policy declaration leading to Rabbani's New Delhi visit. Trump considers India as a key US ally in South Asia and its rivalry with both Pakistan and China fosters many areas where both Modi and Trump require each other's support and this clearly demonstrates that cooperation on Afghanistan is a top priority for both.

Much ahead of this visit, the need to end Afghan isolation was realised well by India as a crucial prerequisite for peace, trade and connectivity. India, as the largest regional donor contributing to the tune of 2 billion dollars in Afghanistan's reconstruction since 2001, has worked very closely with the Afghan government and responded to the needs of Afghans in sharp contrast to some other donors who acted on their designated priority areas. These projects related to infrastructure, capacity building, education and community development helped India gain a lot of good will, an essential prerequisite not only for its 'soft power' influence but also for renewing the old civilizational connect.

The contemporary dynamics evolves from the shared history and the civilizational links, from the realisation that the ties with the region dates back to pre-history and that the reference to this land in our mythology and Vedas are extensive. Afghanistan was the vehicle for the spread of Buddhism from India to Central Asia and beyond and the Kushans and the Mauryan empires stretched up to the vast stretches of present-day Afghanistan. The people of Indian origin have traded and settled in Afghanistan during the past few centuries and the Hindu and Sikh traders have long been a part of the

¹ **Dr. Arpita Basu Roy** is Senior Fellow and Academic Committee Member, CSIRD. A former Pavate Wrangler Fellow at the Department of Politics and International Studies, Cambridge University, she is also a Visiting faculty at West Bengal State University, Barasat and Rabindra Bharati University.

Indian diaspora in the neighbourhood. Later, linkages through invasions and conquests have left indelible impressions on our cultural, linguistic, social and religious landscapes. So there is a shared history, not always a happy one but definitely shared enough to have created strong bonds of culture.

Some analysts have been critical enough to perceive India's developmental role in post-2001 Afghanistan in terms of the price that Indians had to pay with their lives. It is counter-argued that India's investment in Afghanistan is not a zero-sum game and the utility of maintaining a friendly relationship and partnership is a strategic decision. India has generously invested in Afghanistan right from the construction of their parliament building (inaugurated by Prime Minister Modi in Kabul in December 2015) to the Salma Dam (inaugurated by him in June 2016) or the Zeranj Delaram highway (a strategic highway to reduce Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan) and has often paid a high price for such investments but we also need to understand that India's interests lie in an economically sustainable, politically stable and socially inclusive Afghanistan. The nascent Afghan security forces are currently struggling to maintain a stalemate with the insurgents and new challenges are cropping up with the emergence of groups like the *Daesh* while old challenges in the form of Taliban is resurgent. The Afghan government urgently needs the support of a good trusted friend at its critical hour.

Recent leap in the relationship included the opening up of the Air Freight Corridor, commenced in June 2017, to provide direct access to the cultivators of Afghanistan to the Indian markets. Such decision in India's Afghan policy has been made with the genuine desire to help the Afghan economy and improve capacity building in a war-ravaged country. India is also expediting the development of the Chabahar port in Iran, whose strategic and economic benefits have been well-documented, and it is good news that India is almost ready to begin the supply of wheat to Afghanistan in the coming weeks using this port. This visit also saw the signing of the Motor Vehicles Agreement with hopes of overland transit and joining "regional trade and transit agreements that have Afghanistan at its heart".

In a bid to strengthen the relationship, four documents were exchanged between the foreign secretaries Jaishankar and Hekmat Khalil Karzai on Motor Vehicles Agreement, MOUs on national medicine and health care products, bilateral agreement between border frequency coordination of South Asian satellite and exchange of letters for commencing new development partnership. As part of the New Developmental partnership and in keeping with the priorities of Afghanistan, it was agreed that 116 new High Impact Development Projects would be jointly implemented to bring up the socio-economic and infrastructure development in suburban and rural communities. India agreed to develop the Shahtoot dam and other drinking water projects for Kabul, facilitate irrigation and low-cost housing for the returning Afghan refugees in the Nangarhar province, and improve road connectivity to Band-e Amir in Bamiyan to promote tourism to the famous national park. Such projects have had and are likely to have a high impact in building goodwill for India in Afghanistan.

India has, for quite a number of years, been offering scholarship to Afghan students opting to study in India but a unique feature of the Indian Foreign Minister's statement this time was the extension of all possible assistance and the beginning of the implementation of 500 new scholarship programmes for the next of kin of the martyrs of Afghan National and Security Forces from Academic year 2018. Also, it was significant that she appreciated the fact that Afghanistan had attained the status of a test playing cricketing nation which she called was a "reflection of the indomitable spirit of the people of Afghanistan" who have ridiculed the forces of death and destruction in the country subtly critiquing the Taliban regime for banning all sports and cultural activities.

India's support to the present Afghan government was reiterated when Foreign Minister, Smt. Sushma Swaraj said that India will continue to work with the people of Afghanistan in their efforts to build a secure, stable, peaceful, prosperous, united and inclusive nation and support the Afghan and the international efforts for peace and reconciliation. The alliance against insurgent groups like the Taliban or the IS were subtly spelt out through her statement. A strong message was also sent to common neighbour Pakistan as the commitment to stand shoulder to shoulder with Afghanistan to fight cross border terrorism and terror sanctuaries was clearly spelt out.

Rabbani, however, made no pretence of his detest for Pakistan and scathingly criticised the country for supporting groups like *Lashkar e Taiba* and *Jaish-e Mohammad* and accused them of launching attacks against India in Jammu and Kashmir and engaged in activities along with the Taliban, *Al Qaeda* and *Daesh*. Afghanistan also loudly supported India's claim for Security Council membership and expected India to back Kabul's entry into the SCO. It is worth noting that the two sides have agreed to strengthen security cooperation and India has agreed to extend further assistance for the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces in fighting terrorism, organised crimes, trafficking of narcotics and money laundering. Rabbani expressed his gratitude to India for her unflinching support to peace and stability for Afghanistan as both countries agreed to strengthen security cooperation

Undoubtedly, the strategic partnership between India and Afghanistan, described by Sushma Swaraj as an "article of faith" need to be boosted in the context of increased Sino-Pakistan cooperation, the progress on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its possible impact on the region. Pakistan has reacted sharply to Trump's Afghan policy which clearly shows a tilt towards India. The changing strategies of Russia and the evolving trilateral dynamics are also matters of careful consideration for India. With challenges facing both governments, our strategic and developmental partnership need to move from strength to strength. However, a cautionary bell against boots on the ground should be clearly rung to prevent the Modi government who enjoys huge majority in Parliament against taking steps supporting military intervention which, historically attested, will be counter-productive in the long-run.