

Afghans in Need

Positing India's Continued Engagement With Afghanistan



Vishal Chandra



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES
मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

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*Dedicated to
Indian diplomatic and project personnel
who lost their lives in the line of duty in Afghanistan.*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANASTU	Afghanistan National Agricultural Sciences and Technology University
AQIS	Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
ARCS	Afghan Red Crescent Society
AY	Academic Year
BHEL	Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited
BRO	Border Roads Organisation (India)
CHDs	Congenital Heart Diseases/Defects
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
DAB	Da Afghanistan Bank
DARE	Department of Agricultural Research and Education (India)
DGCA	Directorate General Civil Aviation (India)
DRI	Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (India)
e-VB	e-VidyaBharati
EAM	External Affairs Minister
ERW	Explosive Remnants of War
FFFAI	Federation of Freight Forwarders' Associations in India
FSI	Foreign Service Institute
FTO	Foreign Terrorist Organization
FY	Financial Year

GDP	Gross Domestic Product
Gen	General
GLs	General Licences
GoI	Government of India
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IAF	Indian Air Force
IAPTA	India-Afghanistan Preferential Trading Arrangement
IARI	Indian Agricultural Research Institute
ICAR	Indian Council for Agricultural Research
ICCR	Indian Council for Cultural Relations
ICP	Integrated Check Post
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (Norway)
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IGICH	Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health (Kabul)
IIM-K	Indian Institute of Management-Kozhikode
IMA	Indian Military Academy
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organisations
INSTC	International North-South Transport Corridor
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPGCFTZ	India Ports Global Chabahar Free Trade Zone
IPGL	India Ports Global Limited
ISK	Islamic State Khorasan
ISKP	Islamic State Khorasan Province

ITEC	Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation
JS (PAI)	Joint Secretary (Pakistan, Afghanistan & Iran)
kg	kilogramme
km	kilometre
kV	Kilovolt
LPAI	Land Ports Authority of India
LTV	Long Term Visa
MDSA	Model Disability Survey of Afghanistan
MEA	Ministry of External Affairs (India)
MFN	Most Favoured Nation
MHA	Ministry of Home Affairs (India)
MIV	Maritime India Vision
MOP	Margin of Preference
MoPH	Ministry of Public Health (Afghanistan)
MoUs	Memorandums of Understanding
MSSRF	M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation
NGOs	Non-governmental Organisations
nm	Nautical Miles
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
NSA	National Security Adviser
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OFAC	Office of Foreign Assets Control (US)
PG	Postgraduate
PIB	Press Information Bureau (India)
PM	Prime Minister

PMA	Pakistan Military Academy
PTA	Preferential Trade Agreement
RBAP	Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific
RFE/RL	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SAU	South Asian University
SDGTs	Specially Designated Global Terrorists
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
sq km	Square Kilometre
SSIFS	Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Service
TEUs	Twenty-foot Equivalent Units
TTP	Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNMAS	United Nations Mine Action Service
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States (of America)
UXO	Unexploded Ordnance
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

MAPS, TABLES AND IMAGES

MAPS

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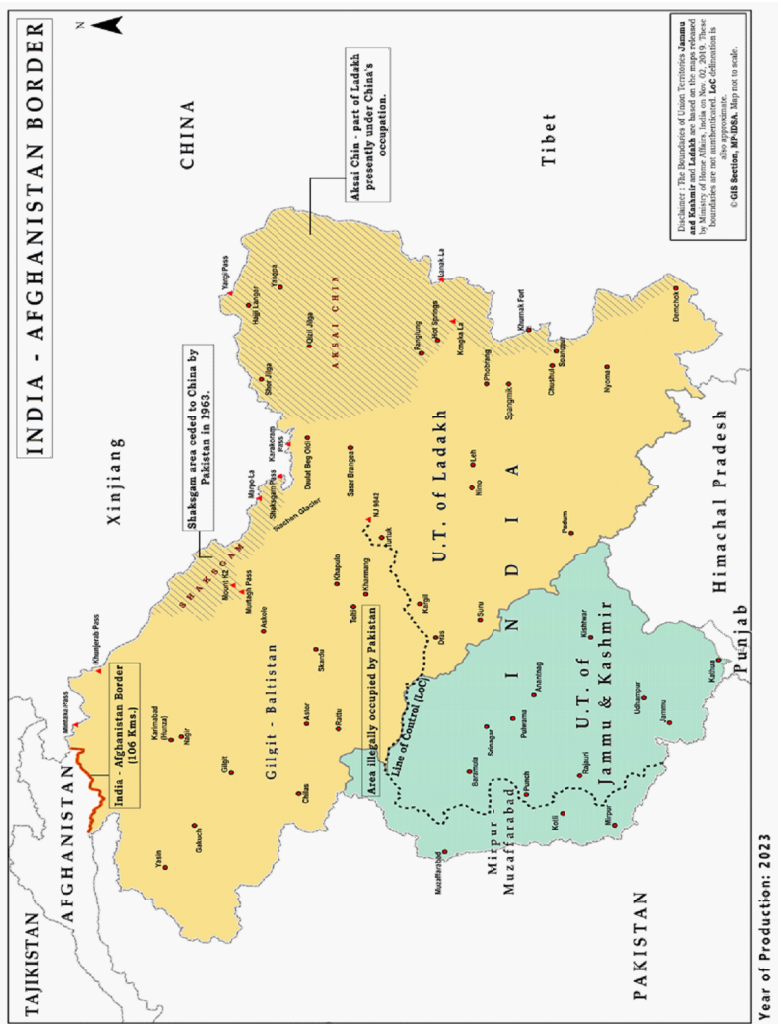
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MAP I: INDIA–AFGHANISTAN BORDER
(106 KM)



Source: GIS Section, MP-IDSA.

INTRODUCTION

POSITING CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT

Afghanistan has witnessed several rounds of political upheaval and regime change over the past five decades, often violent and interspersed with direct or indirect intervention by external powers. However, irrespective of the ideological orientation of Afghan regimes—including the “mujahideen” coalition government installed by Pakistan in Kabul after the collapse of the Najibullah Government in April 1992 and barring the first Taliban regime that ruled from Kabul between 1996 and 2001—India has succeeded in sustaining its engagement with Afghanistan and its people, which has only evolved and grown with time.

After the 2001 transition that opened avenues of unprecedented international engagement in Afghanistan for the next two decades, India emerged as the leading regional development partner of Afghanistan. India’s development and capacity-building projects in Afghanistan were broad-based, multi-sectoral and abidingly people oriented. India’s Afghan outreach traversed the remarkably diverse social–cultural and geographical landscape of the country. It was, therefore, no surprise when within weeks of the power shift in Kabul in August 2021, however dramatic and spectacular it was, India decided to resume humanitarian aid and assistance to the Afghan people. As the humanitarian crisis deepened in Afghanistan, India further augmented its humanitarian outreach to its longest standing partner in the country, the people of Afghanistan.

While India put its grant-in-aid development projects on hold after the Taliban takeover, it continued with humanitarian aid and assistance programmes, and also scholarship/fellowship schemes for Afghan

students already enrolled at the time in Indian institutions.¹ The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) sought to resolve the lingering issue of visa issuance/extension to Afghan students by announcing in August 2023 that from the academic year (AY) 2023–24 onwards, it will offer 1,000 scholarships annually to Afghan students for various online undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) courses at the participating Indian universities and institutions.² According to the latest annual report of 2023–24 of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), fresh admissions have been granted to more than 2,000 Afghan students, including 301 girls, under the ICCR's Online Scholarship Scheme for Afghan Nationals. India is also providing online scholarships for Afghan students in agricultural sciences.³

The New Delhi based South Asian University (SAU), an initiative of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), too

¹ 'Current Issues Regarding ICCR Scholarship Students from Afghanistan', Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India (GoI), 8 October 2021, at https://www.iccr.gov.in/sites/default/files/2021-11/Notification%20for%20Afghan%20Student%20under%20ICCR%27s%20Afghan%20Scholarship%20Scheme_0.pdf (Accessed 14 May 2023).

² 'Scholarships for Afghan Nationals for Online Courses for A.Y 2023–24', ICCR, MEA, GoI, 25 August 2023, at <https://iccr.gov.in/scholarships-afghan-nationals-online-courses-ay-2023-24> (Accessed 18 September 2023). The online courses will be conducted under e-VidyaBharati (e-VB), a tele-education network project launched by External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar in October 2019 and implemented January 2020 onwards, through the iLearn tele-education portal. See 'Guidelines for Awarding Tele-Education Scholarships to Afghan Students', e-VB Network Project, Online Higher Education, ICCR, MEA, GoI, at https://www.ilearn.gov.in/static/static/pics/Afghan_Guidelines.pdf (Accessed 18 September 2023).

³ *Annual Report 2023–24*, Policy Planning and Research Division, MEA, GoI, 25 July 2024, p. 8, at https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/CPV/38005_Final-MEA-AR-2023-English.pdf (Accessed 10 September 2024). For ICCR online scholarship slots for Afghan nationals for AY 2024–25, see 'Scholarship Manual: Academic Year 2024–25', ICCR, MEA, GoI, January 2024, p. 9, at https://a2ascholarships.iccr.gov.in/assets/site/downloads/ICCR_UserManual.pdf (Accessed 12 October 2024).

issued a notification in August 2023 stating that students from Afghanistan (and also from Pakistan and Bangladesh) who could not join the 2023–24 session due to visa issuance problem can directly join the 2024–25 session, without reappearing for the university entrance test in 2024.⁴ SAU had continued to offer admission and scholarships to Afghan students after August 2021. In AY 2022–23, a total of 42 Afghan students were admitted (37 in masters and 5 in doctoral programmes) by the university.⁵

In September 2023, SAU renewed scholarships and financial assistance for about 14 Afghan doctoral candidates admitted between 2019 and 2022, for AY 2023–24.⁶ Similarly, it renewed scholarship/stipend/freeships for about 23 Afghan master's students admitted in 2022.⁷

India has also deputed a team of officials and staff at its embassy in Kabul to monitor and coordinate its humanitarian aid and assistance and, in due course, resume its development outreach to the Afghan people. India has continued to annually allocate budget of Rs 200 crore (US\$ 24 million approx.) for 'Aid to Afghanistan' through the financial year (FY) 2022–23, FY 2023–24 and FY 2024–25 (budget

⁴ 'Notification–Deferment of Admission to Non-Indian Candidates due to Visa Issues', South Asian University (SAU), New Delhi, 21 August 2023, at https://sau.int/student_notices/notification-deferment-of-admission-to-non-indian-candidates-due-to-visa-issues/ (Accessed 29 November 2023).

⁵ *Annual Report 2022*, SAU, March 2024, pp. 10–11, at <https://sau.int/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/SAU-Annual-Report-2022.pdf> (Accessed 12 October 2024).

⁶ 'Revised Notification–Renewal of Scholarship/Stipend to PhD Students for the Academic Year 2023–24', SAU, 29 September 2023, at https://sau.int/student_notices/revised-notification-renewal-of-scholarship-stipend-to-phd-students-for-the-academic-year-2023-24/ (Accessed 29 November 2023).

⁷ 'Notification–Renewal of Scholarship (Masters Students)', Notification No. 01/2023, SAU, 26 September 2023, at https://sau.int/student_notices/notification-renewal-of-scholarship-masters-students/ (Accessed 29 November 2023).

estimates).⁸ The bilateral trade, including through the land route, too has continued and as per the World Bank's latest data of August 2024, India remains the second-largest export market for Afghan products.⁹ The air freight corridor, established between the two countries in 2017, has been reopened. There are also charter flights carrying passengers and goods from Afghanistan to India.¹⁰ Indian Ministry of Civilian Aviation has permitted the operation of charter flights from Afghanistan under special circumstances.¹¹

The monograph is broadly divided into two parts, 'Afghans in Need' and 'India in Afghanistan'. The first part takes a broad view of various aspects of the humanitarian crises facing the Afghan people and provides the context for the second and main part, which highlights

⁸ 'Detailed Demands for Grants 2024–25', Demand No. 29, MEA, GoI, 16 August 2024, p. 34, at https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/38163_DDG_MEA.pdf (Accessed 13 October 2024); 'Detailed Demands for Grants 2023–24', Demand No. 29, MEA, GoI, 30 May 2023, p. 26, at https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/36620_36456_DDG_2023-24.pdf (Accessed 13 October 2024); and 'Detailed Demands for Grants 2022–23', Demand No. 29, MEA, GoI, 30 May 2023, pp. 18–19, at https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/36619_DDG_2022_23.pdf (Accessed 13 October 2024).

⁹ The World Bank, 'Afghanistan Economic Monitor', Afghanistan Futures, Issue No. 8, August 2024, published 10 September 2024, p. 3, at <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/2bb4dd118634eb6940eca7808a50b6ee-0310012024/original/Afghanistan-Economic-Monitor-August-2024.pdf> (Accessed 13 October 2024).

¹⁰ 'Year End Review 2023 for Ministry of Civil Aviation', Press Information Bureau (PIB), GoI, 23 December 2023, at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1989856> (Accessed 13 October 2024); and 'Year End Review: 2022—Ministry of Civil Aviation', PIB, GoI, 16 December 2022, at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1884212> (Accessed 29 May 2023).

¹¹ 'Monthly Summary of July 2024', Ministry of Civil Aviation, GoI, 16 August 2024, at <https://www.civilaviation.gov.in/sites/default/files/2024-08/Monthly%20Summary%20English%2C%20July%202024.pdf> (Accessed 13 October 2024); and 'Monthly Summary of January 2023', Ministry of Civil Aviation, GoI, 13 February 2023, at <https://www.civilaviation.gov.in/sites/default/files/2023-09/Monthly%20Summary%20of%20January%202023%20%281%29.pdf> (Accessed 17 October 2023).

India's varied and extensive development and humanitarian assistance programmes in Afghanistan over the past two decades and continued humanitarian support, post the Taliban takeover, to the people of Afghanistan in their gravest time of need. The monograph concludes with broad observations on the need for India to step up its people-centric development engagement with Afghanistan, the basic premise being that Afghanistan is not just geography and demography to India. "Indo-Afghan" is a far larger idea and historical dynamic that goes beyond the ebb and flow of state relations, and it has only strengthened since the partition of the Indian subcontinent. It is within this framework that India has to deal with the long-term impact of the changed political landscape in Afghanistan. The Taliban may not come across as a relatable entity or authority, but, perhaps, an independent Taliban is better than a Taliban shrouded in exile and under the tutelage of Pakistan establishment.

It is posited that India's development assistance and capacity-building programmes that played a key role in facilitating Indian engagement with cross sections of the Afghan population, although questioned in the past by sceptics for its value and efficacy, are all the more critical today to not only sustain the traditionally favourable people-to-people ties but also to deal with broader security and geo-economic impact of the power shift in Kabul in the longer term. Indian economic presence and sustained people-to-people engagement are also crucial to offset the anti-India propaganda and narratives being constantly peddled by certain state and non-state actors in the region. Whether the Islamist regime in Afghanistan itself poses any direct threat to Indian interests or not, either way Kabul has to be dealt with.

Similarly, India has to continue to capitalise on its vast experience of dealing with the Afghan maze—the vagaries of rifts and shifts in the Afghan polity—and of implementing development projects under local conditions, to further reprioritise its engagement strategy in Afghanistan. Beginning with the resumption of people-centric community development projects to the benefit of the Afghan people, India, in due course, can move on to increased trade and capacity building in select socio-economic sectors aimed at generating self-employment opportunities for the Afghan youth. It is noteworthy that hundreds of development projects implemented by India in the past two decades

across Afghanistan, as well as the property of its diplomatic missions in the country, were largely intact when India sent its first official delegation to Kabul in June 2022, post the Taliban takeover.

India has the experience of dealing with Afghan Islamists, although mainly non-Pashtun. New Delhi had engaged the “mujahideen” coalition government installed by Pakistan in Kabul in April 1992. The Afghan Islamists may have been propped up for over a decade by the Pakistan establishment to wage jihad against the Soviet forces and the communist government in Kabul, but once based inside Afghanistan, most of them pursued their independent courses and interests and sought to build ties with other neighbouring and regional countries, including India. The Taliban too, in the 1990s, had refused to serve the Pakistani agenda beyond a point. They are doing the same again and rather aggressively, for they have their own Pakistani protégé and are diplomatically far better positioned this time around.

It is also noteworthy that, similar to all other Afghan regimes, none of the Pakistan-backed and installed Islamist governments in Kabul have ever accepted the Durand Line as the settled international border with Pakistan. Several rounds of armed skirmishes have taken place between the Taliban and Pakistani forces at points running along Kunar, Nangarhar, Paktia, Khost, Kandahar and Nimroz. Similar clashes have occurred earlier during the time of both Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani governments.

The Taliban have the first-hand experience of Pakistan’s propensity of abandoning and replacing its long-time Afghan protégés and allies—the way Pakistan did to the old Afghan Islamists, the “mujahideen” who fought against the Soviet forces, by backing and raising the Taliban against them in the mid-1990s, and later to the Taliban itself in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, when several senior Taliban members were hounded and handed over to the United States (US) and incarcerated at Guantanamo Bay. Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, the Taliban ambassador to Islamabad who was handed over to the US by Pakistan after the 9/11 attacks and was released from Guantanamo Bay after four years of incarceration, stated in his autobiography published in 2010:

Pakistan, which plays a key role in Asia, is so famous for treachery that it is said they can get milk from a bull. They have two

tongues in one mouth, and two faces on one head so they can speak everybody's language; they use everybody, deceive everybody. They deceive the Arabs under the guise of Islamic nuclear power, saying that they are defending Islam and Islamic countries. They milk America and Europe in the alliance against terrorism, and they have been deceiving Pakistani and other Muslims around the world in the name of the Kashmiri jihad. But behind the curtain, they have been betraying everyone. Their Islam and their jihad were to destroy their neighbouring Islamic country together with the infidels. They handed over their airports to the Americans so they could kill Muslims and destroy an Islamic country. Their loyalty to the Arabs is so great that they sold diplomats, journalists and mujahedeen for dollars. Like animals.¹²

Later, several senior Taliban members who had responded to President Karzai's call for reconciliation and opened back channels with Kabul, or had refused to follow Pakistani diktats, were either detained or eliminated. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, co-founder and deputy leader of the Taliban and currently Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs in the Taliban caretaker cabinet, was detained by Pakistan for eight years (2010–18) for being in contact with Kabul. In the weeks following Baradar's arrest in February 2010, over 20 Taliban leaders were said to have been arrested by the Pakistani intelligence.¹³

Interestingly, just before Mullah Baradar was captured from Karachi in a joint operation led by the Pakistani and American intelligence in February 2010, Pakistan's then Army Chief, General (Gen) Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, had stated: 'We can't have Talibanization. We want to remain modern and progressive. We cannot wish for Afghanistan what

¹² Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban*, edited and translated by Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, Hachette India, 2010, pp. 234–235.

¹³ Dexter Filkins, 'Pakistanis Tell of Motive in Taliban Leader's Arrest', *The New York Times*, 22 August 2010, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/23/world/asia/23taliban.html> (Accessed 17 December 2023).

¹⁴ Pamela Constable, 'Pakistan's Army Chief Seeks Stable Afghanistan', *The Washington Post*, 2 February 2010, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/01/AR2010020102506.html> (Accessed 18 December 2023).

we don't wish for Pakistan."¹⁴ Pakistan establishment did just the opposite, as it continued to host not only the *Rahbari Shura* or the leadership council of the Taliban in Quetta for the next over one decade but also the United Nations (UN)-designated terrorist groups, such as the Haqqani Network and the Al-Qaeda. It was only over a year after Kayani's statement that the Al-Qaeda chief, Osama bin Laden, was found and killed by US Navy SEALs, in May 2011, in a compound located next to the Pakistan Military Academy (PMA) in Abbottabad in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province.

With the Taliban no more exiled inside Pakistan and fully saddled in power in Kabul and provincial capitals by August 2021, it was clear it would reach out to the regional countries it had engaged with over the past years to help "normalise" its status and presence as the new reigning power in Kabul. The Taliban, particularly its representatives based in Doha, had long been assuaging the security concerns among the regional countries as it sought transactional ties based on non-interference in internal affairs and respect for territorial integrity on a reciprocal basis.

Similar to former Afghan presidents, Ghani and Karzai, the Taliban had also emphasised the 'economic-centric' nature of their foreign policy early on, aimed at transforming Afghanistan into 'a hub of regional economic connectivity'.¹⁵ More recently, Acting Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in his addresses at the Fifth Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan, held in September 2023, reiterated his government's 'economic-centric foreign policy' and called

¹⁵ 'Speech by Minister of Foreign Affairs Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi at Washington Conference on Peace and Humanitarian Assistance for Afghanistan', Al Emarah, 11 January 2022, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/speech-by-minister-of-foreign-affairs-mawlawi-amir-khan-muttaqi-at-washington-conference-on-peace-and-humanitarian-assistance-for-afghanistan/> (Accessed 9 May 2023); and 'Speech by Acting Foreign Minister Mawlaw Amir Khan Muttaqi at first Economic Conference', Al Emarah, 19 January 2022, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/speech-by-acting-foreign-minister-mawlaw-amir-khan-muttaqi-at-first-economic-conference/> (Accessed 15 September 2023).

for the commencement of 'Afghanistan-centered regional connectivity projects', including the North–South trade corridor.¹⁶ He emphasised the same at the Sixth Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan held in October 2024.¹⁷ The overall Taliban objective has been to secure much-needed investments and a semblance of proto-legitimacy from the neighbouring countries, to begin with. The Taliban have been positioning themselves as potential counterterrorism and counternarcotics partner, with Afghanistan as a secure transit hub for regional economies seeking greater connectivity and access to markets and resources. Interestingly, successive Afghan regimes since the 1970s have invested more in building legitimacy through outside support and external relations than seeking it from within the country.

While the political landscape in Afghanistan and geopolitics around it are not same as in the 1990s and dealing with the Taliban–Haqqani regime poses an altogether different challenge, the point remains that India has the accumulated experience to tactically engage the Islamist regime in Kabul, while the latter is still in a state of transition, on crucial issues of security concern. It is particularly important to broaden the scope of people-to-people engagement for the long-term benefit of both countries.

However, dealing with an internationally non-recognised regime in Kabul—shepherded by an opaque clique of clerics centred in Kandahar in the south, and with several members of the Taliban caretaker cabinet in Kabul under the UN sanctions list—would call for non-conventional, rather exploratory, approaches. Unlike the far-off Western countries

¹⁶ 'Statement by IEA Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi at the Moscow Format Consultations', Kazan, Russian Federation, 29 September 2023, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kabul, Afghanistan, 1 October 2023, at <https://mfa.gov.af/en/statement-by-iea-foreign-minister-mawlawi-amirkhan-muttaqi-at-the-mosow-format-consultationsseptember-29-2023kazan-tatarstan/> (Accessed 12 December 2023).

¹⁷ 'Speech by IEA Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi at the 6th Moscow Consultations Format', Moscow, Russian Federation, 4 October 2024, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kabul, Afghanistan, 4 October 2024, at <https://mfa.gov.af/en/17832> (Accessed 6 October 2024).

that can afford to wait and watch for a longer period, the same cannot be said for neighbouring countries and regions directly impacted by the changing or emerging political–Islamist landscape in Afghanistan and developments in adjoining Pashtun-dominated areas in Pakistan. India, as an emerging economic power, simply cannot afford to take its eyes off the potential impact of collapsing states and economies in its complex north-western neighbourhood.

The “agreement for peace” signed between US and the Taliban at Doha in February 2020, to the complete exclusion of the internationally-recognised government in Afghanistan, ended handing over to the Taliban all that was taken away from them two decades back. The fact that Osama bin Laden was killed by the American forces deep inside Pakistan in May 2011, and that his successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was killed a decade later in an American drone strike in the heart of the Afghan capital, Kabul, in August 2022, a year after the Taliban–Haqqani regime came to power, speaks volume about the terrorism landscape spanning the Pakistan–Afghanistan region. The old non-Pashtun resistance groups from the north remain divided and barely have any notable presence in the country. Perhaps, it is for the first time that one finds only ethnic Pashtun Sunni Islamist militant groups collaborating, competing, and warring for influence and control over vast territories extending from Kandahar to Mazar and Herat to Peshawar.

India has long faced the scourge of state-sponsored terrorism from Pakistan. As prospects for any regional compact to collectively tackle sources and forces of militant extremism and terrorism, more so if it is state sponsored, remain bleak, it will remain for India to continue to strengthen bilateral counterterrorism cooperation with other countries in the region, and also with Afghan entities with aligned threat perceptions and security stakes.

The monograph posits that while it might be logically impossible to imagine a pacified and knowledge-based progressive Afghanistan in the foreseeable future, or expect any immediate notable moderation or shift in the literalist worldview of the Afghan Taliban, Afghanistan will remain a critical cog in the broader interplay of geopolitics and geo-economics around it. The Taliban and their “emirate” are a product of long-drawn geopolitical play and not any nationwide grassroots revolution or popular movement. While the Taliban have been tying

themselves into knots the past three years to justify their debilitating domestic policies—complicating their relationship with the Afghan society at large, and along with it, the prospects of securing domestic legitimacy and earning international recognition for their regime—it is still early to overthink alternative future scenarios.

While most of the regional countries have been quick at accepting the “Taliban reality”, the Taliban have yet to grasp the “Afghan reality”, which is: the country is inherently multicultural, a microcosm of centuries-old traditions and identities, and any forced imposition of social–political ideologies in the past has sooner or later produced resistance at local levels, and this has invariably found support from outside. Like most previous regimes in Kabul, the Taliban regime too lacks pan-Afghan appeal and broad-based support within the country. For now, the vast majority in Afghanistan is silent, but not necessarily at peace.

As New Delhi patiently crafts its political–diplomatic approach towards an Islamist Kabul, which has variously signalled its interest in building ties with New Delhi, a working understanding of sorts on non-interference, non-threat and limited formal contact appears to have been attempted over the past three years. It is posited that if the engagement has to be taken forward, then developments in Afghanistan will have to be viewed in its social–political context, which has been upended and heaved multiple times over the past five decades, to better deal with its absurdities, contradictions and layered complexities. This includes Kabul’s traditional proclivity to play upon geopolitical competition and rivalries to offset its traditional vulnerabilities and to preserve its sovereign autonomy.

It is hard to think of any other country where interests of so many and such disparate actors—state and non-state, regional and global—have come into play and for decades together. Also, almost as a pattern, successive Afghan regimes, including the first Taliban regime, have not been known to make timely course corrections, leading to violent power shifts and continued instability. More than three years into power, the second Taliban regime does not seem to be an exception. However, like the Afghan regimes in the past, the Taliban regime—whether it evolves or devolves with time—too has to run its course. In a nutshell, Afghanistan is what it is and for now, it has to be dealt with as it is.

PART I

Thefts have disappeared. But bread has also disappeared.

—*An Afghan shopkeeper to Reuters, September 2021**

If hunger doesn't kill us, the cold certainly will.

—*An elderly Afghan woman to The Khaama Press, October 2023***

* 'One Month After Fall of Kabul, Economic Crisis Stalks Taliban', *Reuters*, 15 September 2021, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/one-month-after-fall-kabul-economic-crisis-stalks-taliban-2021-09-15/> (Accessed 17 September 2021).

** Zahra Rashidi, 'Story of an Afghan Woman Who Said, "If Hunger Doesn't Kill Us, the Cold Will"', *The Khaama Press*, 25 October 2023, at <https://www.khaama.com/story-of-an-afghan-woman-who-said-if-hunger-doesnt-kill-us-the-cold-will/> (Accessed 18 November 2023).

AFGHANS IN NEED

The collapse of the state and the economy in Afghanistan in 2021, a landlocked country of about 40 million, has not only added to the security concerns among countries in the region but also, immensely, to the sufferings of the Afghan people. Despite the international community stepping up aid and assistance, both in kind and in cash, the humanitarian and economic crisis facing the Afghan people, aggravated by the complete decimation of the “Islamic Republic” and the return of “Islamic Emirate” to power, which is yet to be internationally recognised for various reasons, remains an issue of serious concern. It reminds of the acute humanitarian crisis that Afghanistan suffered during the civil war in the 1990s, following the collapse of President Najibullah’s government in April 1992 and until the overthrow of the first Taliban regime in late 2001.

It is worth recalling the observations made by India’s permanent representative to the UN in a meeting held at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in April 1996 to discuss the situation in Afghanistan:

The conflict in Afghanistan has created a humanitarian problem of gargantuan proportions. The massive loss of human life and the serious damage to the economic and social infrastructure in that country have been graphically documented. The suffering of the Afghan people has far exceeded the bounds of even extreme human tolerance. Their suffering is hard to describe; it is so pervasive that one is left wondering in amazement how these innocent people can continue to exist with any semblance of normalcy. The latest report of the United States Government entitled ‘Global Humanitarian Emergencies 1996’ lists Afghanistan at the very top of those countries facing the most severe current humanitarian crises...This is most unfortunate and untenable.

We cannot forget or ignore the humanitarian and development needs of Afghanistan.¹

UN HUMANITARIAN ASSESSMENTS

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), in its January 2023 report on Afghanistan, had stated that 28.3 million people (two-thirds of the population) needed humanitarian assistance to survive, of whom 14.7 million were said to be in extreme need of food and life-saving assistance. Of the total 28.3 million, 6.4 million were women and 15.2 million were children; and 6.1 million lived in urban areas and 22.2 million in rural areas, with extreme need in 33 out of 34 provinces and 27 out of 34 major cities/provincial capitals. The report also stated that the number of Afghan people in need of humanitarian assistance had progressively increased from 18.4 million in 2021 to 24.4 million in 2022 to an estimated 28.3 million in 2023.² These figures included widows, pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, orphans, disabled people, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees, cross-border returnees, Pakistani refugees, and Afghan refugees returning from the neighbouring countries, mainly Pakistan and Iran.

Later, in June 2023, the OCHA came out with a revised assessment on the humanitarian situation in the country, increasing the estimated number of Afghan people in need from 28.3 million to 29.2 million—a 20 per cent increase compared to 2022—of whom approximately 15.5 million faced acute food insecurity. Of the 29.2 million people in need, about

¹ 'The Situation in Afghanistan', UN Digital Library, UNSC, Fifty-first Year, 3650th Meeting, S/PV. 3650, 9 April 1996, p. 30, at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/209512> (Accessed 27 September 2023).

² 'Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023', ReliefWeb, UNOCHA, 23 January 2023, pp. 10–11, at <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-overview-2023-january-2023> (Accessed 25 February 2023).

77 per cent were women and children and 8.3 per cent were people with severe disabilities.³

In the order of priority, after food assistance comes the need to provide life-saving shelter and essential non-food items to the affected people, particularly before the long and harsh winter sets in. According to the OCHA's revised assessment report, the number of people in need of emergency shelter and non-food assistance had risen nearly tenfold, from 1 million in 2018 to 9.5 million in 2023. In addition, almost 79 per cent of the households required shelter repairs and about 10–14 per cent of households were headed by women or children without adult male members.⁴

According to the UN estimates, in 2023, the malnutrition rates among children and women were extremely high, with some 875,000 children suffering from severe acute malnutrition and 2.3 million children and 840,000 women, including pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, suffering from moderate to acute malnutrition. About 80 per cent of households across Afghanistan were experiencing income reduction due to the third consecutive year of drought-like conditions in parts of the country and the second year of economic decline. The debts had also increased in 2023, both in terms of the number of people dependent on debt, which was 82 per cent of all households, and the amount of debt, which was about 11 per cent higher compared to the previous year.⁵

According to the OCHA's Afghanistan humanitarian needs and response plan for 2024, published in December 2023, an estimated 23.7 million

³ 'Afghanistan: Revised Humanitarian Response Plan 2023', ReliefWeb, UNOCHA, 4 June 2023, pp. 4 and 9, at <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-revised-humanitarian-response-plan-2023> (Accessed 15 August 2023).

⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

⁵ 'Afghanistan Refugee Crisis Explained', United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 18 July 2023, at <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/afghanistan-refugee-crisis-explained/> (Accessed 30 September 2023).

people—more than half of the country’s population—were projected to require humanitarian assistance. This is down from 29.2 million people projected in the OCHA’s aforementioned revised humanitarian assessment of June 2023. Of the 23.7 million Afghan people in need, 25 per cent were women, 52 per cent were children, 2 per cent were older people, and 11.8 per cent were people with disability.⁶ Women and children continued to constitute 77 per cent of the estimated Afghan people projected to require humanitarian assistance in 2024.

ORPHANS, WIDOWS AND DISABLED

The Taliban deputy minister of martyrs and disabled affairs in its press briefing held in August 2024 stated that a total of 653,265 orphans, widows, and disabled individuals were identified during the year, of which 264,335 had been registered until then with the ministry. It included more than 122,000 orphans, widows and disabled individuals from the previous government. He further stated that 28,183 individuals found ineligible during the verification process were deregistered from the ministry’s central system.⁷ Last year in August 2023, the Taliban deputy minister had stated that a total of 638,954 disabled people, widows and orphans had been registered with the ministry, of which 149,672 were disabled males, 30,777 were disabled females, 371,420 were orphans and 87,087 were widows. It included 150,000 widows and orphans from families that fought for the “Islamic Emirate” and 100,000 widows and orphans from families that fought for the previous

⁶ ‘Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024’, UNOCHA, 23 December 2023, p. 2, at <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2024-december-2023-endarips> (Accessed 20 October 2024).

⁷ ‘Ministry of Martyrs and Disabled Affairs Presents Annual Performance Report’, Al Emarah, 21 August 2024, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/ministry-of-martyrs-and-disabled-affairs-presents-annual-performance-report/> (Accessed 15 September 2024); and Nazir Shinwari, ‘Ministry of Martyrs: 15 Billion Afs Paid Out Last Year’, *Tolo News*, 21 August 2024, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-190335> (Accessed 26 August 2024).

government. It was also stated that more than 77,000 disabled people, orphans and widows had been biometrically registered.⁸

A model disability survey report⁹ on Afghanistan, published by The Asia Foundation in May 2020, had noted that with the rise in the levels of violence and conflict across the country, the severe disability prevalence among Afghan adults above 18 years had increased from an estimated 2.7 per cent in 2005 to 13.9 per cent (almost 2.5 million adults) in 2019, with another 40.4 per cent adults suffering from moderate disability and 24.6 per cent from mild disability. About 44.1 per cent of the disabled adults were not found using any assistive devices or products. The severe disability prevalence among the children (2–17 years) was said to be 3.5 per cent, with another 7.1 per cent suffering from moderate disability and 6.6 per cent from mild disability. In a way, almost 79 per cent of Afghan adults and over 17 per cent of Afghan children suffered from some form of disability—physical, psychological or sensory.

⁸ Nazir Shinwari, '638,954 Widows, Orphans, Disabled Registered in Past Year', *Tolo News*, 14 August 2023, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-184628> (Accessed 25 August 2023). Interestingly, the figure of 190,000 disabled people quoted by the Taliban deputy minister earlier in June 2023 was same as the number of disabled people registered with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as of 2020. See Nizamuddin Rezahi, 'Cash Aid Distribution to Orphans, Widows, Disabled People to Resume in Afghanistan', *The Khaama Press*, 15 June 2023, at <https://www.khaama.com/cash-aid-distribution-to-orphans-widows-disabled-people-to-resume-in-afghanistan/> (Accessed 16 June 2023); and 'Helping the Physically Disabled in Afghanistan: A Lifetime's Work', ICRC, 9 December 2020, at <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/helping-disabled-afghanistan> (Accessed 16 June 2023).

⁹ The Model Disability Survey of Afghanistan (MDSA) is a complex survey using multi-stage sampling, administered to adults (18+ years) and children (2–17 years), with separate survey tools for both. The MDSA was designed and implemented to generate representative data at nationally and regionally representative levels. A total of 14,290 households were surveyed from 14 April to 6 May 2019, representing 111,641 Afghans across the country. See Tabasum Akseer, 'Disability Survey is Afghanistan's First in 15 Years', ReliefWeb, May 2020, at <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/model-disability-survey-afghanistan-2019> (Accessed 16 June 2023).

According to the sample survey, severe disability prevalence varied across regions: 8.5 per cent (Kabul); 9.0 per cent (north); 11.4 per cent (central; excluding Kabul); 12.3 per cent (south); 13.9 per cent (east), 15.1 per cent (north-east); 19.1 per cent (south-east); 20.5 per cent (west); and 25.4 per cent (central highlands). The survey also noted that nearly 75 per cent of the disabled people resided in rural and semi-urban areas, and that disability prevalence was higher among Afghan females than males.¹⁰

According to a report published by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) in April 2020:

Afghanistan has one of the largest populations per capita of persons with disabilities in the world. At least one in five Afghan households includes an adult or child with a serious physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychosocial disability. More than 40 years of war have left more than one million Afghans with amputated limbs and other mobility, visual, or hearing disabilities. Many Afghans have psychosocial disabilities (mental health conditions) such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress, which are often a direct result of the protracted conflict. Other Afghans have pre-existing disabilities not directly related to the conflict, such as those caused by polio. [emphasis added]

Obtaining access to health care, education, and employment, along with other basic rights, is particularly difficult for Afghan women and girls with disabilities, who face both gender discrimination and stigma and barriers associated with their disability. ... *Afghan women with disabilities face intersecting forms of discrimination* in a society

¹⁰ 'Model Disability Survey of Afghanistan 2019', The Asia Foundation, 2020, pp. 14, 18, 27 and 54, at https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00Z3TKR.pdf (Accessed 16 June 2023); also see 'A Report on Human Rights Status of People with Disabilities in Afghanistan', Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, 2020, at <https://www.aihrc.org.af/media/files/A%20report%20on%20human%20rights%20status%20of%20people%20with%20disabilities%20in%20Afghanistan.pdf> (Accessed 16 June 2023).

where gender bias and violence against women are endemic.¹¹
[emphasis added]

It is to be noted that visual disabilities were also said to be common in Afghanistan, with an estimated 1.5 million people suffering from either a partial or complete loss of vision, caused in 80 per cent cases by lack of access to proper and timely treatment.¹² There were also rising cases of cerebral palsy in the country. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), there was a 50 per cent increase in the number of children treated for cerebral palsy at its physical rehabilitation centre in Kabul in 2022, compared to 2021. The number of patients treated for cerebral palsy reached 1,673 in the first 11 months of 2022, compared to 1,125 for the same period in 2021.¹³

Similarly, there were a large number of Afghan children suffering from congenital heart diseases/defects (CHDs). In September 2024, it was reported that 14,000 children suffering from CHD were registered with the Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS), of which 7,000 cases needed to be sent to Germany or India.¹⁴ Last year in September 2023, it was reported that the ARCS recommended about 1,801 children affected by CHD for treatment over the previous 14 months. The

¹¹ “‘Disability is Not Weakness’: Discrimination and Barriers Facing Women and Girls with Disabilities in Afghanistan’, HRW, 28 April 2020, at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/04/28/disability-not-weakness/discrimination-and-barriers-facing-women-and-girls> (Accessed 6 October 2023).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ ‘Afghanistan: 50 Per Cent Increase in Children with Cerebral Palsy Treated in Kabul’, ICRC, 11 January 2023, at <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/afghanistan-50-cent-increase-children-cerebral-palsy-treated-kabul> (Accessed 7 October 2023).

¹⁴ Habib Rahman Qooyash, ‘14,000 Afghan Children Suffer from Congenital Heart Defects: ARCS’, *Tolo News*, 15 September 2024, at <https://tolonews.com/health-190733> (Accessed 18 September 2024).

report added that about 12,000 Afghan children with CHD were registered with the ARCS for treatment.¹⁵

According to another estimate from 2020, one in every 100 children in Afghanistan was born with heart problems, which meant about 128,000 children with CHD across the country.¹⁶

The most common causes of various forms of disability prevalence in the country, including among children, were: injuries from remnant unexploded ordnance (UXO), landmines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), suicide bombings and airstrikes; the trauma and psychological distress caused by decades of violence and conflict; and blindness, cerebral palsy and polio.

UNEXPLODED ORDNANCE

According to the latest data of the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), as of April 2024, about 45,000 Afghan civilians had been killed or injured by landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) since 1989, averaging to around 110 persons per month. More than 14 million items of ERW, some 759,310 anti-personnel mines, and some 9,451 abandoned improvised mines had been cleared since 1989. Overall, a total of 34,918 hazardous areas had been cleared or cancelled, representing over 3,800 sq kms of land released for productive use to 3,300 gazetteer communities. Similarly, some 5,305 identified hazards

¹⁵ Esmat Khawrin, '30 More Children with Heart Defects Referred to Hospitals', *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 19 September 2023, at <https://pajhwok.com/2023/09/19/30-more-children-with-heart-defects-referred-to-hospitals/> (Accessed 9 October 2023); also see Sharifa Sultani, 'Over 1,100 Children Treated for Heart Diseases in Past 10 Months: ARCS', *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 24 May 2023, at <https://pajhwok.com/2023/05/24/over-1100-children-treated-for-heart-diseases-in-past-10-months-arcs/> (Accessed 9 October 2023).

¹⁶ 'QRCS Treats 60 Afghan Children with Congenital Heart Defects', ReliefWeb, Qatar Red Crescent Society (QRCS), 22 September 2020, at <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/qrcs-treats-60-afghan-children-congenital-heart-defects-enar> (Accessed 8 October 2023).

remained, representing nearly 1,247 sq km of land, threatening about 1,704 communities.¹⁷

According to OCHA reports, Afghanistan has ‘one of the highest levels of explosive hazard contamination in the world, with more than 60 people – mostly children – killed and maimed every month.’ It is said that ‘explosive hazards are the second leading cause of civilian casualties in Afghanistan’. It is estimated that there were 1,401 casualties between January 2022 and February 2024, 86 per cent of whom were children. Almost 4 million people in Afghanistan would be requiring mine action services in 2024.¹⁸

According to a report published by the UNAMA in 2023, between the Taliban takeover on 15 August 2021 and 30 May 2023, there were recorded 3,774 civilian casualties (1,095 killed, 2,679 wounded). The report stated that the leading causes of civilian casualties during the period were IED attacks (2,814 civilian casualties, with 701 killed and 2,113 wounded), ERW (639 civilian casualties) and targeted killings (148 civilian casualties). Among those killed and wounded by IED attacks were 289 children (75 killed, 214 wounded) and 168 women (64 killed, 104 wounded). The majority of civilian casualties (1,701) as a result of IEDs were due to attacks carried out by the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK). The report further stated that a significant number of casualties (1,095) resulting from IED attacks were never claimed by any entity.¹⁹

¹⁷ Afghanistan, UNMAS, as of April 2024, at <https://www.unmas.org/en/programmes/afghanistan> (Accessed 17 August 2024).

¹⁸ ‘Afghanistan: Unearthing Hope from a Legacy of Mines’, UNOCHA, 3 April 2024, at <https://www.unocha.org/news/afghanistan-unearthing-hope-legacy-mines> (Accessed 19 July 2024); and ‘Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024’, n. 6, p. 9.

¹⁹ ‘Impact of Improvised Explosive Devices on Civilians in Afghanistan’, 15 August 2021–30 May 2023, UNAMA Human Rights Service, 2023, pp. 5–6, at <https://unama.unmissions.org/impact-improvised-explosive-devices-civilians-afghanistan> (Accessed 22 September 2024).

According to the ICRC report of July 2023, 640 children had been killed or injured in 541 incidents caused due to explosion of remnant landmines and other ordnance between January 2022 and June 2023. This was said to be 60 per cent of the total number of civilian casualties (1,092 people) in UXO-related incidents that occurred during the period.²⁰

According to the Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict, for the period January–December 2022, the UN could verify the killing and maiming of 909 children in Afghanistan, of which 732 were boys and 177 were girls, with 253 killed and 656 maimed. It was stated that explosive ordnance was responsible for 718 of the 909 verified casualties among the Afghan children in 2022.²¹

Meanwhile, the Secretary-General's report of July 2023 on 'Assistance in Mine Action', while stating that figures from Afghanistan were under-reported, in its projected estimates put the casualty rate caused by explosive ordnance in the country, including ERW, mines and IEDs, at 851 in 2022.²² As per the UNICEF's preliminary data, 134 children were said to have been killed or maimed by explosive devices in the first three months of 2023.²³

²⁰ 'Afghanistan: Children are the Main Victims of Unexploded and Abandoned Weapons', ICRC, 31 July 2023, at <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/afghanistan-children-victims-unexploded-abandoned-weapons> (Accessed 8 October 2023).

²¹ 'Secretary-General Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict', Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, A/77/895-S/2023/363, 5 June 2023, p. 4, at <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/144/96/PDF/N2314496.pdf?OpenElement> (Accessed 17 December 2023).

²² 'Assistance in Mine Action: Report of the Secretary General', UN Digital Library, United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), A/78/259, 31 July 2023, p. 2, at https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4019981?ln=en&fbclid=IwAR1xBjXV0FMWWi988u7BbXOEZkD_ZRFyN2a-Vgc9aWZLFFCW5V52ety3A30 (Accessed 17 December 2023).

²³ 'Children Bearing the Brunt of Afghanistan Crisis: UNICEF', *UN News*, 18 May 2023, at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/05/1136797> (Accessed 22 August 2023).

INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

Afghanistan has the largest number of IDPs in South Asia and the second largest in the world after Syria. The years 2021 and 2022 saw unprecedented levels of both displacement and the return of displaced people in the country. According to the 2023 global reports of the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), there were about 6.6 million IDPs in Afghanistan as of December 2022, with two-thirds of them (over 4.39 million) mostly displaced earlier due to the rise in levels of violence (2019–21), particularly between May and August 2021 when the Taliban launched a nationwide offensive, and a third of them (about 2.16 million) as a result of recurrent natural disasters, like drought, flood, earthquake, landslide and avalanche.²⁴ According to the 2024 global reports of the IDMC, there were about 4.2 million IDPs in Afghanistan as of December 2023.²⁵

In a reversal of trend in 2022, largely attributed to the reduction in the levels of violence, a much larger proportion of displacement was caused by natural disasters than conflict. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), in its detailed report of June 2023, stated that of the 6.6 million IDPs in Afghanistan since 2012, about 2.6 million (two-fifths or 40 per cent) were displaced in 2021 and 2022, of which 44

²⁴ 'GRID 2023: Internal Displacement and Food Security', IDMC, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), May 2023, p. 66, at https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/IDMC_GRID_2023_Global_Report_on_Internal_Displacement_LR.pdf (Accessed 25 August 2023); and 'Institutional Strategy on Development Solutions to Internal Displacement', UNDP, June 2023, pp. 8 and 36, at <https://www.undp.org/publications/institutional-strategy-development-solutions-internal-displacement> (Accessed 25 August 2023).

²⁵ 'GRID 2024: Global Report on Internal Displacement', IDMC, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), May 2024, p. 78, at <https://api.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/IDMC-GRID-2024-Global-Report-on-Internal-Displacement.pdf> (Accessed 13 October 2024).

per cent were displaced due to the conflict and 66 per cent due to natural disasters. The top five provinces that together hosted almost 53 per cent of the 2.6 million IDPs from 2021 and 2022 were: Kabul (23 per cent); Herat (10 per cent); Balkh (8 per cent); Kandahar (7 per cent); and Helmand (6 per cent).²⁶ At the same time, according to the IOM, about 5.7 million IDPs had returned to their homes in 2021 and 2022, which was 52 per cent of the total 11 million IDPs who had returned to their homes since 2012. The top five provinces that together constituted 39 per cent of the 5.7 million returned IDPs were: Kunduz (12 per cent); Kandahar (7 per cent); Nangarhar (7 per cent); Baghlan (7 per cent); and Jawzjan (6 per cent).²⁷

Meanwhile, the Taliban-led State Ministry for Disaster Management stated in July 2023 that around 700 people were killed, more than 700 injured and about 20,000 houses destroyed in natural disasters across the country in the past one year. The ministry further stated that 20 provinces were threatened by floods, four provinces by earthquakes, as well as six provinces (Bamiyan, Daikundi, Badakhshan, Ghazni, Parwan and Baghlan) were affected by avalanches during the period.²⁸

Earlier, in March 2023, the ministry had informed that more than 1,096 people were killed, 2,157 injured and 10,806 houses destroyed in natural disasters during 2022–23. It was further stated that 22 of the 34 provinces were threatened by natural disasters.²⁹ Prior to it, in October

²⁶ ‘DTM Afghanistan—Baseline Mobility Assessment Report, Round 16 (September–December 2022)’, IOM, UN Migration, 6 June 2023, pp. 5 and 8, at <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/afghanistan-baseline-mobility-assessment-report-round-16-september-december-2022> (Accessed 11 September 2023).

²⁷ ‘DTM Afghanistan—Baseline Mobility Assessment Report, Round 16 (September–December 2022)’, n. 26.

²⁸ Nazir Shinwari, ‘Nearly 700 People Killed in Natural Disasters in Past Year: Official’, *Tolo News*, 31 July 2023, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-184435> (Accessed 29 September 2023).

²⁹ Nazir Shinwari, ‘Over 1,000 Killed in Natural Disasters this Year: Afghan Officials’, *Tolo News*, 12 March 2023, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-182463> (Accessed 29 September 2023).

2022, the ministry stated that 1,500 people were killed, 3,000 injured and 20,000 houses destroyed in natural disasters over the past year.³⁰ The Taliban estimates appear to be overlapping and lacking in clarity. According to the recent estimates of the OCHA, 26 out of 34 provinces were affected by natural disasters in 2023. The report added that earthquakes, floods, droughts, landslides and avalanches impact, on an average, 200,000 people in the country per year.³¹

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR; also known as the UN Refugee Agency) Operational Data Portal on Afghanistan, as of 30 June 2023, there were total 3.25 million IDPs in the country.³² The figures available on the UNHCR portal, as of 17 December 2023, indicated that about 20,937 IDPs had returned to their homes. The top five provinces that saw the new returned IDPs in 2023 were: Nuristan (13.4 per cent); Farah (10.6 per cent); Kabul (8.0 per cent); Kandahar (7.6 per cent); and Baghlan (5.9 per cent).³³ It was said that about 1.3 million IDPs living in informal settlements lacked access to basic services and proper shelter.³⁴

According to the World Food Programme (WFP), around 50,000 IDPs—mostly from provinces of Helmand, Balkh, Uruzgan, Kandahar

³⁰ Nazir Shinwari, 'Over 1,500 People Died in Natural Disasters in Past Year: Ministry', *Tolo News*, 20 October 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-180380> (Accessed 29 September 2023).

³¹ 'Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024 (December 2023)', ReliefWeb, n. 6, p. 19.

³² 'Afghanistan: Forced Displacement and Returns in 2023', UNHCR Operational Data Portal, as of 30 June 2023, at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/afg> (Accessed 17 October 2023).

³³ 'Afghanistan: Forced Displacement and Returns in 2023', UNHCR Operational Data Portal, as of 17 December 2023, at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/afg> (Accessed 20 December 2023).

³⁴ 'Afghanistan: Revised Humanitarian Response Plan 2023', n. 3, p. 24.

and Laghman—were living in makeshift villages around the capital, Kabul, alone.³⁵

As for the status of IDPs in 2024, the figures available on the UNHCR Operational Data Portal on Afghanistan indicated 3.22 million IDPs, as of 30 June 2024. According to the portal, as of 12 October 2024, about 19,085 IDPs had returned to their homes, taking the total number IDP returns since 2021 to 1.58 million. The top five provinces that saw the new returned IDPs in 2024 were: Baghlan (44.6 per cent); Faryab (21 per cent); Takhar (15.6 per cent); Farah (7.6 per cent); and Zabul (2.2 per cent).³⁶

HERAT EARTHQUAKES

The series of earthquake and aftershock that hit the western province of Herat between 7–15 October 2023, with tremors felt in the neighbouring provinces of Badghis and Farah, had further compounded the ongoing humanitarian efforts, particularly in view of the harsh winter season and the arrival of large number of Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran. According to the latest World Health Organization (WHO) situation report of November 2023 on Herat earthquakes: over 1,400 people were reportedly killed and 2,000 injured; more than 275,000 people in 382 villages were directly affected, spread across the districts of Herat, Injil, Kushk, Zindajan, Gulran, Guzara, Ghoryan, Karukh and Koshan; over 10,000 houses were completely destroyed, 220,430 houses were severely damaged, and 40 health facilities also were damaged; and more than 47,000 people were said to be living in makeshift tents and temporary shelters. Of the estimated

³⁵ Rana Deraz, “‘We Eat Less, Sometimes Not at All’: Cuts to Food Relief Deepen Hunger in Afghanistan”, WFP, 4 September 2023, at <https://www.wfp.org/stories/we-eat-less-sometimes-not-all-cuts-food-relief-deepen-hunger-afghanistan> (Accessed 11 September 2023).

³⁶ ‘Afghanistan: Forced Displacement and Returns in 2024’, UNHCR Operational Data Portal, as of 12 October 2024, at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/afg> (Accessed 19 October 2024).

275,000 affected people and in need of humanitarian assistance, about 60 per cent were children.³⁷

According to the UNICEF updates, as of 23 October 2023, nearly 1,500 people were reportedly killed in the Herat earthquakes, with almost 90 per cent of those killed being women and children. An estimated 96,000 children were believed to have been affected by the Herat earthquakes.³⁸ However, the IOM, in its latest situation report on Herat earthquakes, stated that as per the needs assessment data from 12 November 2023, a total of 451,570 people (amounting to 52,352 families) spread across nine districts had been directly impacted and were in need of assistance. It added that over 51,852 homes had been impacted, with 19 per cent homes completely destroyed, 43 per cent severely damaged and 38 per cent moderately damaged.³⁹

REFUGEES FROM WAZIRISTAN

According to the UNHCR estimates, as of 31 December 2023, there were 34,800 refugees, mostly from Pakistan, in Afghanistan.⁴⁰ As per the earlier UNHCR estimates, as of 30 June 2023, Afghanistan hosted

³⁷ 'Afghanistan: Earthquakes in Herat Province', Health Situation Report No. 12, WHO, November 2023, p. 1, at https://www.emro.who.int/images/stories/afghanistan/Earthquake_in_Herat_AFGHANISTAN_Health_Sitrep_12.pdf?ua=1 (Accessed 21 December 2023).

³⁸ 'UNICEF Earthquake Relief Supplies to Treat Afghan Children and their Families Arrive in Kabul', Press Release, UNICEF, 23 October 2023, at <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-earthquake-relief-supplies-treat-afghan-children-and-their-families-arrive> (Accessed 21 December 2023).

³⁹ 'Herat Earthquake—Situation Report # 12, 4–10 December 2023', IOM Afghanistan, UN Migration, 10 December 2023, at <https://afghanistan.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11071/files/documents/2023-12/earthquake-flash-update-12.pdf> (Accessed 21 December 2023).

⁴⁰ 'Afghanistan Situation Update #38', UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific (RBAP), as of 1 September 2024, p. 1, at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/111299> (Accessed 9 October 2024).

over 52,000 refugees from Pakistan in its south-eastern Khost and Paktika provinces, bordering the Durand Line. Although some of them had returned to Pakistan at the end of 2021 and in early 2022, the majority remain apprehensive and it was unlikely that they would leave Afghanistan any time soon.⁴¹ Most of them had arrived following Operation Zarb-e-Azb launched by the Pakistan military in North Waziristan in 2014. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), in its briefing note of October 2019, noted that while several of the refugees from Waziristan had returned since 2014, there were still approximately 72,000 remaining in Afghanistan, with most of them living in the Gulan refugee camp in Khost Province. The clashes along the Durand Line in May 2019 had led to the further arrival of 750 families from North Waziristan into Khost, with over 400 refugee families previously living in Paktika Province. Most of them were said to be reluctant to return due to the volatile situation in North Waziristan and fear of detention upon return.⁴²

RETURN OF AFGHAN REFUGEES

In the last over two years, there has been a growth in the number of Afghan refugees returning to Afghanistan. One of the reasons has been the deteriorating security and economic conditions in Pakistan and relative stability in Afghanistan. To understand this phenomenon, let us first take a look at the presence of Afghan refugees in the neighbouring countries since 2021.

⁴¹ 'External Update: Afghanistan Situation # 29', UNHRC RBAP, as of 1 November 2023, p. 1, at <https://reporting.unhcr.org/afghanistan-situation-update-29> (Accessed 20 December 2023); and 'Afghanistan Humanitarian Response Plan 2023', UNOCHA, 9 March 2023, p. 132, at <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-response-plan-2023-march-2023> (Accessed 9 September 2023).

⁴² 'Left Behind: Waziristan Refugees in Afghanistan Risk being Forgotten as Humanitarian Assistance Decreases', Briefing Note, NRC, 15 October 2019, p. 1, at <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/briefing-notes/left-behind-waziristan-refugees-in-afghanistan/left-behind—situation-for-waziristan-refugees.pdf> (Accessed 25 September 2023).

According to a UNHCR report of July 2023, with more than 1.6 million Afghans having fled the country since 2021, the total number of Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries had risen to over 8 million, making Afghans the third-largest displaced population following Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. These refugees were spread across 103 countries in 2023, with a large majority of them living in Pakistan and Iran for the past four decades. Further, the report stated that over 70 per cent of the Afghan refugees in need of humanitarian support were women and children. As observed by High Commissioner Filippo Grandi, UNHCR: 'Afghanistan's displacement crisis is one of the largest and most protracted in UNHCR's seven-decade history. We're now seeing a third generation of Afghan children born in exile.'⁴³ Similarly, a UNICEF report of August 2023 stated that there were over 8.2 million Afghan refugees and asylum seekers living in Iran (4.5 million), Pakistan (3.7 million), Tajikistan (9,500) and Uzbekistan (2,000). As of 30 June 2023, it included about 2.1 million registered Afghan refugees, of whom about 1.6 million arrived mostly in Iran and Pakistan after August 2021.⁴⁴

However, according to the UNHCR Operational Data Portal on Afghanistan, 13,020 Afghan nationals were residing temporarily in Uzbekistan as of 30 November 2021. A majority of them arrived before the Taliban took over Kabul in August 2021, and with valid visas issued by the Uzbek Consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif.⁴⁵ Of the 4.5 million Afghan refugees in Iran, 2.6 million were head counted, including over a million who arrived 2021 onwards; 750,000 were Afghan *Amayesh* card holders; 360,000 were with residence permits; 267,000 Afghans were family passport holders; and 500,000 were undocumented

⁴³ 'Afghanistan Refugee Crisis Explained', n. 5.

⁴⁴ 'Afghanistan Outflow: Humanitarian Situation Report No. 1', Reporting period 1 January to 30 June 2023, UNICEF, 15 August 2023, pp. 1, 4 and 29, at [https://www.unicef.org/media/144081/file/Afghanistan-Outflow-Humanitarian-SitRep-Mid-Year-2023 .pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/144081/file/Afghanistan-Outflow-Humanitarian-SitRep-Mid-Year-2023.pdf) (Accessed 3 October 2023).

⁴⁵ 'Afghanistan: Operational Data Portal', UNHCR, 30 November 2021, at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan> (Accessed 3 October 2023).

Afghans.⁴⁶ The UNICEF Iran was said to be facing 84 per cent funding gap for its planned health response and 82 per cent for its nutritional response.⁴⁷

Of the over 3.7 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, 52 per cent were said to be below the age of 18 years, and about 68.8 per cent were said to be living in urban or semi-urban areas and 31.2 per cent in the remaining 54 refugee villages. The 3.7 million Afghan refugees were estimated to include: 1.3 million with proof of registration (PoR) cards; 840,000 with Afghan citizenship cards (ACC); 146,240 unregistered members of registered families (UMRF); 775,000 undocumented Afghans; and 600,000 new arrivals since 2021. About 77 per cent of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan resided in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (52.6 per cent) and Balochistan (24.1 per cent), which already had poor economic conditions. The remaining Afghan refugees were spread over the provinces of Punjab (14.3 per cent), Sindh (5.5 per cent) and Islamabad (3.1 per cent). Over 6,000 Afghan refugees were voluntarily repatriated from Pakistan in 2022.⁴⁸

As for Tajikistan, there were 9,532 Afghan people living in the country, including 8,232 refugees, 1,097 asylum seekers and 203 people in refugee-like situations, as of 31 March 2023. Uzbekistan informed that it hosted around 2,000 Afghans on valid visas, as of December 2022. The Turkmen foreign ministry informed that there were no refugee arrivals from Afghanistan 2021 onwards.⁴⁹

As per the UNHCR report of August 2023, about 8,029 Afghan refugees voluntarily returned to Afghanistan (95 per cent from Pakistan,

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ 'Afghanistan Outflow: Humanitarian Situation Report No. 1', n. 44.

⁴⁸ 'Pakistan: Operational Data Portal', UNHCR, at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/pak> (Accessed 4 October 2023); and 'Pakistan Factsheet', UNHCR, August 2023, p. 1, at <https://reporting.unhcr.org/pakistan-factsheet-5426> (Accessed 5 October 2023).

⁴⁹ 'Afghanistan Outflow: Humanitarian Situation Report No. 1', n. 44, pp. 2, 6, 9 and 11.

4 per cent from Iran and 1 per cent from other countries) in the first seven months of 2023, which was five times higher compared to the same period in 2022. The total number of Afghan refugees that returned in 2022 was 6,424, which again was five times higher compared to 2021.⁵⁰ However, as per the UNHCR's refugee data portal on Afghanistan: 1,429 Afghan refugees returned in 2021; 6,506 in 2022; and 14,028 (96.2 per cent from Pakistan, 2.9 per cent from Iran and 0.8 per cent from other countries) had returned as of 12 October 2023. More than half of the refugees that returned were said to be in Kabul (20.1 per cent), Kunduz (13.6), Kandahar (10 per cent), Nangarhar (8.7 per cent) and Balkh (8 per cent).⁵¹

From September–October 2023 onwards, Afghanistan witnessed a huge influx of Afghan refugees from both Pakistan and Iran. On 3 October, Pakistan's interior minister announced the decision taken by the Apex Committee of the National Action Plan to repatriate all undocumented foreigners staying illegally in the country by 1 November 2023, failing which they would be deported. According to the UNHCR's latest external update on the Afghanistan situation, between January and November 2023, some 631,000 Afghans were deported from Iran and over 30,700 Afghans were deported from Pakistan, with 25,862 Afghans deported between 15 September and 30 November.⁵² The OCHA, in its report of December 2023 on Afghanistan, stated that 1.9 million Afghans had returned to the country until late December in 2023, including more than 471,000 from Pakistan since 15 September

⁵⁰ 'External Update: Afghanistan Situation #27', UNHCR RBAP, as of 1 August 2023, p. 3, at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/103085> (Accessed 3 October 2023).

⁵¹ 'Afghanistan: Forced Displacement and Returns', UNHCR Operational Data Portal, as of 12 October 2023, at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/afg> (Accessed 17 October 2023).

⁵² 'UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific (RBAP): External Update: Afghanistan Situation #30, as of 1 December 2023', ReliefWeb, UNHCR, 21 December 2023, at <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/unhcr-regional-bureau-asia-and-pacific-rbap-external-update-afghanistan-situation-30-1-december-2023> (Accessed 23 December 2023).

2023, with numbers increasing from less than 200 per day in early October to more than 25,000 by early November 2023. The report also projected:

Over 1.4 million Afghan returnees from Iran and Pakistan are anticipated to be ‘on the move’ across borders in 2024. This includes more than 978,000 newly returning Afghans from Iran, as well as and 423,000 undocumented returnees and 60,000 documented refugees from Pakistan, many of whom will require humanitarian assistance.⁵³

According to the UNHCR operational update of September 2024, over 733,300 Afghans were said to have returned to Afghanistan between 15 September 2023 and 30 September 2024. The update added that, in 2024, returns reached their peak in May and June (38,000 per month). However, it came down to some 22,000 in September 2024.⁵⁴

The UNHCR’s operational data portal, as of 19 October 2024, indicated that 747,200 Afghans had returned since 15 September 2023, with 30,140 Afghans returning in 2024 alone. Of the 30,140 returnee Afghan refugees in 2024, 97.2 per cent returned from Pakistan, 2.4 per cent from Iran and 0.3 from other countries. Most of the refugee returnees went to Kabul (26.2 per cent), Kunduz (12.6 per cent), Nangarhar (12.4 per cent), Kandahar (7.9 per cent), Baghlan (5.2 per cent), and to other provinces.⁵⁵ However, according to the UNHCR operational data, as of 30 June 2024, there were over 5.5 million Afghan refugees and asylum seekers living in Iran (3.7 million or 67.9 per cent), Pakistan (1.7 million or 31.7 per cent), Tajikistan (10,400 or 0.2 per cent),

⁵³ ‘Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024’, n. 6, pp. 17 and 27.

⁵⁴ ‘Afghanistan: UNHCR Operational Update’, September 2024, p. 1, at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/111917> (Accessed 10 October 2024).

⁵⁵ ‘Afghanistan: Forced Displacement and Returns’, UNHCR Operational Data Portal, as of 19 October 2024, at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/afg> (Accessed 20 October 2024).

Uzbekistan (9,000 or 0.2 per cent) and Turkmenistan (3,500 or 0.1 per cent).⁵⁶

HUMANITARIAN ACCESS CONSTRAINTS

According to a UN survey, about 151 non-governmental humanitarian organisations and agencies were operating in Afghanistan as of December 2022. Of the 151, 78 were non-governmental organisations (NGOs), 48 were international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and 25 were civil society organisations (CSOs). These organisations were engaged in 16 affected sectors: education; protection; food security; gender-based violence; child protection; cash and voucher assistance; accountability to affected people; nutrition; health; emergency shelter and non-food items; water sanitation hygiene; logistics; mental health and psychological support; protection from sexual exploitation and abuse; disability inclusion; and early recovery.⁵⁷

However, these humanitarian organisations and agencies had been confronting various access challenges from the Taliban side while delivering aid and assistance to the people in need. According to the OCHA report of August 2023, the humanitarian partners reportedly documented 127 such incidents in the month of August. The Taliban authorities were said to be responsible for 99 per cent of such incidents, primarily in the central, western and northern regions of the country. Due to the Taliban interference, 49 humanitarian programmes had to be temporarily suspended in August, a 30 per cent decrease compared to July. Of these 49 programmes, 36 programmes remained suspended as of September. It included the Taliban requests for 'staff lists and sensitive data (47 incidents)', 'interference with programming (30

⁵⁶ 'Refugee Returnees to Afghanistan', UNHCR Operational Data Portal, as of 19 October 2024, at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan> (Accessed 20 October 2024).

⁵⁷ 'Snapshot: Impact of the Ban on Women NGO and INGO Workers in Afghanistan', ReliefWeb, UN Women, 31 December 2022, at <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/snapshot-impact-ban-women-ngo-and-ingo-workers-afghanistan> (Accessed 30 September 2023).

incidents)', 'delays in signing memorandums of understanding (MoUs) (12 incidents)', 'interference with staff recruitment (11 incidents)' and 'interference or attempted interference in beneficiary selection (two incidents)'. The delay in signing of MoUs and interference with staff recruitment were the most significant challenges in implementing humanitarian programmes in the country.⁵⁸

The OCHA report also referred to reports of violence against humanitarian personnel and facilities. In 2023, until the month of August, there were 113 cases of detention of humanitarian workers, which marked a 73 per cent increase compared to the same period in the previous year. There were 15 such cases in the month of August alone, restricting the movement of humanitarian workers and distribution of critical aid in the affected parts of the country. Of the number of restrictions imposed by the Taliban in August, 67 per cent pertained to women humanitarian workers, further hindering access to women and children in need. The report stated that of the 127 reported cases of the Taliban interference until August 2023, 17 per cent were about restrictions on women humanitarian workers, including those engaged in the supposedly exempted sectors of education and health.⁵⁹

IMPACT OF POPPY PROHIBITION

On 3 April 2022, more than seven months after the Taliban spokesperson first announced that Afghanistan will be 'a narcotics-free country',⁶⁰ Taliban chief Hibatullah Akhundzada's office issued a decree stating:

All Afghans are informed that from now on, cultivation of poppy has been strictly prohibited across the country. If anyone violates

⁵⁸ 'Afghanistan: Humanitarian Access Snapshot (August 2023)', ReliefWeb, UNOCHA, 24 September 2023, at <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-access-snapshot-august-2023> (Accessed 30 September 2023).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ 'Transcript of Taliban's First News Conference in Kabul', *Al Jazeera*, 17 August 2021, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/transcript-of-talibans-first-press-conference-in-kabul> (Accessed 22 August 2021).

the decree, the crop will be destroyed immediately and the violator will be treated according to the Sharia law.

In addition, usage, transportation, trade, export and import of all types of narcotics such as alcohol, heroin, tablet K, hashish and etc., including drug manufacturing factories in Afghanistan are strictly banned.

Enforcement of this decree is mandatory. The violator will be prosecuted and punished by the judiciary.⁶¹

According to a research brief published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in November 2022, Afghanistan continued to be the largest opium producer, accounting for almost 80 per cent of the global opiate demand, with opium cultivation increasing by 32 per cent, or 56,000 hectares, compared to 2021. In addition, despite the Taliban prohibition on poppy cultivation and production and trafficking of all types of narcotics, the income made by Afghan farmers from opium sales tripled from US\$ 425 million in 2021 to US\$ 1.4 billion in 2022.⁶² However, the impact of the Taliban prohibition, if any, can be better assessed only by 2024 and 2025. The UNODC's recent report of November 2023 suggested that the Taliban prohibition was effective for now, as poppy cultivation saw a drastic reduction by an estimated 95 per cent in the country in 2023. The opium cultivation declined from 233,000 hectares to just 10,800 hectares, leading to a corresponding 95 per cent drop in the supply of opium, from 6,200 tonnes in 2022 to just 333 tonnes in 2023. However, the report noted that while many farmers had turned to cultivating wheat,

⁶¹ 'Decree of Amir al-Momenin regarding Prohibition of Poppy Cultivation in the Country', Al Emarah, 3 April 2022, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/decreed-of-amir-al-momenin-regarding-prohibition-of-poppy-cultivation-and-any-intoxicants/> (Accessed 9 May 2023).

⁶² 'Opium Cultivation in Afghanistan: Latest Findings and Emerging Threats', Research Brief, UNODC, November 2022, at https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Opium_cultivation_Afghanistan_2022.pdf (Accessed 8 May 2023).

there had been a surge in trafficking and seizure of methamphetamine and other synthetic drugs in the region.⁶³

According to the spokesperson of the Taliban-led Afghan Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, the wheat production in the country had increased by 13 per cent in 2023, compared to the previous year. Approximately 4.3 million tonne wheat was produced in 2023, cultivated over 2.2 million hectares of land, mainly in Helmand, Kandahar, Herat and Kunduz provinces. Most of the farmers who cultivated wheat, however, complained of the lack of irrigation facilities and the high price of chemical fertilisers. The ministry spokesperson also informed that Afghanistan had an annual wheat requirement of about 6.6 million tonnes and, currently, part of the wheat shortfall was being met through imports from Central Asian and other regional countries.⁶⁴ In July 2024, the Taliban-led Afghan Ministry of Commerce and Industry reported that despite increase in wheat production over the past year, Afghanistan had to import 17,000 tonnes of wheat in the first quarter of the year. The wheat had to be imported from several countries, including Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Russia, Kazakhstan, India, Turkmenistan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).⁶⁵

Meanwhile, in the absence of adequate international funding and planned efforts towards crop substitution and alternative livelihood support, a lingering issue for past two decades, the economic sustainability and financial viability of any counter-narcotics effort remains questionable. According to the UNODC, about 200,000 Afghan households relied

⁶³ 'Afghanistan Opium Survey 2023', Research Brief, UNODC, November 2023, at https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_opium_survey_2023.pdf (Accessed 26 November 2023).

⁶⁴ Bibi Amina Hakimi, 'Ministry: Wheat Yield Increased by 13% this Year', *Tolo News*, 5 December 2023, at <https://tolonews.com/business-186349> (Accessed 6 December 2023).

⁶⁵ 'Afghanistan Imports 17,000 Tons of Wheat in First Quarter', *Tolo News*, 31 July 2024, at <https://tolonews.com/business-190007> (Accessed 29 August 2024).

on poppy cultivation for their livelihoods. It included some of the most vulnerable sections of the society with no alternative livelihood support—landless and small-holder farmers, migrant workers, women-headed households, rural youth and the disabled. As per the UNODC's earlier estimates:

opium poppy weeding and harvesting provided the equivalent of up to 354,000 full time jobs to local and migrant workers hired by farmers. When also including labor by family members, it was estimated that opium poppy cultivation provided around 590,000 full time equivalent on-farm jobs in 2017.⁶⁶

Further reflecting on the broader and more direct implications of banning poppy cultivation, without addressing the issue of alternative livelihood support to the affected sections of the rural population, the UNODC made a detailed observation:

In the absence of alternatives, poppy farmers are desperately resorting to negative coping mechanisms including but not limited to exploitative child labor, early and forced marriages, sale of assets, organs and even children. Some farmers and in particular those who defaulted on their debt to opium traders who were providing advance loans through an informal credit system, are migrating withing [*sic*] and outside of Afghanistan.

The significant loss of income due to the poppy ban without alternatives is creating a self-perpetuating negative feedback loop whereby poppy farmers are forced to cut back on their food and health expenditures...while the yield and productivity of licit crops cultivation is also anticipated to reduce as part of the poppy income was also financing the inputs, fertilizers, pest management and agricultural tools/equipment/machinery used for the licit crops cultivation. This negative feedback loop is expected to be further reinforced as many farmers cultivated

⁶⁶ 'Taliban's Poppy Ban: Can It Work?', UNODC Afghanistan, at <https://www.unodc.org/coafg/en/poppy-ban.html> (Accessed 1 October 2023).

wheat in place of poppy whose planting seasons overlap with each other which will cause an increase in wheat production in the short run but also a reduction in wheat prices disincentivizing future wheat cultivation unless crop plantation is carefully planned taking into account the market dynamics.

...[It] has led some poppy farmers to cultivate cotton instead of food crops during the 2023 spring/summer cultivation season to compensate for the loss of poppy income as the former has higher value but also is a water intensive crop that exacerbates the overuse of ground water...which has taken over the surface water as the primary water source for irrigation. The well depths have been becoming increasingly deeper and depths over 100 meters are increasingly becoming common place.⁶⁷

FROZEN CENTRAL BANK RESERVES

Within months of taking over Kabul in August 2021, the Taliban had begun appealing to the international community for urgent resumption of international aid and assistance, delinking it from political issues. They also demanded access to the foreign reserves of the country's central bank, Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), mostly held at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, to deal with the worsening humanitarian and economic crises in the country. The DAB's gross foreign reserves were estimated to be approximately \$9.5 billion, of which \$7 billion was held at the US Federal Reserve and the remaining was held at international financial institutions.⁶⁸ The US Department of Treasury

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ 'Monthly Report: June 2021', Monetary Policy Department, Da Afghanistan Bank, p. 5, at [https://dab.gov.af/sites/default/files/2022-07/MPD Monthly Report-June 2021.pdf](https://dab.gov.af/sites/default/files/2022-07/MPD%20Monthly%20Report-June%2021.pdf) (Accessed 2 September 2023); and 'Islamic Republic of Afghanistan: First Review under the Extended Credit Facility Arrangement and Request for Modification of Performance Criteria—Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Islamic Republic of Afghanistan', International Monetary Fund (IMF) Country Report No. 2021/138, 28 June 2021, p. 7, at <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2021/06/28/Islamic-Republic-of-Afghanistan-First-Review-Under-the-Under-the-Extended-Credit-Facility-461288> (Accessed 3 September 2023).

had blocked the US accounts holding DAB's reserves shortly before the Haqqani–Taliban forces entered the capital, Kabul.⁶⁹

The former Acting DAB Governor Ajmal Ahmady, in a series of tweet posted on 18 August 2021, also informed that the DAB's total foreign reserves were approximately \$9 billion. Of the \$9 billion, \$7 billion were held by the US Federal Reserve, which included \$3.1 billion in US treasury bills/bonds, \$2.4 billion in World Bank Reserve Advisory & Management Partnership (WB RAMP) assets, \$1.2 billion in gold and 0.3 billion in cash accounts. In addition to it, \$1.3 billion were held in international accounts and \$0.7 billion in the Bank for International Settlements (BIS). According to Ahmady, the Taliban had access to only 0.1–0.2 per cent of the DAB's total international reserves. He further stated that the DAB was dependent on physical shipment of cash every few weeks, and that the bank assets were monitored by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the US Department of Treasury.⁷⁰

In November 2021, Acting Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, in an open letter to the US Congress, expressed surprise at the freezing of the DAB reserves by the US at a time when Afghanistan 'has been hammered by corona virus, drought, war and poverty'. Questioning the justification of the US decision, he argued that

⁶⁹ Saleha Mohsin, 'U.S. Freezes Nearly \$9.5 Billion Afghanistan Central Bank Assets', *Bloomberg*, 18 August 2021, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-08-17/u-s-freezes-nearly-9-5-billion-afghanistan-central-bank-assets#xj4y7vzkg> (Accessed 3 September 2023); and Jeff Stein, 'Biden Administration Freezes Billions of Dollars in Afghan Reserves, Depriving Taliban of Cash', *The Washington Post*, 17 August 2021, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/us-policy/2021/08/17/treasury-taliban-money-afghanistan/> (Accessed 3 September 2023).

⁷⁰ See Ajmal Ahmady, Former DAB Governor, Twitter Post, 18 August 2021, 12:10 pm, at <https://twitter.com/aahmady/status/1427883009164955649> (Accessed 4 September 2023); and Nikhil Rampal, 'Why Taliban Can't Lay its Hands on Afghanistan's \$9 Billion Reserves', *The Print*, 19 August 2021, at <https://theprint.in/world/why-taliban-cant-lay-its-hands-on-afghanistans-9-billion-reserves/718497/> (Accessed 4 September 2023).

following the signing of the Doha Agreement, the two countries were no more in direct conflict with one another and the Afghan people had a right to financial security. Inviting the US to invest in Afghanistan, he expressed his government's interest in 'establishing positive relations with all world governments including the American administration' and called upon the US to 'take responsible steps towards addressing the humanitarian and economic crisis unfolding in Afghanistan so that doors for future relations are opened' and 'assets of Afghanistan's Central Bank are unfrozen and sanctions on our [Afghan] banks are lifted'.⁷¹

In a series of tweet thereafter, the then US Special Representative for Afghanistan, Thomas West, retorted that the 'Taliban letter 'misconstrued the facts' as Afghanistan was 'already suffering a terrible humanitarian crisis before mid-August, made worse by war, years of drought, & the pandemic'. He asserted that the US:

made clear to the Taliban for years that if they pursued a military takeover rather than a negotiated settlement with fellow Afghans then critical non-humanitarian aid provided by the international community—in an economy enormously dependent on aid, including for basic services—would all but cease.⁷²

He argued that the Taliban will have to earn their legitimacy by addressing the issue of terrorism; establishing an inclusive government; and

⁷¹ 'IEA Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Open Letter to the US Congress', *Bakhtar News Agency*, Kabul, 17 November 2021, at <https://bakhtarnews.af/en/iea-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-open-letter-to-the-us-congress/> (Accessed 15 April 2023); and Abdul Qahar Balkhi, Taliban Spokesperson, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Open Letter to US Congress', Twitter Post, 17 November 2021, 10:32 am, at <https://twitter.com/QaharBalkhi/status/1460835705828085761> (Accessed 15 April 2023).

⁷² Thomas West, US Special Representative for Afghanistan, Twitter Post, 19 November 2021, 7:32 pm, at <https://twitter.com/US4AfghanPeace/status/1461698124695719940> (Accessed 18 September 2023); and Rajab Taieb, 'US Envoy Thomas West Reacts to Taliban Letter to US Congress', *Tolo News*, 19 November 2021, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-175529> (Accessed 18 September 2023).

respecting the rights of minorities, women and girls, including their equal access to education and employment. West further stated that the US will continue to provide humanitarian aid to support the Afghan people and pursue 'clear-eyed, candid diplomacy' with the Taliban.⁷³

The very next month, in December 2021, Muttaqi, in an interview, reportedly reiterated his government's progress on several fronts and assured that it was committed to reforms in its policies and sought the world's 'mercy and compassion' to help millions of Afghans facing acute hunger and starvation.⁷⁴ Two months later, in February 2022, US President Joseph Biden issued an executive order to block the Taliban from accessing the DAB reserves held at the US financial institutions.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the US Department of the Treasury issued a series of general licences (GLs), seven in all, between September 2021 and February 2022, in order to authorise the resumption of humanitarian assistance, other support and trade with Afghanistan, which otherwise was prohibited by the Global Terrorism Sanctions Regulations, the Foreign Terrorist Organizations Sanctions Regulations or the Executive Order 13224 of September 2001. The purpose was to ensure that the US efforts at supporting the basic humanitarian needs of the people in Afghanistan were not impeded by the US sanctions on the Taliban and the Haqqani Network. These GLs authorised: humanitarian activities in Afghanistan; transactions related to the exportation or re-exportation of agricultural

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Kathy Gannon, 'The AP Interview: Taliban Seek Ties with US, Other Ex-foes', *The Associated Press*, 14 December 2021, at <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-united-states-only-on-ap-kabul-taliban-c0475a3370ea219aabb3ded311911cc1> (Accessed 14 April 2023).

⁷⁵ 'Executive Order on Protecting Certain Property of Da Afghanistan Bank for the Benefit of the People of Afghanistan', The White House, 11 February 2022, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/02/11/executive-order-on-protecting-certain-property-of-da-afghanistan-bank-for-the-benefit-of-the-people-of-afghanistan/> (Accessed 5 September 2023).

commodities, medicine, medical devices, replacement parts and components or software updates; non-commercial, personal remittances; official business of the US government; official activities of certain international organisations and other international entities; certain transactions in support of NGOs; and transactions involving Afghanistan or governing institutions in Afghanistan.⁷⁶

In 2022, according to the US Department of the Treasury fact sheet on Afghanistan, the Taliban and the Haqqani Network were designated as Specially Designated Global Terrorists, or SDGTs, and the Haqqani Network was also designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). However, the fact sheet stated:

there are no OFAC-administered sanctions that prohibit the export or reexport of goods or services to Afghanistan, moving or sending money into and out of Afghanistan, or activities in Afghanistan, provided that such transactions or activities do not involve sanctioned individuals, entities, or property in which sanctioned individuals and entities have an interest.⁷⁷

It is noteworthy that the annual international development aid to Afghanistan had been declining since before the Taliban took over power. According to the World Bank data, international aid to Afghanistan came down from a high of \$6.7 billion in 2011 to \$4.2 billion in 2019. The US too had reduced its annual development assistance to about \$600 million by 2019. In view of the decreasing international aid to Afghanistan, the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), John F. Sopko, had warned in

⁷⁶ See 'General Licences', in 'Afghanistan-related Sanctions', OFAC, US Department of the Treasury, US Government, at <https://ofac.treasury.gov/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/afghanistan-related-sanctions> (Accessed 3 September 2023).

⁷⁷ 'Fact Sheet: Provision of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan and Support for the Afghan People', US Department of the Treasury, 13 April 2022, p. 1, at <https://ofac.treasury.gov/media/922136/download?inline> (Accessed 5 September 2023).

March 2021: ‘Eighty percent of Afghanistan’s budget is funded by the U.S. and the (other international) donors. If, for whatever reason, the donors keep drawing down funding...that could bring the sudden demise of the Afghan government as we know it.’⁷⁸

Interestingly, US remains the largest donor to the Afghan people. According to the SIGAR’s latest quarterly report, US had appropriated, as of 30 June 2024, approximately \$20.71 billion in assistance to Afghanistan and to Afghan refugees. US was also the single largest donor to the UN Humanitarian Response Plan for Afghanistan, as of 12 July 2024. US appropriations for Afghan reconstruction prior to the withdrawal period (FY 2002 to FY 2021) amounted to nearly \$144.75 billion. US appropriations over the past three years (FY 2022, FY 2023 and FY 2024) amounted to more than \$2.97 billion.⁷⁹

SUMMING UP

Although humanitarian aid and assistance to Afghanistan has been trickling in since late 2021, and will continue to, it is the Taliban’s notable lack of people-centric approach to governance, as evident from its continued and rigid aversion to “inclusivity”, both in terms of ethnicity and gender, and its decades-old ties with Al-Qaeda and affinity to various regional Islamist groups with presence in Afghanistan, which has complicated the prospect of removal of the Taliban members and entities from the UN sanctions list. It has also hindered the prospects of defreezing of Afghan central bank reserves and increased flow of funds and investment needed to revive the Afghan economy. Large foreign aid and grants, particularly as economies struggle to cope with

⁷⁸ Jonathan Landay and Idrees Ali, ‘U.S., Other Aid Cuts could Imperil Afghan Government—U.S. Watchdog’, *Reuters*, 16 March 2021, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-afghanistan-funding-int-idUSKBN2B72WJ> (Accessed 5 September 2023).

⁷⁹ ‘Quarterly Report to the United States Congress’, SIGAR, 30 July 2024, pp. 5, 72 and 141, at <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2024-07-30qr.pdf> (Accessed 12 October 2024).

disruptions in global supply chains caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–21 and the ongoing Russia–Ukraine War since February 2022, are not a sustainable proposition in the long run.

While the people of Afghanistan benefitted in many ways from two decades of international engagement, but due to endemic corruption, traditionally low tax and revenue generation base and chronic fiscal and institutional weaknesses, the state and the economy that emerged from the Bonn Process (2001–05) remained notably dependent on external aid and grants. According to the UNDP report of October 2022, international aid accounted for 75 per cent of the total public expenditure and 40 per cent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) at the time of the collapse of the Ashraf Ghani Government in August 2021. The report noted that Afghanistan's GDP had been in steady decline since 2008, which made the country more dependent on international aid to sustain its economy. It also stated that a year after the Taliban takeover, the licit Afghan economy, which was already in decline, suffered a loss of nearly \$5 billion and an estimated 700,000 jobs by mid-2022.⁸⁰ Save the Children, a humanitarian organisation dedicated to helping children in need, had issued a statement immediately following the Taliban takeover in August 2021: 'Even before the Taliban advancement, Afghanistan had the second-highest number of people facing emergency hunger levels in the world. Half of all children under five were expected to suffer from acute malnutrition this year [2021] and require specialized treatment to survive.'⁸¹

⁸⁰ 'UNDP Report Paints Grim Picture of Afghanistan a Year after 'Transition'', UNDP, 5 October 2022, at <https://www.undp.org/press-releases/undp-report-paints-grim-picture-afghanistan-year-after-transition> (Accessed 26 February 2023).

⁸¹ 'Save the Children Concerned Hunger Crisis in Afghanistan will Escalate', Save the Children, 18 August 2021, at <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/media-and-news/2021-press-releases/save-the-children-concerned-hunger-crisis-in-afghanistan-will-escalate> (Accessed 14 October 2023).

With international aid agencies facing critical funding gaps and recurrent occurrence of natural disasters, including frequent earthquakes and persistent drought in parts of the country, the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is unlikely to abate any time soon. For instance, the WFP announced in early September 2023 that due to a funding shortfall, it has been forced to scale back its food assistance and livelihood support programmes, at a time when millions of Afghan people, including women and children, face acute food insecurity. Projecting a shortfall of over \$1 billion to provide critical life-saving assistance to 21 million Afghan people over the next six months, the WFP decided to exclude about 10 million people from its assistance programmes in 2023. Earlier, in March 2023, the WFP had to cut down rations from 75 per cent to 50 per cent for the Afghans facing emergency levels of hunger. In the following two months, April and May, it was forced to exclude 8 million Afghan people from its assistance programmes.⁸² Similar strategies were adopted by other UN humanitarian agencies to cope with funding shortfall.

The humanitarian scenario is only expected to worsen in parts of Afghanistan, particularly in the winter months. According to the WHO's August 2023 health emergency alert on Afghanistan, continued funding deficiency in the current year could potentially impact: 8 million people requiring life-saving health assistance; 450,000 patients requiring life-saving trauma care services, including blood transfusions and referrals; 1.6 million people requiring mental health support; 520 health facilities, including hospitals, requiring external support; 875,000 children with severe acute malnutrition; 300,000 women of reproductive age requiring critical healthcare; 11 million children requiring polio vaccination; and the strength of the WHO workforce in the country, which may have to be reduced from 1,262 to 554. In addition, the WHO alert stated

⁸² 'WFP in Afghanistan Forced to Drop 10 Million People from Lifesaving Assistance, Deepening Despair and Worry for Afghans', WFP, 5 September 2023, at <https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-afghanistan-forced-drop-10-million-people-lifesaving-assistance-deepening-despair-and> (Accessed 11 September 2023).

that as per the 2021 estimates, 167 infants die each day of preventable child mortality causes, and as per the 2020 estimates, 24 mothers die each day of preventable maternal mortality causes in Afghanistan.⁸³ However, the Taliban spokesperson for the Afghan Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) had earlier rejected the WHO figures about the high infant mortality rate in the country.⁸⁴

While several regional countries have directly engaged the Taliban regime in Kabul for various reasons, they all largely remain circumspect about formally recognising the “Islamic Emirate”. However, for now, without humanitarian aid and assistance, it will be difficult for the vast suffering majority in Afghanistan—including millions of children, women and physically disabled people, particularly households where women are sole bread earners and have been denied livelihood opportunities due to several social restrictions imposed by the Taliban regime⁸⁵—to survive the long and complex road to normalisation of Afghanistan’s international relations.

⁸³ ‘Alert on Afghanistan’s Humanitarian Health Emergency’, WHO, 18 August 2023, pp. 4–5, at <https://www.emro.who.int/images/stories/media/WHO-Afghanistan-Emergency-ALERT.pdf?ua=1> (Accessed 8 October 2023); WHO Afghanistan, Infant Mortality, Twitter Post, 17 April 2023, 12:08 pm, at <https://twitter.com/WHOAfghanistan/status/1647852006826995712> (Accessed 23 September 2023); and WHO Afghanistan, Maternal Mortality, Twitter Post, 28 August 2023, 2:57 PM, at <https://twitter.com/WHOAfghanistan/status/1696092090781024346> (Accessed 23 September 2023).

⁸⁴ Noorullah Zazai, ‘MoPH Spurns WHO Report on Infant Mortality Rate’, *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 18 April 2023, at <https://pajhwok.com/2023/04/18/moph-spurns-who-report-on-infant-mortality-rate/> (Accessed 23 September 2023).

⁸⁵ Frud Bezhan, Kristyna Foltynova and Juan Carlos Herrera Martinez, ‘Draconian Decrees: The Taliban’s Restrictions in Afghanistan’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (RFE/RL), 14 August 2023, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/draconian-decrees-taliban-restrictions-afghanistan/32547882.html> (Accessed 18 August 2023).

PART II

The Indian wheat has been a lifeline for Afghan families facing hunger and is a critical part of WFP's humanitarian response. Generous support such as this has helped WFP and its partners avert a humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan. However, the scale of needs remains immense. Our sincere gratitude is extended to the Government of India, and we count on its continued support to the people of Afghanistan.

—Bishow Parajuli, WFP Representative and Country Director in India,
July 2022.*

Connecting to Chabahar Port will grant Afghanistan access to markets in Europe, the Middle East, India, and China, thereby strengthening Afghanistan's global relationships. Chabahar Port offers a more efficient route, being tens of kilometers closer than Bandar Abbas and hundreds of kilometers shorter than Karachi Port, resulting in unprecedented reductions in export costs and transit times. Situated strategically, Chabahar Port enables Afghanistan to establish new trade and transit partnerships while connecting to international markets with lower time and cost.

—Office of Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghani Baradar, Afghanistan,
November 2023.**

* 'India and WFP Sign MoU for Final Tranche of Wheat Donation to the People of Afghanistan', WFP, 11 July 2022, at <https://www.wfp.org/news/india-and-wfp-sign-mou-final-tranche-wheat-donation-people-afghanistan> (Accessed 21 April 2023).

** 'Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar Akhund, Afghanistan's Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, Conducted an Official Visit to Chabahar Port in Iran on November 9th', Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, Afghanistan, 9 November 2023, at <https://dpmea.gov.af/News14> (Accessed 8 October 2024).

INDIA IN AFGHANISTAN

Over the last two decades, the External Publicity Division of the MEA has published brochures highlighting India's wide-ranging development and capacity-building projects and humanitarian assistance programmes in post-2001 Afghanistan. The key themes of these brochures—'Afghans First',¹ 'Rebuilding Afghanistan',² 'A Development Partnership'³ and 'A Historic and Time Tested Friendship'⁴—reflected the sentiments and priorities driving India's engagement with Afghanistan. The theme of the first brochure, 'Afghans First', published in March 2004, conveyed the continued centrality of the Afghan people, as was the case in the preceding decades, in India's overall policy approach towards post-2001 Afghanistan; and it has remained so post the August 2021 regime change in Afghanistan.

Prior to delving into the details of India's humanitarian outreach to the Afghan people post the Taliban takeover in August 2021, it will be useful to take a broad view of the nature and extent of the Indian engagement with Afghanistan and its people earlier. Indians and Afghans are not only bonded by history and geography but also by thousands of years of varied cultural imprints that still evoke curiosity and a sense

¹ 'Afghans First: India at Work in Afghanistan', External Publicity Division, MEA, GoI, March 2004, at https://mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/189_Afghanistan-First.pdf (Accessed 20 April 2023).

² 'Rebuilding Afghanistan: India at Work', External Publicity Division, MEA, GoI, August 2005, at https://mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/182_Rebuilding-Afghanistan.pdf (Accessed 20 April 2023).

³ 'India and Afghanistan: A Development Partnership', External Publicity Division, MEA, GoI, 2009, at https://mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/176_india-and-afghanistan-a-development-partnership.pdf (Accessed 20 April 2023).

⁴ 'India–Afghanistan: A Historic and Time Tested Friendship', External Publicity Division, MEA, GoI, 2019, at https://mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/30860_India-Afghanistan_Map_Book.pdf (Accessed 20 April 2023).

of affinity and cordiality between the two sides. In December 2015, while addressing the Afghan Parliament in its new building constructed by India, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi aptly captured the timeless essence of the “Indo-Afghan” relations when he stated:

Our ties are as ancient as history. Over the mighty Hindu Kush and through the forbidding Khyber Pass, monks, merchants and monarchs have linked us through knowledge, culture, religion, commerce and kingdoms. In the shifting contours of history, there were times we have been one. There were times we saw wars. But, through the ages, we have always enriched one another.

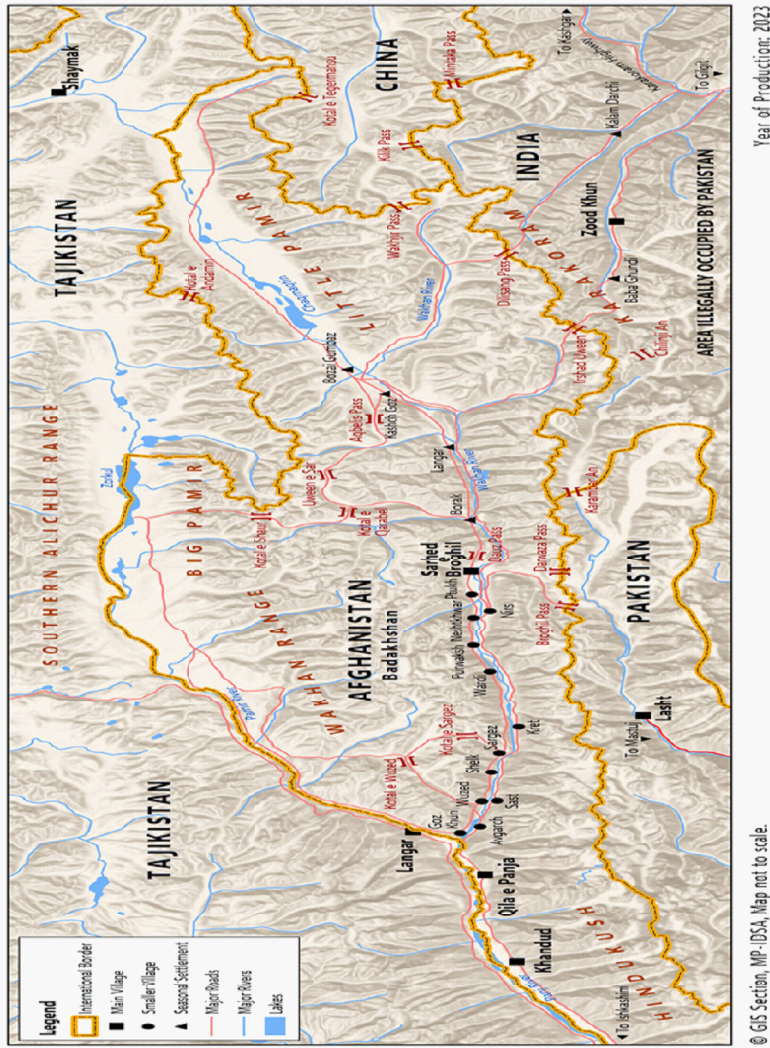
In the timeless Buddhist symbols of Aynak and Bamian and in the majestic monuments of Delhi, in our culture and art, in language and literature, food and festivals, we see the imprint of our timeless relations.⁵

Even as Afghanistan went through a series of political–ideological upheavals from the 1970s onwards, often violent and chaotic, and despite various logistical challenges and resource constraints posed by a lack of direct physical access, India has always endeavoured to sustain the momentum of its engagement with the Afghan people. Although India shares a 106 kilometre (km) border with Afghanistan, running along the Leh District of the Union Territory of Ladakh on the Indian side and the Wakhan Corridor in the Badakhshan Province on the Afghan side, the Indian territory contiguous to Afghanistan has been under Pakistan’s illegal and forcible occupation since 1947 (see Map 2).⁶

⁵ ‘Text of PM’s Address at the Parliament of Afghanistan’, PM India, 25 December 2015, at https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/text-of-pms-address-at-the-parliament-of-afghanistan/ (Accessed 26 June 2022).

⁶ Also see the web page of Border Management–I Division, Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), GoI, at <https://www.mha.gov.in/en/divisionofmha/border-management-i-division> (Accessed 14 September 2023). As per the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation (Removal of Difficulties) Second Order, 2019, the Leh District includes ‘the areas of the districts of Gilgit, Gilgit Wazarat, Chilhas [Chilas] and Tribal Territory of 1947, in addition to the remaining areas of Leh and Ladakh districts of 1947, after carving out the Kargil District’. The ‘Map of Union Territory of Ladakh’, which was created on 31 October 2019, and the new ‘Political Map of India’, as prepared by the Survey of India, are available in ‘Maps of Newly Formed Union Territories of Jammu Kashmir and Ladakh’, MHA, GoI, 2 November 2019, at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1590112> (Accessed 14 September 2023).

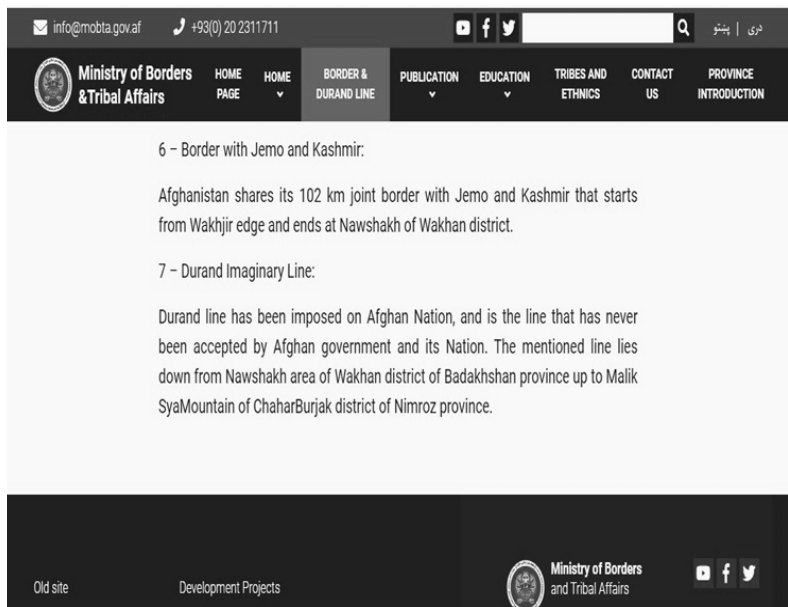
**MAP 2: CLOSE-UP MAP OF INDIA–AFGHANISTAN
BORDER**
(106 KM)



Source: GIS Section, MP-IDSA.

Interestingly, the Borders and Durand Line section on the official website of the Taliban-run Afghan Ministry of Borders and Tribal Affairs states that ‘Afghanistan shares its 102 km joint border with Jemo [sic] and Kashmir that starts from Wakhjir edge and ends at Nawshakh of Wakhan district.’⁷ (see Image 1)

Image 1: Website of Afghan Ministry of Border and Tribal Affairs Referring to Joint Border with Jammu & Kashmir



Source: ‘Border and Durand Line’ section, Ministry of Border and Tribal Affairs, Afghanistan, at <https://mobta.gov.af/en/borders-durand-line> (Accessed 9 October 2024).

India’s development and assistance programmes in Afghanistan have a long history, beginning with the signing of the Treaty of Friendship

⁷ ‘Borders and Durand Line’, Ministry of Border and Tribal Affairs, Kabul, Afghanistan, at <https://mobta.gov.af/en/borders-durand-line> (Accessed 9 October 2024).

between the two countries in New Delhi in January 1950.⁸ The Treaty of Friendship was followed by a series of treaties as bilateral engagement and with it, the people-to-people contacts expanded and deepened. By the 1960s, Afghanistan was among the leading beneficiaries of exchange programmes of the ICCR.⁹ Similarly, by the early 1970s, Afghanistan emerged as a leading beneficiary of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme.¹⁰ Afghan students also benefitted from seats reserved for foreign students at Indian medical and engineering institutions.

⁸ 'Treaty of Friendship between the Government of India and the Royal Government of Afghanistan', 4 January 1950, New Delhi, MEA, GoI, at <https://mea.gov.in/Portal/LegalTreatiesDoc/AF50B1219.pdf> (Accessed 8 April 2023). The treaty, signed by the then Indian Prime Minister and Minister for External Affairs, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the then Afghan Ambassador to India, Nadjibullah Khan, came into force on 30 September 1950.

⁹ The ICCR, an autonomous organisation under the MEA, was founded on 9 April 1950 by independent India's first education minister, Abul Kalam Azad. The objectives of the ICCR are 'to participate in the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes relating to India's external cultural relations; to foster and strengthen cultural relations and mutual understanding between India and other countries; to promote cultural exchanges with other countries and people; to establish and develop relations with national and international organizations in the field of culture; and to take such measures as may be required to further these objectives.' See *Indian Horizons*, ICCR, Vol. 62, No. 4, October–December 2015, p. 1, at <https://www.iccr.gov.in/sites/default/files/indian%20horizon%20vol%2062%20no.%204%20final.pdf> (Accessed 14 May 2023).

¹⁰ Instituted on 15 September 1964, the ITEC programme is the leading capacity-building platform of the MEA. It is administered by the MEA's Development Partnership Administration (DAP)—II Division, which was established in January 2012. The ITEC is, essentially, bilateral in nature and demand driven. It has several components: (i) training (civilian and defence) in India of nominees of ITEC partner countries; (ii) projects and project-related activities, such as feasibility studies and consultancy services; (iii) deputation of Indian experts abroad; (iv) study tours and exposure visits; (v) supply/donation of equipment to assist the development efforts of partner countries; and (vi) aid for disaster relief. The ITEC programme now covers around 160 partner countries across the world, and has grown organically from about 4,000 training slots in 2006–07 to around 14,000 slots (including defence training) in 2019–20. See 'Capacity Building and Technical Assistance as Development Partnership', MEA, GoI, at <https://mea.gov.in/Capacity-Building-and-Technical-Assistance-as-Development-Partnership.htm> (Accessed 15 September 2023).

A ‘DEVELOPMENT PARTNER’

After the overthrow of the first Taliban regime in late 2001, India was among the first countries to re-establish its diplomatic presence in Kabul and extend the much-needed humanitarian aid and assistance to the Afghan people. A week after the Taliban forces retreated from Kabul on 13 November 2001, India’s Special Envoy on Afghanistan, S.K. Lambah, led a diplomatic mission to open a liaison office in Kabul on 21 November, which was subsequently upgraded to a full-fledged embassy on 22 December 2001, the day Hamid Karzai was sworn in as Chairman of the Afghan Interim Administration. In the following years, India emerged as a key development partner of Afghanistan, with hundreds of Indian-sponsored development projects spread across the country.

The people of Afghanistan have very much been a partner in India’s almost seven-decade long endeavour to strengthen both state-to-state and people-to-people ties. The imprint of certain aspects of India’s earlier development and capacity-building programmes can be seen in its more recent engagement with Afghanistan.

India’s engagements in Afghanistan can be categorised mainly under five heads: (i) large infrastructure projects; (ii) small community development projects;¹¹ (iii) capacity-building projects, including special scholarship/fellowship and customised training programmes instituted for Afghan students, government officials and professionals; (iv) humanitarian aid and assistance, mainly comprising supply of food grains and life-saving drugs, and more recently, the India-made COVID vaccines, and also delivery of emergency relief material in times of natural calamities; and (v) promoting Afghan trade through connectivity projects, particularly the development of Shahid Beheshti Terminal at Chabahar Port in Iran and the setting up of the India–Afghanistan Air

¹¹ The MoU for small development projects was signed during PM Manmohan Singh’s state visit to Afghanistan on 28–29 August 2005.

Freight Corridor. During 2001–21, India–Afghanistan relations were also characterised by a regular exchange of high-level visits, including visits by heads of the two states, strategic partnership, and consultative mechanisms instituted at various levels.

MULTI-SECTORAL ENGAGEMENT

Indian development projects in Afghanistan covered a wide range of critical sectors, including power transmission, hydroelectricity, road construction, agriculture, irrigation, industry, telecommunication, transport, information and broadcasting, education, healthcare, water supply, rural development and institutional capacity building. India's development and humanitarian efforts ranged from:

1. Constructing the new Afghan Parliament building¹² in Kabul to supporting the establishment of the Afghanistan National Agricultural Sciences and Technology University (ANASTU)¹³ in Kandahar.

¹² The new Afghan Parliament building was jointly inaugurated by PM Narendra Modi and President Ashraf Ghani on 25 December 2015. It was constructed by India's Central Public Works Department (CPWD). The foundation stone for the new parliament building was laid by former Afghan King Mohammad Zahir Shah during PM Manmohan Singh's state visit to Afghanistan on 28–29 August 2005.

¹³ The ANASTU, located in Kandahar, was inaugurated on 15 February 2014 by Afghan President Hamid Karzai and the then Indian EAM, Salman Khurshid. See 'Speech by External Affairs Minister at the Inauguration of the Afghanistan National Agricultural Sciences and Technology University (ANASTU) in Kandahar', MEA, GoI, 15 February 2014, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/22928/speech+by+external+affairs+minister+at+the+inauguration+of+the+afghanistan+national+agricultural+sciences+and+technology+university+anastu+in+kandahar> (Accessed 6 May 2023). For details about the Indian assistance to ANASTU, see 'ANASTU: India Furthers Assistance in Southern Afghanistan', Embassy of India, Kabul, 7 February 2015, at <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?3832?000#:~:text=ANASTU%20was%20inaugurated%20on%2015,Mr> (Accessed 6 May 2023).

2. Renovating, equipping and upgrading the 400-bed Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health (IGICH)¹⁴ in Kabul to extending financial assistance to the ARCS for the treatment of Afghan children suffering from CHD.¹⁵
3. Constructing basic health clinics/centres and school buildings across various provinces to providing artificial limbs (or the Jaipur foot) for Afghan amputees from landmine blasts.¹⁶
4. Providing regular wheat assistance to augment Afghanistan's food reserves in times of drought to sending millions of doses of India-made COVID vaccines for the Afghan people, including Afghan refugees in Iran.
5. Constructing the 202 km-long, 220 kilovolt (kV) double-circuit power transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to the capital, Kabul, and a 220/110/20 kV substation at Chimtala,¹⁷ to building

¹⁴ The foundation stone for the 100-bed children's hospital, initially known as the Institute of Child Health (ICH), in Kabul was laid by Indian Vice-President Dr Zakir Hussain during his visit to Afghanistan from 10 July to 15 July 1966. The institute was formally inaugurated by King Mohammad Zahir Shah on 12 July 1972 during Indian President V.V. Giri's visit to Afghanistan from 10 July to 14 July 1972. ICH was later renamed as Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health (IGICH) in 1985.

¹⁵ In 2015, India committed grant-in-aid of \$5 million (\$1 million per year) to ARCS for the treatment of Afghan children suffering from CHD at hospitals in New Delhi. By 2020–21, a total of 2,328 Afghan children had been treated at Indian hospitals. See 'Grant-in-Aid Provided by Govt of India, to Afghan Red Crescent Society, Kabul, Afghanistan for the Treatment of Afghan Children Suffering from Congenital Heart Disease (CHD)', Press Release, Embassy of India, Kabul, 28 February 2021, at <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?12443?000> (Accessed 16 October 2024).

¹⁶ 'Live with Dignity – Free Artificial Limbs Camp Started in Kabul', Press Release, Embassy of India, Kabul, 18 June 2014, at <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?3412?000> (Accessed 16 October 2024).

¹⁷ The 202 km, 220 kV double-circuit Pul-e-Khumri–Kabul power transmission line and the 220/110/20 kV substation at Chimtala, north of Kabul, was built by the Power Grid Corporation of India, under an agreement with the MEA signed on 12 August 2005. The transmission line, a part of the 462 km transmission line bringing electricity from Uzbekistan to Kabul, was

multipurpose 42 megawatt Afghan–India Friendship Dam (Salma Dam)¹⁸ in western Afghanistan.

6. Donating hundreds of buses for urban transport, utility vehicles for city municipalities and military vehicles for the Afghan National Army to gifting three airbus aircraft to Ariana Afghan Airlines.
7. Restoring telecommunication infrastructure in 11 provinces to expanding national TV network by providing an uplink from Kabul and downlinks in all 34 provincial capitals.
8. Renovating the iconic Habibia School¹⁹ to restoring the historic Stor Palace²⁰ in Kabul.

energised on 20 January 2009. The Chimtala substation was inaugurated by former President Karzai on 18 May 2009. For details, see ‘Lighting up Kabul’, *The Economic Times*, 29 March 2010, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/view-point/lighting-up-kabul/articleshow/5737072.cms?from=mdr> (Accessed 29 May 2023). Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) later constructed 220/20 kV substations at Charikar (capital of northern Parwan Province) and Doshi (in northern Baghlan Province) to service the Pul-e-Khumri–Kabul transmission line.

¹⁸ The Afghan–India Friendship Dam, built on Harirud River in western Herat Province, was jointly inaugurated by PM Narendra Modi and President Ashraf Ghani on 4 June 2016. See ‘PM Inaugurates Afghan-India Friendship Dam; WAPCOS Executes Landmark Infrastructure Project’, Ministry of Water Resources, PIB, GoI, 4 June 2016, at <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx?relid=145967> (Accessed 9 October 2024).

¹⁹ The renovated building of the Habibia High School in Kabul was jointly inaugurated by former PM Manmohan Singh and President Hamid Karzai on 28 August 2005. The school was originally built by Amir Habibullah Khan (1901–19) in 1903.

²⁰ The historic Stor Palace (also known as the Qasre Storay) in Kabul, originally built in the late nineteenth century, was restored by Agha Khan Trust for Culture in collaboration with India and Afghanistan. The restored palace was jointly inaugurated, via video-conferencing, by PM Narendra Modi and President Ashraf Ghani on 22 August 2016. The restoration work began in 2013 and was completed in July 2016, employing more than 300 Afghan craftsmen and labourers.

9. Digging tube/bore wells and solar electrification in villages to building a cold storage facility in Kandahar.²¹
10. Training Afghan military cadets and officers, including women cadets, to providing scholarships for thousands of Afghan students and professionals at its institutions.

Thus, all along, India was a part of Afghanistan's endeavour to make up for the decades lost to wars and instability.

SPECIAL SCHOLARSHIP AND TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Having committed development assistance worth US\$ 3 billion to Afghanistan over the last two decades, India became the largest regional donor and the fifth-largest donor globally.²² India's "people-centric" development projects not only traversed the geography but also the demography of the country. The same could be said for India's training and capacity-building programmes, including the ICCR-administered Special Scholarship Scheme for Afghan Nationals, ITEC-administered Fellowship Programme for Afghan Nationals implemented since April 2006, and the Department of Agricultural Research and Education (DARE) and Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR)-administered Fellowship Programme for Afghan Nationals since 2010–11, all of which have benefitted a cross-section of Afghan students and professionals. During 2002–06, slots for Afghan students were allocated under the ICCR General Cultural Scholarship Programme and Cultural Exchange Programme Scholarship, and slots for Afghan professionals were allocated under the regular ITEC training programmes.

²¹ The 5,000 tonne-capacity cold storage facility in Kandahar was built by India's Central Warehousing Corporation. It was completed and handed over to the Afghan Ministry of Agriculture in April 2006.

²² Address by H.E. Shaida Abdali, Ambassador of Afghanistan to India, 'Strengthening India-Afghanistan Strategic Relations in an Uncertain World', Brookings India, New Delhi, 25 April 2017, at <https://www.brookings.edu/events/india-afghanistan-and-connectivity-in-south-asia-address-by-h-e-shaida-abdali-ambassador-of-afghanistan-to-india/> (Accessed 5 October 2024).

In addition, India deputed its civil servants, under the UNDP's Capacity for Afghan Public Administration (CAP) Programme, to assist in developing the administrative capacities of various Afghan institutions. India was also a major contributor to the World Bank's Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) and the UNDP's National Institution Building Programme (NIBP) in Afghanistan.

India allocated 1,000 slots per year for Afghan students under the ICCR Special Scholarship Scheme, with additional 500 scholarship for the children/dependents of Afghan military martyrs implemented since 2018–19; 625 slots per year under the ITEC Fellowship Programme; and 614 slots on agricultural studies under the DARE–ICAR India–Afghanistan Fellowship Programme since 2010–11. Another 25 slots were allocated annually to Afghanistan for short-term training programmes under the Technical Cooperation Scheme (TCS) of the Colombo Plan.²³

India made an immense contribution to the establishment of ANASTU, in 2014, in Kandahar in southern Afghanistan—the only agricultural university of its kind in the country—and rendered technical assistance for the development of the university's human resource, academic curriculum and research infrastructure. In April 2016, a MoU was signed between ICAR and ANASTU for long-term cooperation in the field of agricultural research and education. The ICAR–ANASTU MoU envisaged:

...cooperation in the areas of academic and research programs, capacity building and academic exchange, exchange of scientists and technologists, exchange of germplasm and breeding material, exchange of scientific literature, information and methodology, exchange of scientific equipment as available and required in programme of common interest as may be mutually agreed upon and development and implementation of collaborative research projects...²⁴

²³ 'Development Partnership', Development Cooperation Wing, Embassy of India, Kabul, at <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0707?000> (Accessed 29 November 2023).

²⁴ 'ICAR Signed MoU with ANASTU', ICAR, 21 April 2016, at <https://icar.org.in/node/5027> (Accessed 12 April 2023).

The ICAR–Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI), also known as the Pusa Institute—which played a key role in the establishment of ANASTU since 2012—partnered with the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) to train the core staff of ANASTU. The IARI and MSSRF also worked, along with the ICAR–National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources, towards the establishment of Afghanistan Agro-Biodiversity Genetic Garden at ANASTU, ‘to preserve for posterity a representative sample of the genetic diversity in major crops and economic plants’ in Afghanistan.²⁵ The ICAR–IARI assisted ANASTU in establishing laboratories, developing course curriculum for its master’s degree programme in agriculture, and also designed capacity-building programmes for the ANASTU teaching faculty.²⁶

According to ICAR’s annual report of 2020–21, in the academic year 2019–20, a total of 82 Afghan nationals were enrolled, mostly at PG and PhD levels, in agricultural and allied sciences in Indian agricultural universities. In all, 482 Afghan nationals were studying in 51 Indian agricultural universities at the time. No new Afghan students were enrolled in the academic session 2020–21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁷ IARI’s annual report of 2022 reported that the first three batches of Afghan students pursuing MSc Agronomy graduated in 2016, 2018 and 2021. Due to the pandemic, the teaching and research guidance of the fourth batch was conducted and completed in the

²⁵ ‘Afghanistan–India Collaboration in Agricultural Transformation: Prof M S Swaminathan’, MSSRF, 7 June 2016, at <https://www.mssrf.org/small-news/afghanistan-india-collaboration-in-agricultural-transformation-prof-m-s-swaminathan/> (Accessed 6 May 2023); and ‘Conserving Afghanistan’s Rich Genetic Resources: Prof M S Swaminathan’, MSSRF, 28 March 2016, at <https://www.mssrf.org/small-news/conserving-afghanistans-rich-genetic-resources-prof-m-s-swaminathan/> (Accessed 6 May 2023).

²⁶ A. Arunachalam and A.K. Misra, ‘DARE–ICAR Global Reach’, ICAR, DARE, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, GoI, June 2020, p. 18, at https://icar.org.in/sites/default/files/2022-06/ICAR-Global-Reach_21.08.2020.pdf (Accessed 18 November 2023).

²⁷ *ICAR Annual Report 2021–22*, ICAR, DARE, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, GoI, p. 113, at <https://dare.gov.in/sites/default/files/ICAR-DARE-AR-2021-22.pdf> (Accessed 18 November 2023).

online mode, which was facilitated through a tele-education facility established at the IARI. In 2019, three new PG-level courses on horticulture, plant protection and animal husbandry were introduced for the Afghan students. The horticulture and plant protection courses were conducted at IARI, New Delhi, and the animal husbandry course was conducted at the Indian Veterinary Research Institute, Bareilly. There were also plans to introduce, for the Afghan students, three new PG courses on plant breeding; soil science and water technology; and agricultural economics.²⁸ The long-term plan was to develop ANASTU into a self-sustaining lead agricultural institution of Afghanistan by 2028, under a 10 Year Plan (2019–28).²⁹

It is noteworthy that despite the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021, funds amounting Rs 16,84,960 were allocated to the ICAR for fellowship programme for the Afghan students for the period October 2021–September 2022.³⁰

The MEA's annual report of 2020–21 informed that since 2006, more than 10,000 Afghan students, including 3,000 Afghan women students, had benefitted from the ICCR Special Scholarship Scheme.³¹ The annual short-term ITEC training programmes included areas, such as:

²⁸ *IARI Annual Report 2022*, ICAR–IARI, March 2023, p. 157, at https://www.iari.res.in/files/Publication/annual_report/Annual_Report_en_2022.pdf (Accessed 17 November 2023).

²⁹ *DARE Annual Report 2021–22*, DARE, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, GoI, p. 63, at <https://dare.gov.in/sites/default/files/DARE%20Annual%20Reports%20English%202021-22.pdf> (Accessed 19 November 2023); and *DARE/ICAR Annual Report: 2019–20*, DARE, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, GoI, pp. 147–48, at <https://dare.gov.in/sites/default/files/ICAR-DARE-AR-2019-20.pdf> (Accessed 18 November 2023).

³⁰ *DARE Annual Report 2022–23*, DARE, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, GoI, p. 54, at <https://dare.gov.in/sites/default/files/2%20DARE%20Annual%20Report%202022-23%20English-part-2.pdf> (Accessed 19 November 2023).

³¹ *Annual Report: 2020–21*, Policy Planning and Research Division, MEA, GoI, 25 February 2021, p. 163, at https://mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/33569_MEA_annual_Report.pdf (Accessed 26 April 2023).

information technology; communication; English language proficiency; human resource planning and development; geo-informatics; textile mills management; development journalism; women's empowerment; and promotion of micro-enterprises. By 2018–19, India was annually offering about 3,500 scholarship and training slots to Afghan nationals, and over 15,000 Afghan students were studying in India.³² Afghan diplomats were also attending training courses at India's Foreign Service Institute (FSI), now Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Service (SSIFS), since early 2002.³³ Just a month before the fall of the Ghani Government, the SSIFS conducted the Eighth Special Course for Diplomats from Afghanistan from 5 July to 17 July 2021. In all, 25 Afghan diplomats, including three women diplomats, participated in it.³⁴ By July 2021, 218 Afghan diplomats had undergone training courses at the SSIFS, New Delhi.³⁵

NEW DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIP

In September 2017, India and Afghanistan agreed to initiate a 'New Development Partnership' comprising 116 high-impact community development projects in critical areas, such as, education, health, agriculture, irrigation, flood control, micro-hydropower, drinking water, sanitation, renewable energy, rural development and capacity building. These projects were to be implemented across 31 provinces of

³² *Annual Report: 2018–19*, Policy Planning and Research Division, MEA, GoI, p. 34, at https://mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/31719_MEA_AR18_19.pdf (Accessed 26 April 2023).

³³ An MoU on mutual cooperation between the FSI, now SSIFS, of the MEA and the Institute of Diplomacy of the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs was signed on 1 September 2004. It was signed during former Afghan Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah's official visit to New Delhi from 31 August to 3 September 2004.

³⁴ '8th Special Course for Diplomats from Afghanistan', *Videsh Sema*, Vol. XI, July–September 2021, p. 4, at <https://ssifs.mea.gov.in/?pdf13504?000> (Accessed 28 April 2023).

³⁵ 'Visitors to SSIFS', *Videsh Sema*, Vol. XI, July–September 2021, p. 8, at <https://ssifs.mea.gov.in/?pdf13504?000> (Accessed 28 April 2023).

Afghanistan. India further agreed to provide grant-in-aid assistance for the following:

1. building the Shahtoot Dam that would provide potable drinking water to over 2 million Kabul residents and facilitate irrigation in the neighbouring districts;
2. a low-cost housing project for the returning Afghan refugees in eastern Nangarhar Province;³⁶
3. improving road connectivity to Band-e-Amir in central Bamiyan Province;³⁷
4. building a water supply network for Charikar city in Parwan Province;
5. establishment of a gypsum board manufacturing plant in Kabul; and
6. the construction of a polyclinic in Mazar-e-Sharif, capital of northern Balkh Province.

India also agreed to further extend the ICCR Special Scholarship Scheme for Afghan Nationals by another five years (2017–22); initiate the implementation of 500 scholarships for graduate studies in India for the next-of-kin of Afghan military martyrs from the academic year 2018–19; expand medical assistance for Afghan military personnel; explore ways to strengthen ANASTU; extend assistance to Afghanistan

³⁶ Under the India-funded low-cost housing project, 4,765 houses for the returning Afghan refugees were to be built at an estimated cost of US\$ 27.364 million in Khanakay–Qasamabad area, near Jalalabad, in eastern Nangarhar Province. See *Annual Report: 2021–22*, Policy Planning and Research Division, MEA, GoI, 24 February 2022, p. 200, at https://mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/34894_MEA_Annual_Report_English.pdf (Accessed 29 May 2023).

³⁷ A grant-in-aid project to rehabilitate the 16.9 km-long road connecting Band-e-Amir to the Bamiyan–Yakawlang Highway in central Bamiyan Province of Afghanistan. See ‘Question No. 3532: Developmental Assistance’, Lok Sabha, Answer by Minister of State V. Muraleedharan, MEA, GoI, 17 March 2021, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/33642/QUESTION+NO3532+DEVELOPMENTAL+ASSISTANCE> (Accessed 29 May 2023).

in applications of remote sensing technology, including in agriculture and resource management; and host India–Afghanistan Days of Culture to promote cultural and people-to-people contacts.³⁸

AIR CORRIDOR AND CHABAHAR–INSTC

To overcome the obstacle posed by Pakistan’s continued intransigence on the issue of extending overland transit facilities to India, which has long hampered and undermined prospects of inter and intra-regional trade and connectivity, India and Afghanistan established an air freight corridor in June 2017, connecting Kabul to New Delhi, to leverage bilateral trade and provide Afghan goods with direct access to Indian and other South Asian markets.³⁹ Subsequently, the air corridor was extended to include Kandahar and Herat on the Afghan side, and Mumbai and Chennai on the Indian side. It was stated in November 2020 that more than 1,000 flights bringing Afghan goods to India had been conducted since the establishment of the corridor.⁴⁰ The main

³⁸ ‘Joint Statement on the 2nd Strategic Partnership Council Meeting between India and Afghanistan, New Delhi (September 11, 2017)’, MEA, GoI, 11 September 2017, at https://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 7 May 2023).

³⁹ The first cargo flight from Kabul to Delhi was received on 19 June 2017 by EAM Sushma Swaraj, in the presence of Civil Aviation Minister Ashok Gajapathi Raju, Minister of State for External Affairs M.J. Akbar and Afghan Ambassador Shaida Mohammad Abdali. It was flagged off from Kabul by President Ashraf Ghani. Subsequently, the first cargo flight from Kandahar to Delhi arrived on 24 June 2017. See ‘Establishment of Air Freight Corridor’, MEA, PIB, GoI, 26 July 2017, at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1497231> (Accessed 18 May 2023).

⁴⁰ ‘Statement by Ambassador T.S. Tirumurti, Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations’, Arria Formula Meeting on Afghanistan at the UNSC, Permanent Mission of India to the UN, New York, 20 November 2020, at <https://pminewyork.gov.in/IndiaatUNSC?id=NDEwNg,,> (Accessed 1 April 2023); and ‘EAM’s Remarks at Afghanistan 2020 Conference on 24 November 2020’, MEA, GoI, 24 November 2020, at https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/332335/EAMs_Remarks_at_Afghanistan_2020_Conference_on_24_November_2020 (Accessed 1 December 2020).

items of Afghan exports through the air corridor were dried fruits and nuts (mainly, dried raisin, walnut, almond, fig, pine nuts, pistachios and dried apricots); fresh fruits (mainly, pomegranate, apple, apricot, cherry, melon and watermelon); saffron; *beeng* (asafoetida); and medicinal herbs and spices. In October 2022, India agreed to reactivate the air freight corridor with Kabul, which led to a spurt in Afghan exports to India.⁴¹

At a broader regional level, India has been committed to developing and expanding the capacities of Chabahar Port, located in the south-eastern Sistan and Baluchestan Province of Iran, as part of its efforts to improve North–South regional connectivity and trade and provide landlocked Afghanistan and Central Asia with an alternative and a shorter access route to sea. According to a dry run study report published by the Federation of Freight Forwarders' Associations in India (FFFAI), Chabahar Port is 247 nautical miles (nm) closer than Bandar Abbas to India and 80 km closer to the Afghan border, which reduces the sea and land transport time to Afghanistan.⁴²

According to the India Ports Global Limited (IPGL),⁴³ which is responsible for equipping and operating the Shahid Beheshti Port Terminal at Chabahar, Chabahar Port is barely 550 nm from Kandla (renamed Deendayal Port Trust) and 786 nm from Mumbai. It is Iran's

⁴¹ Amina Hakimi, 'Air Corridor Between Delhi and Kabul to Resume Soon: MoCI', *Tolo News*, 31 October 2022, at, <https://tolonews.com/index.php/business-180542> (2 November 2022).

⁴² Shankar Shinde, 'Report on Dry Run Study: Chabahar Agreement with TIR Intermodal', MEA, GoI and Federation of Freight Forwarders' Associations in India (FFFAI), 2021, p. 8.

⁴³ The IPGL, a joint venture company formed by Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust and Kandla Port Trust (renamed Deendayal Port Trust w.e.f. 25 September 2017), is a wholly owned subsidiary of Sagarmala Development Company Limited (SDCL) under the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, GoI. IPGL was incorporated on 22 January 2015 under the Indian Companies Act, 2013, as per directions of the ministry, for development of port projects overseas. The ministry has presently assigned IPGL the task of equipping and operating container/multi-purpose terminals at Chabahar. See IPGL website, at <http://www.ipgl.co.in/> (Accessed 9 October 2024).

only oceanic port with direct access to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. This also means that the port is least likely to be impacted by any challenges posed by developments in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. Unlike Iran's main Bandar Abbas Port, which handles its 85 per cent seaborne trade and is highly congested, Chabahar, with a deep draft of 16 metres, has the ability to handle cargo ships larger than 100,000 tonnes. The Shahid Beheshti Terminal at Chabahar, which is being developed in four phases, has a capacity of 2.5 million tonnes per year. On completion of Phase I, the capacity will increase to 8 million tonnes per year. On completion of all four phases, the port capacity will be 82 million tonnes per year. There will be 32 jetties, out of which 16 will be multipurpose, 10 will be for containers and three each for oil and dry bulk.⁴⁴

Earlier, in January 2009, India completed and handed over to the Afghan Government the 218 km-long Zaranj–Delaram Road, linking the south-western Herat–Kandahar section of Afghanistan's national highway to the Iranian border, to be further linked up with Chabahar Port.⁴⁵

India, Iran and Afghanistan also reinforced their commitment to strengthen regional connectivity through bilateral and trilateral MoUs/agreements. On 15 May 2015, the Indian Minister of Shipping, Road Transport and Highways, Nitin Gadkari, and Iranian Minister of Roads and Urban Development, Abbas Ahmad Akhoundi, signed an inter-governmental MoU on India's participation in the development of Chabahar Port in Iran. According to the MEA press release:

With the signing of the MoU, Indian and Iranian commercial entities would now be in a position to commence negotiations towards finalization of a commercial contract under which Indian

⁴⁴ 'About Chabahar', IPGL, Last Updated on 25 January 2021, at https://www.ipgl.co.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls_id=489&lid=65 (Accessed 4 May 2023).

⁴⁵ The Zaranj–Delaram Road was built by India's Border Roads Organisation (BRO). It was inaugurated on 22 January 2009 by the then Indian EAM, Pranab Mukherjee, and Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

firms will lease two existing berths at the Port and operationalize them as container and multi-purpose cargo terminals.

The availability of a functional container and multipurpose cargo terminal at Chabahar Port would provide Afghanistan's garland road network system alternate access to a sea port, significantly enhancing Afghanistan's overall connectivity to regional and global markets, and providing a fillip to the ongoing reconstruction and humanitarian efforts in the country.⁴⁶

A year later, on 23 May 2016, during PM Modi's state visit to Iran, a trilateral Agreement on the Establishment of an International Transport and Transit Corridor between India, Afghanistan and Iran, or the Chabahar Agreement, was signed. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani travelled to Tehran to join PM Modi and President Hassan Rouhani for the signing ceremony of the trilateral agreement. The agreement was signed by Nitin Gadkari, Indian Minister of Shipping, Road Transport and Highways, Abbas Ahmad Akhouni, Iranian Minister of Roads and Urban Development, and Mohammadullah Batash, Afghan Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation. India committed total grant assistance of US\$ 85 million and a credit facility of US\$ 150 million for the development of Shahid Beheshti Terminal at Chabahar Port. India also supplied six mobile harbour cranes (two 140 tonnes and four 100 tonnes capacity) and other equipment worth US\$ 25 million.⁴⁷

The key objectives of the Chabahar Agreement were to: 'create a reliable transport corridor for the smooth transport and transit of goods and passengers through Chabahar Port' among the three countries; 'increase

⁴⁶ 'Inter-Governmental MoU between India and Iran', MEA, GoI, 6 May 2015, at https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/25185/InterGovernmental_MoU_between_India_and_Iran (Accessed 7 May 2023).

⁴⁷ 'Status of Chabahar Project', Starred Q No 189, Lok Sabha, Statement by Minister of External Affairs Dr Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, 10 December 2021, p. 2, at <https://sansad.in/getFile/loksabhaquestions/annex/177/AS189.pdf?source=pqals> (Accessed 12 October 2024).

the efficiency of the transport corridor aimed at optimizing transport costs'; 'attract transit of goods and passengers of other countries through the international transport and transit corridors'; and 'facilitate access to international markets by using land, sea and/or air transportation through Chabahar Port'.⁴⁸ Here it is important to note that maritime transport accounts for approximately 95 per cent of India's trade volume and 65 per cent of the trade value.⁴⁹

Besides the signing of the trilateral Chabahar Agreement, several bilateral cooperation documents were signed between India and Iran pertaining to operationalisation and development of Chabahar Port and related projects. It included a bilateral contract for port development and operations between IPGL and Arya Banadar of Iran; an MoU between EXIM Bank and Iran's Ports and Maritime Organisation (PMO) specifying the current terms of credit line for the Chabahar Port project; a confirmation statement between EXIM Bank and the Central Bank of Iran on projects in Iran; an MoU between Export Credit Guarantee Corporation Limited of India (ECGC) and the Export Guarantee Fund of Iran; and an MoU between IRCON International Limited and Construction and Development of Transport Infrastructures Company of Iran.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ 'Agreement on the Establishment of an International Transport and Transit Corridor among the Governments of the Republic of India, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran (Chabahar Agreement)', MEA, GoI, 23 May 2016, at <https://mea.gov.in/Portal/LegalTreatiesDoc/016P2941.pdf> (Accessed 6 May 2023). The agreement came into effect in July 2018.

⁴⁹ *Maritime India Vision 2030*, Sagarmala, Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, GoI, February 2021, p. 8, at <https://sagarmala.gov.in/sites/default/files/MIV%202030%20Report.pdf> (Accessed 9 December 2023).

⁵⁰ 'India–Iran Joint Statement— "Civilisational Connect, Contemporary Context" during the Visit of Prime Minister to Iran', MEA, GoI, 23 May 2016, at https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/26843/India_Iran_Joint_Statement_quot_Civilisational_Connect_Contemporary_Contextquot_during_the_visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Iran (Accessed 7 May 2023).

Since IPGL took over the operations of Shahid Beheshti Terminal at Chabahar Port in December 2018,⁵¹ India has despatched a total of 2.5 million tonnes of wheat and 2,000 tonnes of pulses (*chana dal*) through the port to Afghanistan.⁵² In fact, India sent its first shipment of over 16,308 metric tonne of wheat through Chabahar Port to Afghanistan on 29 October 2017 from the Kandla Port.⁵³ The shipment finally arrived in Afghanistan's western Nimroz Province, bordering Iran, on 11 November.⁵⁴ It came just months after India acceded to the Customs Convention on the International Transport of Goods Under Cover of TIR Carnets (TIR Convention) on 15 June 2017. The first shipment of cargo from Afghanistan under the TIR Convention, routed through Chabahar Port, arrived at Nhava Sheva and Mundra

⁵¹ The IPGL took over the operations of the Shahid Beheshti Terminal on 24 December 2018. See 'First Meeting of the Follow-up Committee between India, Afghanistan and Iran for Operationalization of the Chabahar Agreement', MEA, GoI, 24 December 2018, at https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/30813/First_meeting_of_the_Followup_Committee_between_India_Afghanistan_and_Iran_for_operationalization_of_the_Chabahar_Agreement (Accessed 20 May 2023); and 'India Takes Over Operations of Part of Chabahar Port in Iran', Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, PIB, GoI, 7 January 2019, at <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1558896> (Accessed 6 May 2023).

⁵² 'Joint Statement of the First Meeting of the India–Central Asia Joint Working Group (JWG) on Chabahar', MEA, GoI, 14 April 2023, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36488/joint+statement+of+the+first+meeting+of+the+indiacentral+asia+joint+working+group+jwg+on+chabahar> (Accessed 4 May 2023).

⁵³ The first Indian shipment via Chabahar Port to Afghanistan was flagged off through a joint video conference by the then Indian Foreign Minister, Sushma Swaraj, and the Afghan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani. See 'Flag Off of the First Consignment of Wheat Assistance to Afghanistan through Chabahar Port', MEA, GoI, 29 October 2017, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29062/flag+off+of+the+first+consignment+of+wheat+assistance+to+afghanistan+through+chabahar+port> (Accessed 20 May 2023); and *Annual Report: 2017–18*, Ministry of Shipping, GoI, p. 9, at <https://shipmin.gov.in/sites/default/files/2017-18%20English.pdf> (Accessed 9 December 2023).

⁵⁴ 'India's First Shipment Arrives in Afghanistan via Chabahar', *Tolo News*, 11 November 2017, at <https://tolonews.com/business/india%E2%80%99s-first-shipment-arrives-afghanistan-chabahar> (Accessed 30 November 2023).

ports on 13 March 2019. It was flagged off on 24 February from Zaranj, capital of Nimroz Province bordering Iran, in the presence of President Ghani and the Indian ambassador. It was said that the shipment contained 570 tonnes of dried fruits, textiles, carpets and other goods carried by 23 vehicles.⁵⁵ Subsequently, Afghanistan sent four more consignments through Chabahar Port in 2019.⁵⁶ In all, Afghanistan shipped almost 700 tonnes of agricultural and mineral products to India through the Chabahar Port in 2019.⁵⁷

At the time of the Cabinet approving India's accession to the TIR Convention in March 2017, it was said that the convention 'will help Indian traders to have access to fast, easy, reliable and hassle free international system for movement of goods by road or multi-modal means across the territories of other contracting parties.' It was further stated that the convention 'can be an instrument for movement of goods along the International "North-South" Transport (INSTC) Corridor and would be helpful in boosting trade with the Central Asian Republics and other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), particularly using ports in Iran like the Chabahar port.'⁵⁸

Meanwhile, in February 2018, India was formally admitted to the Ashgabat Agreement (on the establishment of an international transport and transit corridor between Iran, Oman, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan),

⁵⁵ 'Afghanistan Sends First Exports to India Via Iran's Chabahar Port', *RFE/RL Radio Azadi*, 24 February 2019, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-first-exports-india-chabahar-iran/29787862.html> (Accessed 25 October 2023).

⁵⁶ 'Unstarred Question No. 513: Status of Chabahar Project', Lok Sabha, Answer by Minister of State V. Muraleedharan, MEA, GoI, 20 November 2019, at <https://sansad.in/getFile/loksabhaquestions/annex/172/AU513.pdf?source=pqals> (Accessed 1 December 2023).

⁵⁷ 'India-Afghanistan Bilateral Brief', MEA, GoI, August 2020, p. 3, at https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Kabul_2020.pdf (Accessed 30 November 2023).

⁵⁸ 'Cabinet Approves India's Accession to the Customs Convention on International Transport of Goods Under Cover of TIR Carnets (TIR Convention)', PIB, GoI, 6 March 2017, at <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx?relid=158890> (Accessed 30 November 2023).

which it had signed earlier in April 2011. According to the MEA press release, the agreement was expected to help diversify India's connectivity options with Central Asia and improve trade and commercial ties with the region.⁵⁹

In December 2019, it was agreed that the Indian ports at Mormugao (Goa) and New Mangalore (Karnataka) will be included in the designated route under the Chabahar Agreement, in addition to the Jawaharlal Nehru Port (Navi Mumbai, Maharashtra) and ports at Mundra and Kandla (both in Gujarat) and Cochin (Kerala).⁶⁰ Prior to this, the joint statement issued at the end of President Rouhani's visit to New Delhi in February 2018 had stressed on the need to include Chabahar Port within the framework of the INSTC.⁶¹ In March 2021, External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar proposed the inclusion of Chabahar Port in the 7,200 km-long multi-modal India–Iran–Russia INSTC, which seeks to provide alternative sea access mainly to the landlocked Central Asian and Eurasian economies. The EAM also welcomed Afghanistan and Uzbekistan to join the 13-member INSTC.⁶² The First India–Iran–Uzbekistan Trilateral Working Group Meeting to discuss the joint use of Chabahar Port was held in a virtual mode on 14 December 2020, following the virtual summit held between PM

⁵⁹ 'India Joins the Ashgabat Agreement', MEA, GoI, 1 February 2018, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29406/> (Accessed 7 May 2023).

⁶⁰ 'Second Meeting of the Follow-up Committee between India, Afghanistan and Iran on the Chabahar Agreement', MEA, GoI, 20 December 2019, at https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32231/Second_meeting_of_the_Followup_Committee_between_India_Afghanistan_and_Iran_on_the_Chabahar_Agreement (Accessed 20 May 2023).

⁶¹ 'India–Iran Joint Statement during Visit of the President of Iran to India (February 17, 2018)', MEA, GoI, 17 February 2018, at https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29495/IndiaIran_Joint_Statement_during_Visit_of_the_President_of_Iran_to_India_February_17_2018 (Accessed 4 May 2023).

⁶² 'Address by External Affairs Minister on "Chabahar Day" at the Maritime India Summit 2021', MEA, GoI, 4 March 2021, at https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/33584/Address_by_External_Affairs_Minister_on_Chabahar_Day_at_the_Maritime_India_Summit_2021 (Accessed 4 May 2023).

Modi and President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan on 11 December 2020.⁶³

The MIV 2030, prepared by MoPSW, identified over 150 initiatives across various maritime sectors and sub-sectors. One of them was the operationalisation of Chabahar Port ‘to drive geostrategic advantages’ and establish the INSTC for cargo facilitation from the CIS countries. The MIV 2030 identified four critical bottlenecks for the development of Chabahar Port:

1. The US sanctions on Iran have a detrimental effect on the following areas for Chabahar Port:
 - (i) procurement of equipment;
 - (ii) unavailability of credit facilities;
 - (iii) no mainline vessels calling at Iranian ports;
 - (iv) protection and indemnity insurance and transit cargo cover; and
 - (v) banking challenges.
2. Unpredictability of vessel calls making limited calls at the port.
3. No rail connectivity to Chabahar Port.
4. Limited volumes of cargo with high cost.

The MIV 2030 recommended five short-term actions to be undertaken for making Chabahar Port operational:

1. Early activation of 10-year agreement and resolve the dispute resolution clause.

⁶³ ‘First Trilateral Working Group Meeting between India, Iran and Uzbekistan on Joint Use of Chabahar Port’, MEA, GoI, 14 December 2020, at https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/33295/First_Trilateral_Working_Group_Meeting_between_India_Iran_and_Uzbekistan_on_joint_use_of_Chabahar_Port (Accessed 20 May 2023).

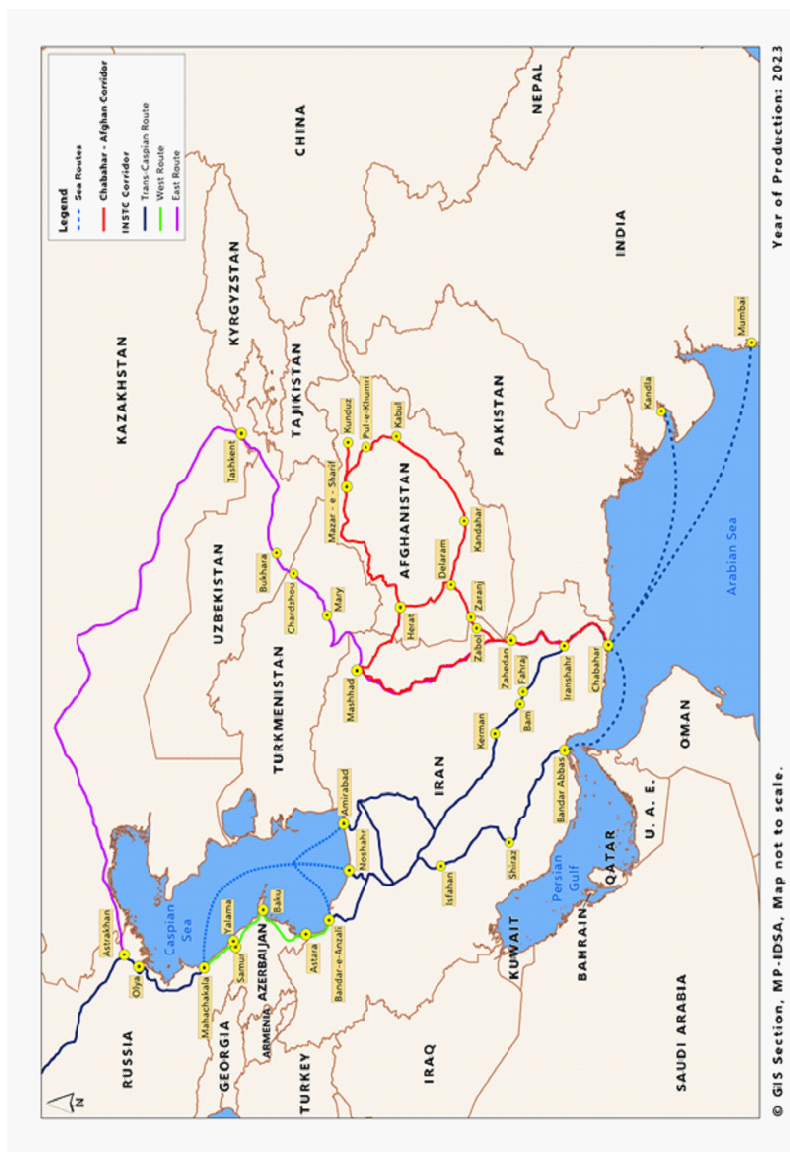
2. The MEA and the Indraprastha Gas [sic] Limited (IPGL) to resolve banking difficulties of trade by negotiating with the US treasury and the OAFIC.
3. Expansion of regular marketing events to promote the port.
4. Generate return cargo for competitive port operations through incentives/export promotion by the Iranian government.
5. Ministry of Commerce to push for Chabahar to be included in the INSTC.⁶⁴

The Inter-Governmental Agreement on 'North–South' Transport Corridor was signed between India, Iran and Russia at St. Petersburg on 12 September 2000 and came into effect on 16 May 2002. The corridor envisaged in the agreement came to be known as the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), or simply the 'North–South' Corridor. It currently has 13 members, namely, India, Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, Belarus, Oman and Syria. Bulgaria has joined as an observer state. The INSTC is a 7,200 km-long corridor (Mumbai–St. Petersburg), consisting of a network of multi-modal transportation routes sea, road and railway—linking the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran and onwards to Northern Europe via St. Petersburg in Russia. The INSTC basically envisages the movement of goods from Mumbai (India) to Shahid Beheshti Port–Chabahar (Iran) by sea, from Chabahar to Bandar-e-Anzali (an Iranian port on the Caspian Sea) by road, then from Bandar-e-Anzali to Astrakhan (a Caspian port in the Russian Federation) by ship across the Caspian Sea, and thereafter from Astrakhan to other regions of the Russian Federation and further into Europe by Russian railways.⁶⁵ (see Map 3)

⁶⁴ *Maritime India Vision 2030*, n. 49, pp. 218–19.

⁶⁵ See 'Workshop Conducted on "Linking Chabahar Port with INSTC"', Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, PIB, GoI, 19 January 2023, at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1892221> (Accessed 4 May 2023).

MAP 3: ROUTE OF CHABAHAR-INSTC



Source: GIS Section, MP-IDSA.

Reacting to the joint communique of the First India–Central Asia Meeting of National Security Advisers/Secretaries of the Security Councils, held on 6 December 2022 in New Delhi, the Taliban welcomed the proposed inclusion of Chabahar Port in the INSTC and assured that they ‘stand ready to provide all necessary protection and facilities in this regard’.⁶⁶ In view of Western sanctions, Russian President Vladimir Putin in his Address to the Federal Assembly in 2023 stated that Russia ‘will expand foreign economic ties and build new logistics corridors’. He added that Russia will develop Black Sea and Sea of Azov ports and ‘pay special attention to the North–South international corridor’, which will ‘open up new routes for business cooperation with India, Iran, Pakistan, and the Middle Eastern countries’. He asserted that Russia will continue to develop the North–South corridor.

India had conducted a successful trial run along INSTC from 8 August to 14 August 2014, which included Bandar Abbas–Astara and Bandar Abbas–Amirabad routes.⁶⁷ According to a study conducted by the FFFAI in 2014 on INSTC’s connectivity, transport accessibility and problems of logistics, the INSTC could reduce time and cost of container delivery by 30–40 per cent, as it provided a shorter, and therefore more economical, route compared to the existing route through the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea. Overall, the INSTC was said to be 40 per cent shorter and 30 per cent cheaper.⁶⁸ The IPGL stated that the corridor would reduce the transit time between India and Russia, from 40–60 days to 25–30 days, and provide more economical options for routing cargoes.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ ‘IEA–MoFA Statement regarding First India–Central Asian States NSA Meeting in New Delhi’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kabul, 7 December 2022, at <https://mfa.gov.af/en/iea-mofa-statement-regarding-first-india-central-asian-states-nsa-meeting-in-new-delhi/> (Accessed 21 May 2023).

⁶⁷ *Annual Report: 2014–15*, Policy Planning and Research Division, MEA, GoI, p. 49, at https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/25009_External_Affairs_2014-2015__English_.pdf (Accessed 4 May 2023).

⁶⁸ Shinde, ‘Report on Dry Run Study: Chabahar Agreement with TIR Intermodal’, n. 42, p. 8.

⁶⁹ ‘Connectivity through Chabahar’, IPGL, 25 March 2022, at https://www.ipgl.co.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls_id=469&lid=19 (Accessed 4 May 2023).

According to the MEA annual report of 2022–23, since December 2018, the IPGL-operated Shahid Beheshti Terminal at Chabahar Port handled 255 vessels, 16,250 twenty-foot equivalent unit (TEUs) of containers and 5 million tonnes of bulk and general cargo from various countries.⁷⁰ In 2020–21, India supplied 40,000 litres of environment-friendly malathion pesticide to Iran via Chabahar to fight locust menace. Two tranches of 20,000 litres each were supplied in June 2020 and March 2021, respectively.⁷¹ Besides shipments from India, the port also handled shipments and trans-shipments from Russia, Brazil, Thailand, Germany, France, Ukraine, Oman, Romania, Bangladesh, Australia, Kuwait, Uzbekistan and the United Arab Emirates.⁷²

In June 2020, Chabahar loaded 30 refrigerated containers and nine conventional ones (a total of 76 TEUs), a record single loading, for the Indian ports. In 2020–21, the port was used, for the first time, to trans-ship food items to Southeast Asian nations. Afghanistan's first shipment of dried fruits to Tianjin Port in China and Iran's first shipment of aquatic products to Thailand were sent via Chabahar Port.⁷³ The port was integrated with a free trade zone in April 2020. Out of the total area of India Ports Global Chabahar Free Trade Zone (IPGCFTZ) of about 14,000 hectares, about 10,000 hectares was delineated for industrial development, with 7,000 hectares for heavy industries and 3,000 for light industries.⁷⁴ In 2021, India also handed

⁷⁰ *Annual Report: 2022–23*, Policy Planning and Research Division, MEA, GoI, 23 February 2023, p. 101, at https://mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/36286_MEA_Annual_Report_2022_English_web.pdf (Accessed 29 May 2023); and 'Second Trilateral Working Group Meeting between India, Iran and Uzbekistan on Joint Use of Chabahar Port', MEA, GoI, 14 December 2021, at https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34653/Second_Trilateral_Working_Group_Meeting_between_India_Iran_and_Uzbekistan_on_joint_use_of_Chabahar_Port (Accessed 20 May 2023).

⁷¹ 'Second Batch of 20,000 Litres of Malathion 95% ULV Pesticide Supplied to Iran as Humanitarian Assistance to Fight Locust Threat', Embassy of India, Tehran, 18 March 2021, at https://www.indianembassytehran.gov.in/public_files/assets/pdf/Malathion.pdf (Accessed 11 December 2023).

⁷² *Annual Report: 2021–22*, n. 36, p. 92.

⁷³ *Annual Report: 2020–21*, n. 31, pp. 82–83.

⁷⁴ 'Connectivity through Chabahar', n. 69.

over six mobile harbour cranes to the IPGL, with a total contract value of over US\$ 25 million, to improve port operations.⁷⁵ The first consignment of two cranes arrived at Chabahar Port from Marghera Port of Italy on 18 January 2021.⁷⁶

BILATERAL TRADE

After a brief interruption following the collapse of the government in Kabul, the trade between the two countries had resumed. While the air freight corridor was suspended, Indian exporters continued to send goods, particularly sugar, via Karachi Port and onward through the land route to Afghanistan. As it was not possible to do business through Afghan banks, Dubai, where most of the Afghan traders were based, emerged as the payment hub.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, India also relaxed the fumigation regulations for the import of agricultural products from Afghanistan.⁷⁸ Prior to 2021, the India–Afghanistan bilateral trade had crossed US\$ 1.5 billion in 2019–20, with exports to Afghanistan almost touching US\$ 1 billion (US\$ 997.58 million) and imports from Afghanistan standing at almost US\$ 530 million. The bilateral trade grew consistently from 2015–16 to 2019–20, with Indian exports to

⁷⁵ 'Six Mobile Harbour Cranes Handed Over to IPGCFTZ by Sarbananda Sonowal to Improve Efficiency in the Operations', Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, PIB, GoI, 20 August 2022, at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1853334> (Accessed 12 October 2024); and 'India Supplies 2 Mobile Harbor Cranes to Iran for Development of Chabahar Port', ANI, 31 January 2021, at <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/middle-east/india-supplies-2-mobile-harbor-cranes-to-iran-for-development-of-chabahar-port20210131191746/> (Accessed 6 June 2023).

⁷⁶ *Annual Report 2021–2022*, Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, GoI, at <https://shipmin.gov.in/sites/default/files/Annual%20Report%202021-22%20%28ENGLISH%29.pdf> (Accessed 12 October 2024).

⁷⁷ Parthasarathi Biswas, 'Afghan Economy in Tatters, Relations on Hold, Delhi and Kabul Trade via Dubai', *The Indian Express*, 20 May 2022, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/afghan-economy-in-tatters-relations-on-hold-delhi-and-kabul-trade-via-dubai-7926769/> (Accessed 28 May 2023).

⁷⁸ 'India Softens Rules for Agro Imports from Afghanistan', *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 19 May 2022, at <https://pajhwok.com/2022/05/19/india-softens-rules-for-agro-imports-from-afghanistan/> (Accessed 21 April 2023).

Afghanistan growing by over 89 per cent and imports from Afghanistan growing by 72 per cent during the five-year period.⁷⁹

Earlier, in March 2003, India and Afghanistan had entered into a Preferential Trade Agreement (see Annexure I), under which India provided Afghanistan duty-free access to the import of dried figs, mulberries, pistachio, roasted pine nuts, fresh melons, asafoetida, lapis lazuli, ruby and emeralds. A 50 per cent duty concession was extended on green, red, golden and black raisins; walnuts; almonds; fresh grapes; apples; apricots; pomegranates; anise, caraway, linseed, alpha and sesame seeds; and dried apricots, plums and sour cherries. Full duty exemption and 50 per cent duty exemption applied to all items of high-export interest to Afghanistan.⁸⁰ Afghanistan, in turn, provided reciprocal concessions to Indian products, including tea, sugar, cement and pharmaceuticals. In November 2011, India also provided duty-free access to the Indian market for Afghan exports under the Agreement on South Asia Free Trade Area and provisions thereof for least developed countries within the SAARC.⁸¹ Afghanistan formally joined as the eighth member of SAARC during the Fourteenth SAARC Summit held in New Delhi in April 2007.

According to trade figures available on the website of Ministry of Commerce and Industry, GoI, India's total bilateral trade with Afghanistan stood at \$1,335.27 billion in 2020–21, \$1,065.40 billion in 2021–22 and \$889.85 million in 2022–23. To further elaborate, Indian exports to Afghanistan declined from \$825.78 million in 2020–21 to \$554.47 million in 2021–22 and \$437.05 million in 2022–23. Similarly, Indian imports from Afghanistan declined from \$509.49 million in 2020–21 and \$510.93 million in 2021–22 to \$452.81 million in 2022–23. However, the total bilateral trade saw a major jump in the past year, growing from \$889.85 million in 2022–23 to \$997.74 million in 2023–24. While Indian exports to Afghanistan continued to decline,

⁷⁹ *Annual Report: 2020–21*, n. 26, p. 31.

⁸⁰ 'India and Afghanistan: A Development Partnership', n. 3, p. 37.

⁸¹ 'India–Afghanistan Commercial Brief', Embassy of India, Kabul, at <https://coi.gov.in/kabul/?11360?000> (Accessed 27 November 2023).

from \$437.05 million in 2022–23 to \$355.45 million in 2023–24, the imports from Afghanistan saw a notable growth, from \$452.81 million in 2022–23 to \$642.29 million in 2023–24.⁸² (see Table 1)

Interestingly, Indian exports to Afghanistan via Integrated Check Post (ICP) at Attari, located on India–Pakistan border in Amritsar District of the Indian state of Punjab, reportedly registered a notable increase in 2023. It is the only permissible land route for trade between India and Pakistan, as well as for importing goods from Afghanistan to India. Citing recent data available with the Land Ports Authority of India (LPAI) that oversees ICP Attari, a report published in September 2023 stated that in a first since 2018, exports from India to Afghanistan via the Wagah–Attari border in Punjab touched Rs 74.29 crore in 2022–23, up from just Rs 5 crore in 2021–22. Following the suspension of direct trade between India and Pakistan in 2019, the trade via ICP Attari had been negligible and limited to imports from Afghanistan, mainly dry and fresh fruits, and medicinal herbs and seeds. Fresh fruits are mostly imported from August to December. Often vegetables, including onion, and pulses are also imported. Imports from Afghanistan stood at Rs 2,219 crore in 2022–23 and Rs 2,977 crore in 2021–22.⁸³

⁸² For India–Afghanistan bilateral trade figures from FY 2016–17 to FY 2018–19, see Bilateral Trade Statistic, Foreign Trade (South Asia), Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, GoI, at <https://www.commerce.gov.in/about-us/divisions/foreign-trade-territorial-division/foreign-trade-south-asia/> (Accessed 18 October 2024). For bilateral trade figures FY 2019–20 onwards, see Country-wise Export Import Data Bank, Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, GoI, at <https://tradestat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/iecntq.asp> (Accessed 18 October 2024).

⁸³ Yudhvir Rana, 'A 1st for Attari: Exports to Afghanistan via ICP Touched Record 74cr in 2022–23', *The Times of India*, 12 September 2023, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/a-1st-for-attari-exports-to-afghanistan-via-icp-touched-record-74cr-in-2022-23/articleshow/103593715.cms> (Accessed 25 September 2023); and Neeraj Bagga, 'Amritsar: Import of Dry Fruits, Fresh Fruits via Attari–Wagah Border Doubles', *The Tribune*, 7 September 2023, at <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/import-of-dry-fruit-via-attari-doubles-542264> (Accessed 29 November 2023).

Table 1: India–Afghanistan Trade: FY 2016–17 to FY 2023–24 (in US\$ million)

	Year	2016–17	2017–18	2018–19	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24
1.	Export to Afghanistan	506.34	709.75	715.44	997.58	825.78	554.47	437.05	355.45
2.	% Growth	-3.85	40.17	0.80	39.43	-17.22	-32.85	-21.18	-18.67
3.	India's Total Export	275,851.71	303,526.16	330,078.09	313,361.04	291,808.48	422,004.40	451,070.00	437,072.03
4.	% Growth	5.17	10.03	8.75	-5.06	-6.88	44.62	6.89	-3.10
5.	% Share	0.18	0.23	0.22	0.32	0.28	0.13	0.10	0.08
6.	Import from Afghanistan	292.90	433.78	435.44	529.84	509.49	510.93	452.81	642.29
7.	% Growth	-4.87	21.13	10.42	21.68	-3.84	0.28	-11.38	41.85
8.	India's Total Import	384,355.56	465,580.99	514,078.42	474,709.28	394,435.88	613,052.05	715,968.90	678,214.77
9.	% Growth	0.88	21.13	10.42	-7.66	-16.91	55.43	16.79	-5.27
10.	% Share	0.08	0.09	0.08	0.11	0.13	0.08	0.06	0.09
11.	Total Trade	799.24	1,143.53	1,150.89	1,527.42	1,335.27	1,065.40	889.85	997.74
12.	% Growth	-4.22	43.08	0.64	32.72	-12.58	-20.21	-16.48	12.12
13.	India's Total Trade	660,207.28	769,107.15	844,156.51	788,070.32	686,244.36	1,035,056.45	1,167,038.89	1,115,286.81
14.	% Growth	2.63	16.49	9.76	-6.64	-12.92	50.83	12.75	-4.43
15.	% Share	0.12	0.15	0.14	0.19	0.19	0.10	0.08	0.09
16.	Trade Balance	213.44	275.97	280.00	467.74	316.29	43.54	-15.76	-286.84
17.	India's Trade Balance	-108,503.85	-162,054.83	-184,000.33	-161,348.24	-102,627.40	-191,047.65	-264,898.90	-241,142.74

Source.: FY 2019–20 to FY 2023–24: ‘Country-wise Export Import Data Bank’, Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, GoI, at <https://tradestat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/iecntq.asp> (Accessed 18 October 2024); and FY 2016–17 to FY 2018–19: ‘Bilateral Trade Statistic’, Foreign Trade (South Asia), Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, GoI, at <https://www.commerce.gov.in/about-us/divisions/foreign-trade-territorial-division/foreign-trade-south-asia/> (Accessed 18 October 2024).

Prior to it, the value of imports from Afghanistan stood at Rs 2,640 crore in 2020–21, Rs 2,538 crore in 2019–20 and Rs 2,114 crore in 2018–19.⁸⁴ According to a report published in *Hindustan Times* in December 2023, between November 2022 and October 2023, ICP Attari witnessed a notable surge of over 130 per cent in imports from Afghanistan compared to the previous year. ICP was said to have recorded imports from Afghanistan worth Rs 689.29 crore against Rs 296.29 crore in the corresponding period last year. Four months later, in April 2024, *The Tribune* reported that ICP Attari recorded its highest ever import to the tune of over Rs 3,700 crore in 2023–24.

Afghanistan was also among the 20 countries that participated in the India International Mega Trade Fair held in Okhla, Delhi, from 18 August to 28 August 2023. Afghan products, such as carpets, articles of onyx marble and a variety of dry fruits, were on display at the Afghan stall.⁸⁵ According to media reports, the number of Afghan stalls at the India International Trade Fair, organised annually by the Indian Ministry of Commerce and Industry, doubled in 2022 compared to 2021. The reports, however, added that most of the Afghan traders participating in the trade fair were based in India since before the Taliban takeover.⁸⁶

In recent years, India had to import onion on an emergency basis from Afghanistan, besides other countries, via ICP Attari, to overcome shortage and arrest the surge in price levels due to damage to the crop

⁸⁴ Yudhvira Rana, 'Trade via Attari Limited to Just Afghan Imports', *The Times of India*, 1 January 2023, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/trade-via-attari-limited-to-just-afghan-imports/articleshow/96657084.cms> (Accessed 13 September 2023).

⁸⁵ 'International Products at the India International Mega Trade Fair (IIMTF)', Okhla, Delhi, at <https://www.megatradefair.com/blogs/international-products-at-the-india-international-mega-trade-fair-iimtf/> (Accessed 2 December 2023).

⁸⁶ Pia Krishnankutty, 'Year After Taliban Takeover, Far More Afghan Stalls at Delhi Trade Fair, But e-Visa Still an Issue', *The Print*, 19 November 2022, at <https://theprint.in/india/year-after-taliban-takeover-far-more-afghan-stalls-at-delhi-trade-fair-but-e-visa-still-an-issue/1224282/> (Accessed 3 December 2023).

caused by rains and floods in Maharashtra.⁸⁷ In 2023, there were again reports of garlic and onion being imported from Afghanistan as crops were damaged due to untimely rains in parts of the country. Speaking to *The New Indian Express* in September 2023, the manager of LPAI at ICP Attari stated that since mid-August 2023, about 50–55 trucks carrying almost 1,110 tonnes of various kinds of agricultural goods had been arriving from Afghanistan on a daily basis. Of these trucks, at least 15 carried garlic, a couple of them carried onions and the remaining large number of trucks carried dry fruits. Thus, the import of dry fruits from Afghanistan had also increased. Before mid-August, only about 20 trucks carrying a meagre 450 tonnes of goods had been coming from Afghanistan.⁸⁸ In July 2024, there were reports of

⁸⁷ See *Annual Report: 2021–22*, Department of Food and Public Distribution, Ministry of Consumer Affairs, GoI, 14 May 2024, at <https://dfpd.gov.in/Home/DocumentReport?language=1>, p. 143 (Accessed 10 October 2024); ‘Inter-Ministerial Committee Reviews Prices & Availability of Onions Across the Nation; Union Government to Act as a Facilitator for Onion Imports to Ease the Process and Ensure a Quick and Healthy Supply from Other Countries’, Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, PIB, GoI, 5 November 2019, at <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/erelcontent.aspx?relid=194279> (Accessed 29 November 2023); Anil Sharma, ‘As Prices Continue to Skyrocket, Onion Import from Afghanistan Picks Up Pace’, *Hindustan Times*, 8 December 2019, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/as-prices-continue-to-skyrocket-onion-import-from-afghanistan-picks-up-pace/story-4qusC0jDPifstAXZ8eIIxM.html> (Accessed 25 November 2023); and Parshant Krar, ‘Onion Imports from Afghanistan Cool Down Prices in India’, *The Economic Times*, 14 December 2019, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/agriculture/onion-from-afghanistan-cools-down-prices-in-india/articleshow/72475277.cms> (Accessed 25 November 2023).

⁸⁸ Harpreet Bajwa, ‘Afghan Onion, Garlic Back for Indian Palate’, *The New Indian Express*, 9 September 2023, at <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2023/sep/09/afghan-onion-garlic-back-for-indian-palate-2613231.html> (Accessed 26 November 2023); and ‘Onions, Garlic and Other Goods are Imported from Afghanistan through ICP at Attari–Wagah Border’, *The New Indian Express*, 8 September 2023, at <https://www.newindianexpress.com/business/2023/sep/08/onions-garlic-and-other-goods-are-imported-from-afghanistan-through-icp-at-attari-wagah-border-2612986.html> (Accessed 26 November 2023).

Afghanistan exporting onions from Kunar Province and cherries and apricots from Maidan Wardak Province to India, through the land route via Pakistan.⁸⁹

ASSISTANCE IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC

By the end of 2020, Indian had implemented over 400 small community development projects spread across Afghanistan, with another over 100 such projects underway; supplied about 75,000 metric tonnes of wheat (April–September 2020) through Chabahar Port; and more than 65,000 Afghan students had studied in India. Afghanistan also opened a second consulate in Hyderabad, in addition to the one in Mumbai, in January 2020.

In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, India supplied 5 lakh tablets of hydroxy-chloroquine, 1 lakh tablets of paracetamol and 50,000 pairs of surgical gloves to the Afghan government.⁹⁰ In February 2021, India supplied 500,000 doses of India-made Covishield vaccine (Serum Institute of India) to help Afghanistan combat the pandemic. It was said that the first stage of mass vaccination in Afghanistan began on 23 February 2021 with the arrival of the Indian vaccine. Another 468,000 doses of India-made Covishield vaccine were supplied by COVAX⁹¹

⁸⁹ 'First Ever Onion Exports to India Begin from Kunar', Al Emarah, 7 July 2024, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/first-ever-onion-exports-to-india-begins-from-kunar/> (Accessed 9 July 2024); and 'Apricot and Cherry Exports to India Begin From Wardak', Al Emarah, 15 July 2024, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/apricot-and-cherry-exports-to-india-begin-from-wardak/> (Accessed 7 September 2024).

⁹⁰ 'India–Afghanistan Bilateral Brief', n. 57, p. 6.

⁹¹ According to WHO, 'COVAX was a historic multilateral effort co-led by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF from 2020 through 2023. During the COVID-19 pandemic, COVAX aimed to accelerate the development and manufacture of COVID-19 vaccines and to guarantee fair and equitable access for every country in the world. COVAX came to a close on 31 December 2023'. See WHO, 'COVAX: Working for Global Equitable Access to COVID-19 Vaccines', at <https://www.who.int/>

on 8 March 2021, making Afghanistan the first Central Asian country to receive the vaccine through COVAX.⁹² On 1 January 2022, post the Taliban takeover, India supplied the second batch of 500,000 doses of India-made Covaxin (Bharat Biotech) to Afghanistan.⁹³ It was sent through Iran's Mahan Air and handed over to the IGICH in Kabul.

In November 2020, EAM Jaishankar announced the launch of Phase IV of Indian community development projects in Afghanistan, which included more than 100 projects worth US\$ 80 million.⁹⁴ Since 2005, three phases of small community-based development projects funded by Indian grants had been implemented. Under Phases I and II implemented during 2005–09, US\$ 20 million was provided for undertaking 116 projects. Under Phase III launched in 2012, funding of US\$ 100 million was provided for 420 projects, of which 350 had been completed.⁹⁵ In addition, on 9 February 2021, EAM Jaishankar and the then Afghan Foreign Minister, Hanif Atmar, signed an MoU, via video conferencing, for the construction of Lalandar (Shahotoot) Dam in the presence of PM Modi and President Ghani. It was stated in the press release that the dam 'would meet the safe drinking water needs of Kabul City, provide irrigation water to nearby areas, rehabilitate

initiatives/act-accelerator/covax (Accessed 10 October 2024). COVAX was coordinated and administered by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. See Gavi, 'What Was the COVAX Facility?', at <https://www.gavi.org/covax-facility> (Accessed 10 October 2024).

⁹² Mahnoor Hayat, Mohammad Uzair, Rafay Ali Syed et al., 'Status of COVID-19 Vaccination around South Asia', *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2022, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21645515.2021.2016010> (Accessed 10 December 2023).

⁹³ 'India Supplies Next Batch of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan', MEA, GoI, 1 January 2022, at https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34737/India_supplies_next_batch_of_humanitarian_assistance_to_Afghanistan (Accessed 15 May 2023). Also see 'Vaccine Supply', MEA, GoI, as on 15 June 2023, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/vaccine-supply.htm> (Accessed 10 December 2023).

⁹⁴ 'EAM's Remarks at Afghanistan 2020 Conference on 24 November 2020', n. 78.

⁹⁵ *Annual Report: 2022–23*, n. 70, p. 221.

the existing irrigation and drainage network, aid in flood protection and management efforts in the area, and also provide electricity to the region.⁹⁶

AFGHANS IN INDIA

At the time of regime change in Kabul in August 2021, India had several ongoing development projects spread across the country; several thousands of Afghan nationals were studying on special scholarship/fellowship schemes or were visiting for medical treatment or business purposes in India; and Afghan military officers and cadets were undergoing training at Indian military institutions.

According to the final report of the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) for AY 2021–22 — which is based on actual responses to the survey from higher education institutions registered in AISHE 2021–22 — a total of 3,151 Afghan students (2,674 male and 477 female) were pursuing various courses (PhD, MPhil, PG, UG, diploma, certificate and integrated) at Indian universities, colleges and stand-alone institutions during the year, making Afghan students the second-highest number of foreign students (6.7 per cent), following students from Nepal (28 per cent) and followed by students from US (6.2 per cent), studying in India.⁹⁷

Similarly, according to the AISHE final report for AY 2020–21, a total of 4,078 Afghan students (3,466 male and 612 female) were pursuing various courses at Indian higher education institutions during the year. In that year too, students from Afghanistan constituted the second-highest number of foreign students (8.4 per cent) studying in India. In

⁹⁶ 'Signing Ceremony of MoU for the Construction of the Lalandar [Shatoot] Dam in Afghanistan', Prime Minister's Office, PIB, GoI, 9 February 2021, at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1696486> (Accessed 12 February 2021).

⁹⁷ 'All India Survey on Higher Education 2021–22', Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, GoI, February 2024, at <https://cdnbbsr.s3waas.gov.in/s392049debbe566ca5782a3045cf300a3c/uploads/2024/02/20240719952688509.pdf> (Accessed 16 October 2024).

AY 2019–20, students from Afghanistan constituted 9.1 per cent. In fact, the second-highest share of foreign students had been coming from Afghanistan since 2013–14.⁹⁸ In a report published in *The Wire* in early September 2021, it was stated that there were around 2,200 Afghan students studying on ICCR-sponsored scholarships, of which 300 had left for Afghanistan during the COVID lockdown and were attending classes online; and approximately 5,000–6,000 Afghan students were pursuing self-financing courses in India.⁹⁹ In a report published in July 2023, it was said that more than 600 Afghan students, including approximately 200 female students, who had completed their graduation or PG courses and were residing in India, had sought extension of their scholarships and visas to further pursue their studies in India.¹⁰⁰ According to the bilateral brief on India–Afghanistan relations available on the website of Indian embassy in Kabul, updated August 2020: ‘On an average, more than 3,500 Afghan nationals undergo training/education in India every year. More than 15,000 Afghan students pursue education in India on self-financing basis.’¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ In 2020–21, the top 10 countries with a high share of students in India were Nepal (28.25 per cent), Afghanistan (8.4 per cent), Bangladesh (5.7 per cent), the US (5.1 per cent), the United Arab Emirates (4.8 per cent), Bhutan (3.8 per cent), Sudan (3.3 per cent), Nigeria (2.9 per cent), Tanzania (2.7 per cent) and Yemen (2.3 per cent). See ‘All India Survey on Higher Education: 2020–21’, Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, GoI, January 2023, at <https://aishe.gov.in/aishe/viewDocument.action;jsessionid=8D54D4ED13B2F26D923D7C6992CF131C?documentId=322> (Accessed 18 April 2023).

⁹⁹ Devirupa Mitra, ‘India’s New Visa Policy for Afghans is in Limbo, Leaving Thousands Tense’, *The Wire*, 7 September 2021, at <https://thewire.in/south-asia/indias-new-visa-policy-for-afghans-is-in-limbo-leaving-thousands-tense> (Accessed 14 April 2023).

¹⁰⁰ Anju Agnihotri Chaba, ‘Afghan Students Stare at Bleak Future, Seek MEA Intervention’, *The Indian Express*, 25 July 2023, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/afghan-students-future-mea-intervention-8858457/> (Accessed 9 August 2023).

¹⁰¹ ‘India–Afghanistan Relations: Bilateral Brief’, n. 57.

Similarly, according to media reports, about 130 Afghan military officers and cadets were undergoing training at Indian military academies at the time of the fall of government in Kabul. There were 83 Afghan gentlemen cadets at IMA alone, of which 40 graduated in December 2021 and the remaining last batch of 43 cadets graduated in June 2022. As the Afghan National Army ceased to exist after August 2021, no fresh Afghan cadets arrived thereafter.¹⁰² India had been training Afghan military personnel for almost a decade and as per media reports, 1,000 training slots were annually offered to the Afghan military. The Afghan cadets were trained at Indian Military Academy in Dehradun, National Defence Academy in Pune, Officers Training Academy in Chennai, Army War College and Infantry School in Mhow, School of Artillery in Deolali, and College of Military Engineering in Pune. It was reported that in all there were about 700 Afghan military officers, soldiers, cadets and their dependents in India when the Taliban took over power in August 2021.¹⁰³ It included Afghan military personnel who were in India for medical treatment.

In February 2022, about 80 Afghan cadets, who had completed their military training and were not in a position to return to Afghanistan, were offered a 12-month training course in 'Effective English Communication for Business and Office Purpose' under the ITEC

¹⁰² Kalyan Das, '43 IMA Cadets Last Batch from Afghanistan', *The Times of India*, 8 June 2022, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/dehradun/43-ima-cadets-last-batch-from-afghanistan/articleshow/92066497.cms> (Accessed 7 June 2023).

¹⁰³ Manjeet Negi, 'India to Complete Training of Afghan Army Soldiers in its Military Academies', *India Today*, 2 September 2021, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-to-complete-training-of-afghan-army-soldiers-in-its-military-academies-1848575-2021-09-02> (Accessed 1 November 2023); and Rajat Pandit, 'Army Helping 700 Afghan Personnel Present in Country on All Fronts', *The Times of India*, 20 December 2021, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/army-helping-700-afghan-personnel-present-in-country-on-all-fronts/articleshow/88380004.cms> (Accessed 22 September 2024).

programme.¹⁰⁴ Later, in July 2022, the Taliban-run Ministry of Interior announced that all Afghan military personnel undergoing training in foreign countries, including India, had been asked to return to Afghanistan. The interior ministry spokesperson stated: 'Afghan soldiers in India are the assets of Afghanistan, we hope they return to the country; based on their expertise we will assign them to different security and defense institutions.'¹⁰⁵ At the end of the month, on 29 July, some 25 Afghan military cadets trained in India returned to Kabul where they were received by the Taliban defence ministry officials. It was stated that the cadets returned after receiving 'assurances of safety and employment from the Afghan Minister of Defence'.¹⁰⁶ Another 20 Afghan cadets returned to Kabul in February 2023.¹⁰⁷

Besides Afghan students, trainees, medical patients and businessmen, there were also Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in India, including

¹⁰⁴ Rezaul H. Laskar, 'India Allows 80 Afghan Defence Cadets to Join 12-month Training Programme', *Hindustan Times*, 4 February 2022, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-allows-80-afghan-defence-cadets-to-join-12-month-training-programme-101643977275662.html> (31 October 2023); and Dinakar Peri and Kallol Bhattacharjee, 'Army Reaches Out to Stranded Afghan Cadets, Offers Special Training', *The Hindu*, 4 February 2022, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/army-reaches-out-to-stranded-afghan-cadets-offers-special-training/article38378820.ece> (Accessed 31 October 2023).

¹⁰⁵ 'Kabul Asks Ex-ANDSF Soldiers Studying in India to Return', *Tolo News*, 15 July 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-178940> (Accessed 15 July 2022).

¹⁰⁶ 'Afghan Cadets Returned After Graduations from India', *Bakhtar News Agency*, 29 July 2022, at <https://bakhtarnews.af/en/afghan-cadets-returned-after-graduations-from-india/> (Accessed 9 May 2023); and 'Afghan Cadets Trained in India Receive Warm Welcome in Kabul', *ANI*, 29 July 2022, at <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/afghan-cadets-trained-in-india-receive-warm-welcome-in-kabul20220729190424/> (Accessed 6 August 2022).

¹⁰⁷ 'Cadets Return to the Country Completing their Training Courses', *Bakhtar News Agency*, 9 February 2023, at <https://bakhtarnews.af/en/cadets-returns-to-the-country-completing-their-training-courses/> (Accessed 12 February 2023); and '20 Ex-Afghan Military Students Return to Afghanistan from India', *The Khaama Press*, 9 February 2023, at <https://www.khaama.com/20-ex-afghan-military-students-return-to-afghanistan-from-india/> (Accessed 11 February 2023).

Afghan Hindu and Sikh refugees. As per the latest factsheet of UNHCR India, there were 10,453 registered Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in India as of 30 August 2024,¹⁰⁸ down from 13,078 as of 31 August 2023,¹⁰⁹ 15,406 as of 30 September 2022,¹¹⁰ and 15,559 as of 31 August 2021.¹¹¹

OPERATION *DEVI SHAKTI*

Given the political uncertainty in the country following the Taliban takeover in August 2021, and with the last of the Western troops rushing for an exit, India had to prioritise the safe and immediate evacuation of its remaining nationals in the country. The evacuation operation, which was carried out by the Indian Air Force (IAF), and Air India and IndiGo, was named Operation *Devi Shakti*. In March 2023, the Minister of State for External Affairs, V. Muraleedharan, in his reply to a question raised in the Parliament, stated:

Under Operation Devi Shakti, a total of 669 people were evacuated. This included 448 Indian nationals, 206 Afghans (including Hindu Sikh minority community members) and 15 people of other nationalities (Nepal, Lebanon and Uganda) in seven flights (6 flights operated between August 16 and 25, 2021 and the last flight on December 10, 2021). All Indian nationals who had sought repatriation to India were evacuated.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ 'India: Factsheet', UNHCR India, August 2024, at <https://reporting.unhcr.org/india-factsheet-9283> (Accessed 16 October 2024).

¹⁰⁹ 'India: Factsheet', UNHCR India, August 2023, at <https://reporting.unhcr.org/india-factsheet-5752> (Accessed 16 October 2024).

¹¹⁰ 'India: Factsheet', UNHCR India, September 2022, at <https://reporting.unhcr.org/india-factsheet-3393> (Accessed 16 October 2024).

¹¹¹ 'India: Factsheet', UNHCR India, August 2021, at <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/India-factsheet-August2021.pdf> (Accessed 16 October 2024).

¹¹² 'Unstarred Question No. 3879: Financial Aid to Afghanistan', Lok Sabha, Parliament of India, 25 March 2022, at <https://loksabha.nic.in/Questions/QResult15.aspx?qref=36543&lsno=17> (Accessed 2 April 2023).

Most of the Indian nationals in Afghanistan were engaged as professionals in banks, information technology firms, construction companies, hospitals, NGOs, telecom companies, security companies, universities, India-sponsored projects, or were working with Afghan ministries and departments and also the UN missions in the country.¹¹³ Also, several Indian companies that had direct or indirect sales presence or were engaged in India-funded infrastructure projects in Afghanistan had to abruptly cease operations due to the fall of the government in Kabul. Prominent Indian companies that had a presence in Afghanistan were: Godrej Consumer; Marico; Tata Motors; Ashok Leyland; Kalpataru Power Transmission Limited; KEC International (electrical transmission lines); Phoenix (consultancy in electrical transmission); WAPCOS Limited (for the Afghan–India Friendship Dam or Salma Dam); Angelique International Limited (Salma Dam and other power projects); AIPL (establishment of hydropower project in Helmand Province); Gammon India (power transmission line and power substations), Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL), APTECH (computer and management education); IRCON International Limited; Anaar Group (Air India GSA); and Spice Jet.¹¹⁴

UN RESOLUTION 2593

India has, time and again, stated that besides historical and civilisation ties with the people of Afghanistan, its future approach to Afghanistan will be guided by UN Resolution 2593 on Afghanistan, adopted on 30 August 2021 during India's rotating presidency at the UNSC (see Annexure II). The resolution demanded that 'Afghan territory not be used to threaten or attack any country or to shelter or train terrorists, or to plan or to finance terrorist acts' and reiterated the importance of

¹¹³ 'India–Afghanistan Bilateral Brief', n. 57, p. 6.

¹¹⁴ Kritika Suneja, 'Continue, Pull Out or Wait and Watch? India Inc in a Huddle Over its Investments in Afghanistan', *The Economic Times*, 7 September 2021, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/india-inc-talks-to-govt-to-gauge-afghan-climate/articleshow/85993615.cms?from=mdr> (Accessed 26 May 2023); and 'India–Afghanistan Relations', MEA, GoI, December 2016, at https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Afghanistan_Dec_2016.pdf (Accessed 26 May 2023).

‘combating terrorism in Afghanistan, including those individuals and entities designated pursuant to resolution 1267 (1999)’. In addition, it called for ‘strengthened efforts to provide humanitarian assistance’ and ‘full, safe, and unhindered access for the United Nations, its specialized agencies and implementing partners, and all humanitarian actors engaged in humanitarian relief activity’; reaffirmed ‘the importance of upholding human rights including those of women, children and minorities’; and encouraged ‘all parties to seek an inclusive, negotiated political settlement’. The resolution further noted the Taliban’s commitment regarding ‘safe, secure, and orderly departure’ of Afghans and all foreign nationals leaving the country.¹¹⁵

TALIBAN’S EARLY OUTREACH TO INDIA

On 31 August 2021, the Indian Ambassador to Qatar, Deepak Mittal, and the then head of the Taliban political office in Doha, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, met at the Indian Embassy in Qatar. This was the first official contact between India and the Taliban since the latter took over Kabul. According to the MEA press release, the two discussed the issue of ‘safety, security and return of the stranded Indian nationals’. The ambassador also expressed India’s security concerns and stated that the Afghan soil should not be used for anti-India activities. Stanekzai assured the ambassador that India’s concerns will be positively addressed.¹¹⁶ About three days before the meeting, Stanekzai, in a video address released on 28 August 2021, reportedly stated: ‘We attach great importance to our trade, economic and political relations with India and want to maintain that relation.’ Probably referring to the India–Afghanistan Air Freight Corridor, he added that the two countries ‘also need to keep the air trade open’. At the same

¹¹⁵ ‘Resolution 2593 (2021)’, Adopted by the Security Council at its 8848th Meeting, UNSC, 30 August 2021, at <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/238/85/PDF/N2123885.pdf?OpenElement> (Accessed 1 June 2023). The resolution was adopted by a vote of 13 in favour with two abstentions (Russia and China).

¹¹⁶ ‘Meeting in Doha’, MEA, GoI, 31 August 2021, at https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34208/Meeting_in_Doha (Accessed 15 April 2023).

time, he emphasised the importance of Afghanistan's trade with India through Pakistan.¹¹⁷

In early September 2021, immediately following the announcement of the caretaker government, the Taliban reached out to India with a request for resumption of commercial flights between the two countries. The acting Taliban civil aviation minister wrote a letter, dated 7 September 2021, to the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) of India in this regard.¹¹⁸ The acting Taliban foreign minister was also said to have requested India to resume its scholarship programmes for Afghan students and allow those already enrolled in Indian educational institutions to travel back to India to complete their courses.¹¹⁹

On 15 June 2022, within two weeks of India sending its first official delegation to Kabul on 2 June, Afghanistan's largest private commercial airline, Kam Air, operated a special flight from Kabul to Delhi. Kam Air had not operated any scheduled passenger flight to Delhi since the fall of Kabul and the closure of the Kabul International Airport to commercial passenger flights in August 2021.¹²⁰ Two months later, in

¹¹⁷ 'We Want to maintain Afghanistan's Trade, Political Ties with India: Taliban Leader', *India Today*, 30 August 2021, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/taliban-maintain-afghanistan-trade-political-ties-india-stanekzai-1846887-2021-08-29> (Accessed 19 April 2023).

¹¹⁸ Devirupa Mitra, 'In First Known Official Communication, Taliban Requests India to Start Commercial Flights', *The Wire*, 29 September 2021, at <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/taliban-india-official-communication-letter-commercial-flights> (Accessed 29 September 2021).

¹¹⁹ Rezaul H. Laskar, 'Not Just Flights, Taliban Wants Scholarships to Resume Too. India is in No Hurry', *Hindustan Times*, 29 September 2021, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/not-just-flights-taliban-wants-scholarships-to-resume-too-india-is-in-no-hurry-101632928342359.html> (Accessed 14 February 2023).

¹²⁰ Saurabh Sinha, 'Afghan Carrier Flies in 9 from Kabul, Takes 26 Back from Delhi', *The Times of India*, 16 June 2022, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/afghan-carrier-flies-in-9-people-from-kabul-took-26-back-from-delhi-today/articleshow/92237658.cms> (Accessed 2 December 2023); and 'Afghan Carrier Kam Air

early August, Ariana Afghan Airlines, too announced the resumption of weekly flights to New Delhi.¹²¹

RESUMPTION OF INDIAN AID

In perhaps the first official enunciation of India's policy towards post-August 2021 Afghanistan, EAM Jaishankar, while speaking at the UN on 13 September 2021, stated that India's approach had always been guided and will continue to be guided by its historical friendship with the people of Afghanistan, and that India was willing to stand by the Afghan people as it had in the past. He identified 'normalisation of regular commercial operations of Kabul airport' and 'efficient logistics' as critical to creating an enabling environment for speedy and effective delivery of relief assistance to the Afghan people. He also stated that it was essential that 'humanitarian assistance providers are accorded unimpeded, unrestricted and direct access to Afghanistan'. He added that only UN had the capacity to ensure 'a non-discriminatory distribution of humanitarian assistance across all sections of the Afghan society'.¹²²

By early October 2021, India was exploring the possibility of dispatching humanitarian assistance consisting of 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat and essential medical supplies via land route through Pakistan

Operates Special Kabul–Delhi Flight on Wednesday', *Financial Express*, 16 June 2022, at <https://www.financialexpress.com/life/travel-tourism-afghan-carrier-kam-air-operates-special-kabul-delhi-flight-on-wednesday-2563044/> (Accessed 2 December 2023).

¹²¹ 'Ariana Afghan Airlines Resumes Kabul–Delhi Flights', *Amu TV*, 4 August 2022, at <https://amu.tv/en/13660/> (Accessed 29 May 2023).

¹²² 'External Affairs Minister's Remarks at the United Nations High-Level Meeting on the Humanitarian Situation in Afghanistan 2021', MEA, GoI, 13 September 2021, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/34253/External+Affairs+Ministers+remarks+at+the+United+Nations+HighLevel+Meeting+on+the+Humanitarian+Situation+in+Afghanistan+2021> (Accessed 18 September 2021).

to Afghanistan.¹²³ A bulk of the UN country team was back by September to coordinate the distribution of humanitarian aid and assistance to the people in Afghanistan. A proposal was sent to the Pakistan Government on 7 October 2021 to allow Indian humanitarian assistance to be transported overland to Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the Indian and Taliban officials met on the sidelines of the Third Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan held on 20 October 2021 in the Russian capital. This was the second official contact between the two sides since the Taliban took over Kabul. The Indian delegation was led by Joint Secretary (Pakistan, Afghanistan & Iran) Division of the MEA, or JS (PAI), J.P. Singh, and the Taliban delegation was led by Acting Taliban Deputy PM Abdul Salam Hanafi. According to the statement issued by the Taliban, ‘Both sides considered it necessary to take into account each other’s concerns and improve diplomatic and economic relations.’ It further stated that India had ‘expressed readiness to provide extensive humanitarian assistance’ to the Afghan people.¹²⁴

As Pakistan Government continued to drag its feet on the Indian proposal, Acting Taliban Foreign Minister Muttaqi took up the issue with PM Imran Khan during his visit to Islamabad in November 2021. In his meeting with the Pakistan PM on 12 November, Muttaqi requested that the Indian wheat be allowed to be transported via Pakistan to Afghanistan. As per the press release issued after the meeting by Pakistan: ‘The Prime Minister conveyed that in the current context Pakistan would favourably consider the request by Afghan brothers

¹²³ Sachin Parashar, ‘Afghanistan in Food Crisis, India Plans to Send 50,000MT of Wheat’, *The Times of India*, 19 October 2021, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/afghanistan-in-food-crisis-india-plans-to-send-50000mt-of-wheat/articleshow/87121362.cms> (Accessed 17 August 2023)

¹²⁴ ‘Delegation of Islamic Emirate Meets Special Representative of India for Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan’, Al Emarah, 21 October 2021, at <http://alemarahen.com/?p=48547> (Accessed 24 October 2021). Also see ‘In Russia, Indian Officials Meet with Taliban Deputy PM, Offer Humanitarian Aid’, *The Wire*, 20 October 2021, at <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/russia-indian-officials-meet-taliban-deputy-pm-offer-humanitarian-aid> (Accessed 21 October 2021).

for transportation of wheat offered by India through Pakistan on exceptional basis for humanitarian purposes and as per modalities to be worked out.¹²⁵ It was clear that Islamabad wanted to be seen as responding to the Taliban request than to the Indian proposal to allow humanitarian assistance to be transported to Afghanistan via Pakistan. On 24 November, in response to the Indian proposal of 7 October, Pakistan finally agreed to allow Indian humanitarian supplies for Afghanistan to be transported through Wagah 'on an exceptional basis'.¹²⁶ On 3 December, Pakistan further announced its decision to allow only Afghan trucks for transporting Indian humanitarian assistance from Attari–Wagah post on the India–Pakistan border to the Torkham crossing point between Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹²⁷

The frustration in Islamabad at the Taliban's willingness to engage India and accept Indian aid and assistance was palpable. Earlier, on 2 November 2021, Pakistan's National Security Adviser (NSA) Moeed Yusuf, speaking to the media in Islamabad, had refused to attend the

¹²⁵ 'Acting Afghan Foreign Minister Calls on Prime Minister Imran Khan', Press Information Department, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of Pakistan, PR No. 103, 12 November 2021, at https://pid.gov.pk/site/press_detail/18321 (Accessed 27 November 2023); and 'Pakistan to "Favourably" Consider Afghan Request for Transport of Indian Wheat, PM Tells Visiting Delegation', *Dawn*, 12 November 2021, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1657689> (Accessed 28 November 2023).

¹²⁶ 'Pakistan's Decision to Allow Transportation of 50000 MTs of Wheat and Life Saving Medicines through Wagah as Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan', Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 591/2021, 24 November 2021, at <https://mofa.gov.pk/pakistans-decision-to-allow-transportation-of-50000-mts-of-wheat-and-life-saving-medicines-through-wagah-as-humanitarian-assistance-to-afghanistan/> (Accessed 19 April 2023).

¹²⁷ 'Pakistan's Decision to Allow Transportation of 50000 MTs of Wheat and Life Saving Medicines through Wagah as Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan', Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 603/2021, 3 December 2021, at <https://mofa.gov.pk/pakistans-decision-to-allow-transportation-of-50000-mts-of-wheat-and-life-saving-medicines-through-wagah-as-humanitarian-assistance-to-afghanistan-2/> (Accessed 19 April 2023).

upcoming Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan in New Delhi on 10 November, stating ‘a spoiler can’t be a peacemaker’.¹²⁸ Again, on 15 January 2022, Yusuf called India’s decision to send wheat assistance to the people in Afghanistan a ‘publicity stunt’.¹²⁹ A week later, Afghanistan’s official state news agency *Bakhtar* retorted stating that the transportation of Indian wheat assistance of 50,000 metric tonne meant for ‘the needy families of Afghanistan’ had to be suspended many times due to Pakistani restrictions.¹³⁰

On 12 February 2022, India signed an MoU with the WFP in Rome for distribution of Indian wheat assistance in Afghanistan.¹³¹ The first convoy of 50 trucks carrying 2,500 metric tonnes of wheat was finally flagged off on 22 February 2022, in a ceremony held at Amritsar, by the then Foreign Secretary, Harsh Vardhan Shringla, Afghan Ambassador Farid Mamundzay and WFP Country Director Bishow Parajuli. According to the MEA press release, the supply of wheat was to be transported from Attari (India) to Jalalabad (Afghanistan) by Afghan

¹²⁸ “‘A Spoiler can’t be a Peacemaker’: Moeed Yusuf Says will not Attend Indian Moot on Afghanistan’, *Dawn*, 2 November 2021, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1655514> (Accessed 30 November 2023).

¹²⁹ ‘NSA Calls India’s Afghan Aid “Publicity Stunt”’, *The Express Tribune*, 16 January 2022, at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2338975/nsa-calls-indias-afghan-aid-publicity-stunt> (Accessed 29 November 2023).

¹³⁰ ‘Finally, Pakistan Allowed Transmission of 50,000-ton Wheat India’s Aid to Afghanistan Through His County’, *Bakhtar News Agency*, 23 January 2022, at <https://bakhtarnews.af/en/finally-pakistan-allowed-transmission-of-50000-ton-wheat-indias-aid-to-afghanistan-through-his-county/> (Accessed 23 April 2023).

¹³¹ WFP Government Partners, ‘India and WFP Sign Landmark Agreement’, Twitter Post, 12 February 2022, 1:13 am, at <https://twitter.com/WFPGovts/status/1492222683328700422> (Accessed 21 April 2023). For details, see Nayanima Basu, ‘India Likely to Start Wheat Aid to Kabul via Pakistan Tuesday, Afghan Trucks to Take 1st Batch’, *The Print*, 21 February 2022, at <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-likely-to-start-wheat-aid-to-kabul-via-pakistan-tuesday-afghan-trucks-to-take-1st-batch/841204/> (Accessed 21 April 2023).

transporters. The wheat assistance was to be delivered in multiple consignments and handed over to the WFP in Jalalabad, Afghanistan.¹³²

DELHI DECLARATION ON AFGHANISTAN

On 10 November 2021, India hosted the Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan, in line with its call for 'a unified international response to address the security and humanitarian challenges facing Afghanistan'. The dialogue, third in series, brought together the NSAs/secretaries of security councils of Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Pakistan and China refused to participate in the regional dialogue. The first two rounds were hosted by Iran in 2018 and 2019.¹³³

The Delhi Declaration on Afghanistan, issued at the end of the dialogue, emphasised that 'Afghanistan's territory should not be used for sheltering, training, planning or financing any terrorist acts'; called for 'collective cooperation against the menace of radicalization, extremism, separatism and drug trafficking in the region'; and noted that the 'United Nations has a central role to play in Afghanistan'. It also highlighted the importance of 'ensuring that the fundamental rights of women, children and minority communities are not violated'; underlined 'the need to provide urgent humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan'; and reiterated that 'humanitarian assistance should be provided in an unimpeded, direct and assured manner to Afghanistan' and the

¹³² 'Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan', MEA, GoI, 22 February 2022, at https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34885/Humanitarian_Assistance_to_Afghanistan (Accessed 15 April 2023); and 'India Sends First Shipment of 2,500 Tonne Wheat to Afghanistan via ICP Attari', *LPAI Connect*, Vol. 2, No. 1, March 2022, p. 12, at <https://lpai.gov.in/sites/default/files/2022-07/Newsletter-5.pdf> (Accessed 27 November 2023).

¹³³ 'The Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan (November 10, 2021)', MEA, GoI, 8 November 2021, at https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34489/The_Delhi_Regional_Security_Dialogue_on_Afghanistan_November_10_2021 (Accessed 9 November 2021).

assistance should be distributed ‘in a non-discriminatory manner across all sections of the Afghan society’.¹³⁴ (see Annexure III)

PM Modi, in his meeting with the foreign participants, emphasised four points in the context of Afghanistan: (i) the need for an inclusive government; (ii) a zero-tolerance stance about Afghan territory being used by terrorist groups; (iii) a strategy to counter trafficking of drugs and arms from Afghanistan; and (iv) addressing the increasingly critical humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.¹³⁵ In December 2021, India also supported the UNSC resolution to grant exemption from sanctions for humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.¹³⁶

FIRST OFFICIAL DELEGATION IN KABUL

On 2 June 2022, India, for the first time since the Taliban takeover, sent a multi-member team led by JS (PAI), MEA, J. P. Singh, to Kabul. According to the MEA press release, the team was in Kabul to oversee the delivery operations of India’s humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.¹³⁷ The Indian delegation visited the IGICH and the Habibia School in Kabul, both renovated by India, and the power substation built by the Power Grid Corporation of India at Chintala near Kabul.

¹³⁴ ‘Delhi Declaration on Afghanistan’, MEA, GoI, 10 November 2021, at https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34491/Delhi_Declaration_on_Afghanistan (Accessed 11 November 2021).

¹³⁵ ‘Joint Call on Prime Minister by National Security Advisers/Secretaries of Security Councils Attending the “Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan”’, Prime Minister’s Office, GoI, 10 November 2021, at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1770732> (Accessed 11 November 2021).

¹³⁶ ‘India’s Explanation of Vote. Statement by Ambassador T.S. Tirumurti, Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations’, UNSC Adoption of Resolution to Grant Exemption from Sanctions for Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan, 22 December 2021, at <https://pminewyork.gov.in/IndiaatUNSC?id=NDQ2Mw,,> (Accessed 1 April 2023).

¹³⁷ ‘India’s Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan’, MEA, GoI, 2 June 2022, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35381/Indias+humanitarian+assistance+to+Afghanistan> (Accessed 2 June 2022).

The visiting Indian delegation met senior members of the Taliban, including Acting Taliban Foreign Minister Muttaqi and Acting Deputy Foreign Minister Stanekzai, to discuss further assistance for the Afghan people, and also met representatives of international agencies, like the WHO and the WFP, involved in the distribution of Indian humanitarian assistance.¹³⁸

According to an article published in *The Indian Express*, an Indian security team had visited Kabul earlier in February 2022 to assess the security situation.¹³⁹ The discussion about having a ground presence in Afghanistan had apparently begun in November 2021, when the Imran Khan Government put conditions for allowing Indian wheat assistance for Afghanistan to transit overland via Pakistan.¹⁴⁰

According to the *Bakhtar News Agency*, Muttaqi described the 2 June visit of the Indian delegation as a 'good start' towards the restoration of diplomatic and trade ties 'between the two friendly countries'. He also stressed on 'India resuming its stalled projects in Afghanistan...and providing consular services to Afghans, primarily for students and travellers.' Further, 'both sides agreed to boost bilateral trade...and work on mutual interests.'¹⁴¹ Similarly, Stanekzai, in his meeting with the

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Nirupama Subramanian, 'India Looks at Reopening Mission in Kabul Minus Senior Diplomats', *The Indian Express*, 17 May 2022, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-looks-reopening-mission-kabul-minus-senior-diplomats-7920920/> (Accessed 2 June 2023); and Rezaul H. Laskar, 'India Exploring Resumption of Diplomatic Presence in Afghanistan', *Hindustan Times*, 7 June 2022, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-exploring-resumption-of-diplomatic-presence-in-afghanistan-101654608612074.html> (Accessed 11 June 2022).

¹⁴⁰ Suhasini Haidar, 'India Mulling Options Over Re-opening Mission in Afghanistan', *The Hindu*, 1 December 2021, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-mulling-options-over-re-opening-mission-in-afghanistan/article37781058.ece> (Accessed 2 June 2022).

¹⁴¹ 'FM Muttaqi Meets J.P Singh of India', *Bakhtar News Agency*, 2 June 2022, at <https://bakhtarnews.af/en/fm-muttaqi-meets-j-p-singh-of-india/> (Accessed 9 May 2023).

Indian delegation, stated that ‘Afghan–Indian relations would move forward based on mutual respect and joint bilateral legitimate interests’ and ‘would not be influenced by other countries’ inter-rivalry’.¹⁴²

Another report published in *Hindustan Times* stated that the Indian delegation, apart from meeting Muttaqi and Stanekzai, also met other senior members of the interim Taliban government. It further stated that the Taliban leadership apparently assured the Indian delegation that it will not allow either Al-Qaeda in the Subcontinent (AQIS) or Pakistani militant groups, like Jaish-e-Mohammed, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, to threaten India and action will be taken against these groups if actionable intelligence was provided to them.¹⁴³

Acting Taliban Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob in his interview to *CNN-News18* published on 2 June, probably his first interview to a news channel, stated:

The Islamic Emirate is ready to form relations with India in all spheres...we want to have amicable ties with India and there is no problem...my view is that we should have cordial relations with India. We welcome India by keeping our doors open for them. We hope that India will also take initiatives and strengthen the relationship with us.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Laskar, ‘India Exploring Resumption of Diplomatic Presence in Afghanistan’, n. 139.

¹⁴³ Shishir Gupta, ‘Taliban to Act against Pak LeT/JeM Terrorists in Afghanistan on Specific Intel’, *Hindustan Times*, 10 June 2022, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/taliban-to-act-against-pak-let-jem-terrorists-in-afghanistan-on-specific-indian-101654831818094.html> (Accessed 11 June 2022).

¹⁴⁴ Manoj Gupta, ‘Great Expectations of India, Gave Crucial Help in Past: Afghan Defence Minister to News18’, *CNN-News18*, 2 June 2022, at <https://www.news18.com/news/world/great-expectations-of-india-gave-crucial-help-in-past-afghan-defence-minister-to-news18-global-exclusive-5292811.html> (Accessed 12 October 2024).

Interestingly, just about a week before, Indian NSA Ajit Doval, in his address at the Fourth Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan, held in Dushanbe on 27 May 2022, accentuated the need 'to enhance capability of Afghanistan to counter terrorism and terrorist groups which pose a threat regional peace and security'. He also stated that 'the foremost priority should be the right to life and a dignified living as well as protection of human rights of all the people in Afghanistan' and emphasised 'the need for representation of all sections of Afghan society including women and minorities so that the collective energies of the largest possible proportion of the Afghan population feel motivated to contribute to nation building'. He further stressed that the 'provision of education to girls and employment to women and youth will ensure productivity and spur growth' and 'have a positive social impact including discouraging radical ideologies among youth'. With regard to India's relationship with Afghanistan, he stated that 'India was and is an important stakeholder in Afghanistan', and India's 'special relationship with the people of Afghanistan over centuries will guide India's approach' and 'nothing can change this'.¹⁴⁵

The same day, on 27 May 2022, Anas Haqqani—who was earlier member of the Taliban negotiating team based in Doha and is the brother of Acting Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani—stated in an interview to *CNN-News18*:

whatever stakes India has in Afghanistan can be reclaimed by it under the stable government of the Emirate. The Emirate extends its support and assurance that if it has any issue, the Emirate will ensure that all its apprehensions will be addressed. We wish that

¹⁴⁵ 'NSA Ajit Doval Stresses on Need to Enhance Capability of Afghanistan to Counter Terrorism', News Services Division, *All India Radio*, 27 May 2022, at <https://newsonair.gov.in/News?title=NSA%26%2339%3Bs-of-Tajikistan%2C-India%2C-Russia%2C-Kazakhstan%2C-Uzbekistan%2C-Iran%2C-Kyrgyzstan-%26-China-meet-in-Dushanbe&id=441716> (Accessed 1 June 2023); and 'NSA Ajit Doval Calls for Enhancing Afghanistan's Capability to Counter Terrorism', *The Wire*, 27 May 2022, at <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/nsa-ajit-doval-calls-for-enhancing-afghanistans-capability-to-counter-terrorism> (Accessed 1 June 2023).

India reopens its embassy, mingles with Afghan people in a friendly environment. The Emirate has no issue and its doors are open...¹⁴⁶

Earlier, on 25 May, the head of Taliban political office in Doha, Suhail Shaheen, reacting to a report published in *The Indian Express* about India exploring the possibility of reopening its embassy, had stated:

It is our commitment to ensure the security of all embassies that are open in Kabul, as well as the diplomats working in Kabul... We will do the same for the Indian embassy. We welcome them [India] if they want to complete their projects or start new projects in Afghanistan.¹⁴⁷

Just prior to it, in an exclusive interview to *The Print*, Shaheen had stated the same but had emphasised that India's relations with Afghanistan should not be based 'on the individual lens of those officials of the former Kabul administration who are now in western countries'. He added that India 'should have a relationship with the people of Afghanistan' and the two countries 'should have relations on the basis of national interest and on the basis of equality and mutual interest'.¹⁴⁸ Interestingly, in May 2022, former Afghan Foreign Minister and Chairman of High Council for National Reconciliation Abdullah Abdullah, who stayed back in Kabul along with former President Karzai

¹⁴⁶ Manoj Gupta, 'News18 Global Exclusive Interview | Afghanistan Doors Open for India, Cricket Can Cement Ties: Taliban Leader Anas Haqqani', *CNN-News18*, 27 May 2022, at <https://www.news18.com/news/world/afghanistans-doors-open-for-india-cricket-can-cement-ties-emirate-leader-anas-haqqani-to-news18-in-global-exclusive-interview-5255479.html> (Accessed 30 May 2022).

¹⁴⁷ 'IEA Ensures Security of Indian Diplomats in the Country', *Bakhtar News Agency*, 25 May 2022, at <https://bakhtarnews.af/en/iea-ensures-security-of-indian-diplomats-in-the-country/> (Accessed 9 May 2023).

¹⁴⁸ Nayanima Basu, 'India shouldn't Retain Ties with Afghanistan's Previous Rulers, Says Taliban Leader Shaheen', *The Print*, 23 May 2022, at <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-shouldnt-retain-ties-with-afghanistans-previous-rulers-says-taliban-leader-shaheen/965684/> (Accessed 9 May 2023).

after the collapse of the Ghani Government, came on a long visit to Delhi where his family had been based.¹⁴⁹

DEPLOYMENT OF TECHNICAL TEAM

On 22 June 2022, a massive earthquake of 5.9 magnitude (6.1 according to some sources) hit eastern Afghanistan—deadliest since the March 2002 earthquake in the north-eastern Baghlan Province—leading to a huge loss of lives and property, mostly in the provinces of Paktika and Khost. According to the initial assessments, over 1,000 people were killed and 1,500 were injured, and about 70 per cent houses in the affected areas were either destroyed or damaged. Giyan, Barmal, Nika and Ziruk districts of Paktika Province and Shamal and Spera districts of Khost Province were said to have been most affected by the earthquake.¹⁵⁰ However, the casualty figures were later revised to around 1,036 deaths (including 230 children), 2,949 injured (including 591 children), along with 7,715 houses destroyed and 7,056 households damaged.¹⁵¹ The earthquake impacted 361,634 people in 17 districts, out of which 10 districts were in Paktika Province and seven were in Khost Province.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ 'Afghanistan: Former Top Leader Abdullah Abdullah Leaves Country to Meet Family', *The Print*, 2 May 2022, at <https://theprint.in/world/afghanistan-former-top-leader-abdullah-abdullah-leaves-country-to-meet-family/939015/> (Accessed 2 May 2022); and 'Dr. Abdullah Ex-Chairman of National Reconciliation Return to the Country', *Bakhtar News Agency*, 11 June 2022, at <https://bakhtarnews.af/en/dr-abdullah-former-chairman-of-national-reconciliation-return-to-the-country/> (Accessed 9 May 2023).

¹⁵⁰ 'Rising from the Rubble: Earthquake Victims in Afghanistan Rebuild After Disaster', IOM, UN Migration, 12 July 2022, at <https://storyteller.iom.int/stories/rising-rubble-earthquake-victims-afghanistan-rebuild-after-disaster> (Accessed 29 September 2023).

¹⁵¹ 'Afghanistan: Khost and Paktika Earthquake', Operation Update No. 2, International Federation of Red Cross, 26 February 2023, p. 2, at <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-khost-and-paktika-earthquake-emergency-appeal-no-mdraf007-operation-update-2> (Accessed 30 September 2023).

¹⁵² 'Afghanistan Earthquake in Paktika and Khost', Situation Report No. 9, WHO, 10 July 2022, p. 2, at <https://www.emro.who.int/images/stories/afghanistan/earthquake-sit-rep-9.pdf> (Accessed 30 September 2023).

India, as a 'true first responder', immediately dispatched two IAF aircraft on 23 June, carrying over 27 tonnes of emergency relief assistance consisting of essential supplies, including family ridge tents, sleeping bags, blankets, sleeping mats, etc., for the affected people, in coordination with the UNOCHA and the ARCS.¹⁵³

At the same time, India also deployed a technical team at its embassy in Kabul to 'closely monitor and coordinate the efforts of various stakeholders for the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance' to the Afghan people. The MEA press release issued on 23 June 2022 stated that India's future approach to Afghanistan will continue to be guided by its 'longstanding links with Afghan society' and 'development partnership including humanitarian assistance for the people of Afghanistan'.¹⁵⁴ It was said that the planned deployment of the technical team was delayed due to a suicide bomb attack, claimed by ISK, on a gurdwara in Kabul on 18 June, in which two Afghan nationals, including an Afghan Sikh, were killed and three were injured.¹⁵⁵

In early August 2022, India sent a team of diplomats, except the ambassador, to strengthen the functioning of the embassy in Kabul.¹⁵⁶ According to a report published in *The Hindu*, there were over 60

¹⁵³ 'Earthquake Relief Assistance for the People of Afghanistan', MEA, GoI, 24 June 2022, at https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35440/Earthquake_Relief_Assistance_for_the_people_of_Afghanistan (Accessed 15 April 2023).

¹⁵⁴ 'Deployment of a Technical Team in Embassy of India, Kabul', MEA, GoI, 23 June 2022, at https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35437/Deployment_of_a_technical_team_in_Embassy_of_India_Kabul (Accessed 24 June 2022).

¹⁵⁵ Suhasini Haidar, 'Gurdwara Attack May Delay India's Plans to Reopen Embassy', *The Hindu*, 19 June 2022, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/gurdwara-attack-message-may-delay-indias-plans-to-reopen-kabul-embassy/article65542649.ece> (Accessed 22 June 2022).

¹⁵⁶ 'Team of Indian Diplomats Reached Embassy in Afghanistan: EAM Jaishankar', *The Print*, 12 August 2022, at <https://theprint.in/india/team-of-indian-diplomats-reached-embassy-in-afghanistan-eam-jaishankar/1080575/> (Accessed 29 May 2023).

personnel posted at the embassy and its residential compound. This included five to seven officials, with a director-level foreign service official as the deputy chief of mission, a head of the chancery and a contingent of Indo-Tibetan Border Police.¹⁵⁷ By October 2022, India had agreed to reactivate the air freight corridor and also extend technical support to the Afghan Central Bank or DAB.¹⁵⁸ In November, it was reported after the then head of Indian technical team, Bharat Kumar, met the Acting Taliban Urban Development Minister that India may resume work on 20 stalled development projects in various parts of Afghanistan.¹⁵⁹ The Taliban minister was also said to have invited Indian investments in the urban and housing sector, especially in the New Kabul City project.¹⁶⁰

In January 2024, the Indian Embassy in UAE invited the Taliban envoy to UAE, Badruddin Haqqani, to the Republic Day celebrations in Abu

¹⁵⁷ Suhasini Haidar and Vijaita Singh, 'Embassy Intact, India Ups Kabul Work', *The Hindu*, 6 August 2022, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/embassy-intact-india-ups-kabul-work/article65737918.ece> (Accessed 4 December 2023).

¹⁵⁸ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, 'India 'Agrees to Back' Afghanistan Banking Sector with Technical Support', *The Economic Times*, 31 October 2022, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-agrees-to-back-afghanistan-banking-sector-with-technical-support/articleshow/95188131.cms?from=mdr> (Accessed 10 March 2023); and 'India to Provide Technical Support to DAB', *Afghanistan Times*, 26 October 2022, at <https://www.afghanistantimes.af/india-to-provide-technical-support-to-dab/> (Accessed 10 March 2023).

¹⁵⁹ Nazir Shinwari, 'India to Resume Projects in Afghanistan: MUDH', *Tolo News*, 29 November 2022, at <https://tolonews.com/index.php/business-180968> (Accessed 30 November 2022); and 'India May Restart 20 Projects in Afghanistan: Taliban', *ANI*, 30 November 2022, at <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/india-may-restart-20-projects-in-afghanistan-taliban20221130233301/> (Accessed 5 October 2024).

¹⁶⁰ 'Indian Urged to Invest in Urban Sector', *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 29 November 2022, at <https://pajhwok.com/2022/11/29/indian-urged-to-invest-in-urban-sector/> (Accessed 26 May 2023).

Dhabi.¹⁶¹ At the end of the month, the head of Indian technical team in Kabul, Rambabu Chellappa, participated in a regional conference hosted by the Taliban-led Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 29 January 2024. Termed as “Afghanistan’s Regional Cooperation Initiative”, the conference was chaired by Acting Foreign Minister Muttaqi. It brought together special representatives and diplomats of several neighbouring and regional countries, including Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkiye and Indonesia, besides India. Muttaqi in his address emphasised the need to establish a ‘region-centric narrative’ that is ‘aimed at developing regional cooperation for a positive and constructive engagement between Afghanistan and regional countries.’¹⁶² In a report posted on the Taliban’s official website, the Indian representative at the conference stated that ‘India actively engages in international and regional initiatives concerning Afghanistan, demonstrating its support for all endeavors aimed at promoting stability and development in Afghanistan.’¹⁶³ He also reportedly attended the reception hosted on the occasion by Acting Taliban Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob for foreign representatives and diplomats attending the conference.¹⁶⁴ The

¹⁶¹ Shubhajit Roy, ‘New Thaw: Taliban Envoy is R-day Guest in Abu Dhabi’, *The Indian Express*, 21 January 2024, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/new-thaw-taliban-envoy-is-r-day-guest-in-abu-dhabi-9119589/> (Accessed 21 January 2024).

¹⁶² ‘IEA – Foreign Minister’s Speech at the “Afghanistan’s Regional Cooperation Initiative” Conference’, Al Emarah, 29 January 2024, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/iea-foreign-ministers-speech-at-the-afghanistans-regional-cooperation-initiative-conference/> (Accessed 23 April 2024).

¹⁶³ “‘Afghanistan’s Regional Cooperation Initiative” Meeting Held in Kabul’, Al Emarah, 29 January 2024, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/afghanistans-regional-cooperation-initiative-meeting-held-in-kabul/> (Accessed 23 April 2024).

¹⁶⁴ Fidel Rahmati, ‘Taliban Defense Minister Assures Foreign Diplomats to Ensure Security for Projects in Afghanistan’, *The Khaama Press*, 30 January 2024, at <https://www.khaama.com/taliban-defense-minister-assures-foreign-diplomats-to-ensure-security-for-projects-in-afghanistan/> (Accessed 6 February 2024).

MEA Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal in the weekly media briefing referred to the Indian participation in the regional meeting in Kabul, and stated that India had been 'attending several meetings on Afghanistan in various formats, both at the regional level and international level'.¹⁶⁵

SECOND OFFICIAL DELEGATION IN KABUL

On 7 March 2024, JS (PAI) J. P. Singh led the second Indian delegation to Kabul. The MEA did not issue any press release this time. However, the official spokesperson of the ministry, Randhir Jaiswal, in the weekly media briefing held on 8 March informed that the Indian delegation held meetings with senior members of the Afghan authorities. The delegation also met former President Karzai and officials of the UNAMA, and interacted with members of the Afghan business community. The delegation held discussions on India's humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan and the use of Chabahar Port by Afghan traders.¹⁶⁶

According to the press release issued by the Taliban-led Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Joint Secretary Singh in his meeting with Acting Foreign Minister Muttaqi referred to historical ties between the two countries and highlighted India's humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan over the past two and a half years. He reportedly commended the Taliban for 'ensuring overall security and stability, countering narcotics, fighting ISK and corruption in the country' and stated that India seeks to expand 'political and economic cooperation' with Afghanistan and 'enhance trade through Chabahar Port'. Muttaqi thereafter expressed gratitude for the humanitarian assistance provided

¹⁶⁵ 'Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson (February 01, 2024)', MEA, GoI, 1 February 2024, at https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/37541/Transcript_of_Weekly_Media_Briefing_by_the_Official_Spokesperson_February_01_2024 (Accessed 16 October 2024).

¹⁶⁶ 'Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson (March 08, 2024)', MEA, GoI, 9 March 2024, at https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/37694/Transcript_of_Weekly_Media_Briefing_by_the_Official_Spokesperson_March_08_2024 (Accessed 9 March 2024).

by India. He emphasised his government's 'balanced foreign policy' and stated that it wants to 'strengthen political and economic relations' with India. He also urged the visiting senior Indian official to facilitate visa issuance for Afghan businessmen, patients and students.¹⁶⁷ The Taliban Spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid while speaking to the *Tolo News* stated: 'India's cooperation in humanitarian aspects is highly appreciated by the Afghan people, and we thank them for their contributions. We have assured Indian representatives that they can progress in this direction and we can revive diplomatic relations.'¹⁶⁸ It was clear from statements issued and Indian delegation's direct interaction with Afghan businessmen, first since the return of the Taliban to power, that the emphasis of the Indian visit was on promoting bilateral trade through Chabahar Port. The discussions held this time were relatively wide ranging and were not limited to delivery of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. Due to ongoing tensions with Pakistan, leading to frequent disruptions in Afghan trade through traditional Pakistani routes, Kabul had been looking to its west to Iran and its ports, particularly Chabahar Port, for secure and reliable alternative access to sea routes. The Taliban regime, similar to the previous regime, had been working towards diversifying Afghan trade and transit routes. The Taliban side though evidently keen on strengthening bilateral cooperation, had not missed out on reminding New Delhi of Kabul's long-held demand for visa facilitation for needy Afghan nationals and a diplomatic representation at the Afghan Embassy.

The next official interaction between Indian and the Taliban officials took place just ahead of the third UN Meeting on Afghanistan, held in Doha on 30 June 2024. The Taliban delegation, led by its spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid, met JS (PAI) J.P. Singh who led the Indian delegation to the UN meeting. Mujahid tweeted the same day,

¹⁶⁷ 'Today, the Special Representative of the Republic of India for Afghanistan, J.P. Singh Called on IEA-Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi', Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kabul, 7 March 2024, at <https://mfa.gov.af/en/16546> (Accessed 8 March 2024).

¹⁶⁸ 'Indian Delegation in Kabul Discusses Trade, Humanitarian Aid', *Tolo News*, 9 March 2024, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-187763> (Accessed 10 March 2024).

confirming the meeting and discussions held on strengthening the relations between the two countries. He also thanked India for its support at the UN meeting and the humanitarian assistance extended to Afghanistan.¹⁶⁹ Interestingly, EAM Jaishankar was on an official visit to Doha the same day, during which he met Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Qatar Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani and reviewed bilateral relations.¹⁷⁰

CONTINUED HUMANITARIAN OUTREACH

India's humanitarian aid and assistance to Afghanistan, since 2021, has included: 50,000 metric tonnes of wheat; about 250 tonnes of medical aid consisting of essential life-saving medicines, anti-tuberculosis medicines (20.5 tonnes), 500,000 doses of COVID vaccine and medical/surgical items, like paediatric stethoscope, sphygmomanometer mobile type with paediatric BP cuff, infusion pump, drip chamber set, electro cautery and nylon sutures; and 28 tonnes of disaster relief aid. India has also partnered with UNODC to fight the drug menace in Afghanistan and in this regard, it has provided 11,000 units of female hygiene kits, baby food and general hygiene kits, blankets, clothing, footwear, medical aid and other miscellaneous items for rehabilitation

¹⁶⁹ Official X Account of the Taliban Spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid, 30 June 2024, 2.27 PM, at https://x.com/Zabehulah_M33/status/1807337573204766913 (Accessed 6 October 2024). English translation; 'Islamic Emirate Delegation Meets with Representatives from Uzbekistan, Russia, and India Preceding Doha Meeting', *Bakhtar News Agency*, 30 June 2024, at <https://www.bakhtarnews.af/en/islamic-emirate-delegation-meets-with-representatives-from-uzbekistan-russia-and-india-preceding-doha-meeting/> (Accessed 15 October 2024); and Pia Krishnankutty, 'Taliban Attends UN Meeting for the First Time in Doha, Meets Top Indian Govt Official', *The Print*, 1 July 2024, at <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/taliban-attends-un-meeting-for-the-first-time-in-doha-meets-top-indian-govt-official/2155502/> (Accessed 6 October 2024).

¹⁷⁰ 'Visit of External Affairs Minister to Qatar (June 30, 2024)', MEA, GoI, 29 June 2024, at https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37917/Visit_of_External_Affairs_Minister_to_Qatar_June_30_2024 (Accessed 6 July 2024).

centres across Afghanistan.¹⁷¹ India has also supplied almost 60 million doses of polio vaccine and 2 tonnes of essential medicines to UNICEF.¹⁷²

During the First Meeting of the India–Central Asia Joint Working Group on Afghanistan, held in New Delhi on 7 March 2023, Indian announced the supply of 20,000 metric tonnes of wheat assistance to Afghanistan, in partnership with WFP, through Chabahar Port. The meeting was attended by special envoys/senior officials of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and also country representatives of UNODC and WFP. In the meeting, India offered to hold customised capacity-building training courses for the relevant stakeholders/officials of UNODC and the Central Asian Republics in the field of counter-narcotics.¹⁷³ According to the MEA press release, India and UNODC also agreed to partner on countering

¹⁷¹ *Annual Report 2023–24*, n. 3, p. 8; ‘Statement by Ambassador R. Ravindra, Deputy Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations’, UNGA Plenary Meeting on Afghanistan, 10 November 2022, at <https://pmnewyork.gov.in/IndiaatUNGA?id=NDg0NA,,> (Accessed 1 April 2023); ‘Question No. 5013: Political Development in Afghanistan’, Lok Sabha, MEA, GoI, 31 March 2023, at <https://mea.gov.in/lok-sabha.htm?dtl/36440/question+no5013+political+development+in+afghanistan> (Accessed 2 April 2023); and ‘Statement by India during the Interactive Dialogue on the OHCHR Report on Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan at the 54th Session of the Human Rights Council (11 September–13 October 2023) Delivered by Ambassador Indra Mani Pandey, Permanent Representative, 12th September 2023’, Permanent Mission of India in Geneva, <https://pmindiaun.gov.in/pageinfo/MzAyOA,,> (Accessed 3 December 2023).

¹⁷² ‘India’s Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan’, MEA, GoI, 2 June 2022, at https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35381/Indias_humanitarian_assistance_to_Afghanistan (Accessed 20 May 2023).

¹⁷³ ‘Joint Statement of the First Meeting of the India–Central Asia Joint Working Group (JWG) on Afghanistan’, MEA, GoI, 7 March 2023, at https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36333/Joint_Statement_of_the_First_Meeting_of_the_IndiaCentral_Asia_Joint_Working_Group_JWG_on_Afghanistan (Accessed 7 March 2023).

drug trafficking, including rehabilitation of Afghan drug user population, especially Afghan women, and providing assistance in development of alternate livelihood opportunities.¹⁷⁴

Interestingly, in March 2023, there were reports about the Taliban officials participating, for the first time, in a four-day online ITEC course on 'Immersing with Indian Thoughts', conducted by the Indian Institute of Management–Kozhikode (IIM–K). The IIM–K later stated that 18 Afghan participants had attended the online course and also, it had 'no role whatsoever in the selection of these candidates nor the knowledge of their political affiliations'.¹⁷⁵

The ITEC programme was aimed at facilitating 'a deeper understanding and appreciation of India's business environment' and providing 'participants an opportunity to experience and learn about India's economic environment, regulatory ecosystem, leadership insights, social and historical backdrop, cultural heritage, legal and environmental landscape, consumer mind-sets and business risks.' The programme was open to government officials, business leaders, senior managers and executives from all countries.¹⁷⁶

Initially, there were reports in the media about an internal memo being circulated by the Afghan foreign ministry's Institute of Diplomacy stating that the Indian Embassy was conducting a training programme for the

¹⁷⁴ 'Holding of the First India–Central Asia Joint Working Group on Afghanistan', MEA, GoI, 7 March 2023, at https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/36334/Holding_of_the_first_IndiaCentral_Asia_Joint_Working_Group_on_Afghanistan (Accessed 7 March 2023).

¹⁷⁵ '18 Persons from Afghanistan Took Part in MEA Course: IIM-Kozhikode', *The Hindu*, 14 March 2023, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/18-from-afghanistan-took-part-in-mea-course-iim-kozhikode/article66619629.ece> (Accessed 16 March 2023).

¹⁷⁶ 'Immersing with Indian Thoughts, an India Immersion Program for Cross Sectoral Foreign Delegates', 14–17 March 2023, at https://www.itecgoi.in/view_course_details?salt4=9ca4e930bd4726 (Accessed 15 March 2023).

Afghan foreign ministry officials.¹⁷⁷ However, the MEA spokesperson, during the weekly media briefing held on 16 March 2023, clarified that India has been ‘extending capacity building assistance to developing countries across the world’ through the ITEC programme, which includes online courses. Elaborating on it, the spokesperson stated:

These courses are on numerous topics and they are conducted by different Indian institutions. These scholarship courses are open to nationals of various countries, including those from Afghanistan, and I think a number of Afghan nationals both based in India as well as in Afghanistan have been participating in these ITEC courses. Of course, the online courses do not involve travel to India.

...our position on how we see developments in Afghanistan has not changed and I don’t think anything should be read into ITEC courses vis-a-vis that. We certainly would not be issuing note verbales, which are intergovernmental notes to, you know, entities that are not recognized.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Fidel Rahmati, ‘Afghan Diplomats to Participate in India’s Online Training Program’, *The Khaama Press*, 14 March 2023, at <https://www.khaama.com/afghan-diplomats-to-participate-in-indias-online-training-program/> (Accessed 16 March 2023); Rajeev KR, ‘In a First, Taliban Officials Attend Online Course at IIM-Kozhikode Under MEA Programme’, *The Times of India*, 15 March 2023, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kozhikode/in-a-first-taliban-officials-attend-online-course-at-iim-kozhikode-under-mea-programme/articleshow/98645301.cms> (Accessed 15 May 2023); Pia Krishnankutty, ‘Taliban Diplomats Expected to Participate in Online Training Course Provided by India’, *The Print*, 14 March 2023, at <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/taliban-diplomats-expected-to-participate-in-online-training-course-provided-by-india/1441968/> (Accessed 15 March 2023); and Rezaul H. Laskar, ‘On Training Invite for Taliban Diplomats, a Clarification in Delhi Follows’, *Hindustan Times*, 13 March 2023, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/on-training-invite-for-taliban-diplomats-a-clarification-in-delhi-follows-101678721862032.html> (Accessed 15 March 2023).

¹⁷⁸ ‘Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson (March 16, 2023)’, MEA, GoI, 16 March 2023, at https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dt1/36359/Transcript_of_Weekly_Media_Briefing_by_the_Official_Spokesperson_March_16_2023 (Accessed 20 April 2023).

Nevertheless, the timing of the development was significant for it came when the Taliban regime reportedly had been pushing for the appointment of foreign ministry spokesperson, Abdul Qahar Balkhi, as its representative at Afghan Embassy in New Delhi.¹⁷⁹ Also, it came shortly after the Taliban forces eliminated a top ISK commander of Kashmiri origin in Afghanistan, who was designated as a terrorist by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) two months before in January 2023.¹⁸⁰

ACRIMONY AT AFGHAN EMBASSY

The Afghan foreign ministry reportedly made another attempt in April 2023 to take charge of the Afghan Embassy in New Delhi, this time by reappointing or redesignating a serving official from within the embassy as its representative, rather than appointing a representative from Kabul. A report published in *Hindustan Times* in May stated that the Taliban had made some 14 attempts by then to replace the ambassador and other officials with a representative of their choice.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Praveen Swami and Pia Krishnankutty, 'Taliban Wants to have its Man in Delhi & Controversial Spokesman Balkhi could be in the Running', *The Print*, January 2023, at <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/taliban-wants-to-have-its-man-in-delhi-controversial-spokesman-balkhi-could-be-in-the-running/1309224/> (Accessed 14 February 2023).

¹⁸⁰ Zabihullah Mujahid, Taliban Spokesperson, 'Intelligence and Military Chief of Khawarij Corruptors Killed', Twitter Post, 27 February 2023, 11:58 pm, at https://twitter.com/Zabehulah_M33/status/1630273780273561602 (Accessed 10 May 2023). Also see Praveen Swami and Amogh Rohmetra, 'Top Kashmir Jihad Commander who Led Indian Suicide Bombers in Afghan IS Attacks Believed Killed', *The Print*, 21 February 2023, at <https://theprint.in/india/top-kashmir-jihad-commander-who-led-indian-suicide-bombers-in-afghan-is-attacks-believed-killed/1385976/> (Accessed 23 February 2023); and Fidel Rahmati, 'Top IS-Khorasan Commander Killed in Southern Afghanistan', *The Khaama Press*, 23 February 2023, at <https://www.khaama.com/top-is-khorasan-commander-killed-in-southern-afghanistan/> (Accessed 23 February 2023).

¹⁸¹ Rezaul H. Laskar, 'Afghan Diplomats in Delhi Reject Taliban-appointed CDA, Block Entry into Mission', *Hindustan Times*, 15 May 2023, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/afghan-embassy-in-new-delhi-sees-tussle-between-diplomats-of-former-republic-and-current-kabul-setup-taliban-appoints-new-charge-daffaires-101684164307209.html> (Accessed 15 May 2023)

According to media reports, two letters/orders were issued by the Taliban foreign ministry to the Afghan Embassy in New Delhi on 25 April: one was a letter by the ministry's human resource director (Order No. 3578, dated 25 April 2023) recalling incumbent Afghan Ambassador Farid Mamundzay to the foreign ministry in Kabul; and the other was by Acting Taliban Foreign Minister Muttaqi (Order No. 1928, dated 25 April 2023) directing Trade Counsellor Qadir Shah to 'supervise affairs at the Afghanistan Embassy in Delhi, India' and report to the government in Kabul. A report published by *Afghanistan International* stated that the letter recalling Mamundzay to Kabul was issued based on an order from the Taliban PM Hassan Akhund.¹⁸² Mamundzay, at that time, was away to London where his family was based.

Meanwhile, referring to Muttaqi's order of 25 April, Shah purportedly wrote to the MEA on 28 April informing that the foreign ministry in Kabul had appointed him as chargé d'affaires of the Afghan embassy until further orders.¹⁸³ On 29 April, the embassy officials reportedly refused to accept Shah as the head of the mission and expelled and barred him from the embassy.¹⁸⁴ Both Farid Mamundzay and Qadir Shah had earlier served in the National Security Council of Afghanistan—Mamundzay as senior political adviser and Shah as strategic communications director and spokesperson—and both were appointed to the Afghan Embassy by the then Afghan Foreign Minister and former NSA, Hanif Atmar, in 2020. Shah was also the spokesperson for Atmar's electoral team when the latter was a candidate

¹⁸² 'Didn't Allow Taliban's Charge d'affaires to Enter Afghan Embassy Premises, Says Mamundzay', *Afghanistan International*, 15 May 2023, at <https://www.afintl.com/en/202305152463> (Accessed 5 December 2023).

¹⁸³ Sidhant Sibal, Diplomatic and Defence Correspondent for *WION*, Twitter Post, 15 May 2023, 4:44 pm, at <https://twitter.com/sidhant/status/1658068418191564800> (Accessed 4 December 2023).

¹⁸⁴ Rezaul H. Laskar, 'Afghan Diplomats in Delhi Reject Taliban-appointed CDA, Block Entry into Mission', n. 181; and Devirupa Mitra, 'Taliban Foreign Ministry Replaces Afghan Ambassador in New Delhi, but Embassy Issues Denial', *The Wire*, 15 May 2023, at <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/taliban-foreign-ministry-replaces-afghan-ambassador-in-new-delhi-but-embassy-issues-denial> (Accessed 15 May 2023).

in the 2019 presidential election. According to a report, Shah was from Khost and his family had close ties with the Haqqani Network.¹⁸⁵

However, the whole issue came to light only weeks later when a nondescript Afghan news agency, *Bokhdi*, published an article on 13 May claiming that India had handed over the Afghan Embassy to the Taliban. The very next day, on 14 May, *Tolo News* tweeted a copy of an unsigned letter from 'Afghans Based in India' sent to the Afghan foreign ministry, accusing top embassy officials of corruption.¹⁸⁶ Immediately thereafter, on 16 May, the Afghan Embassy issued a press statement that categorically rejected both Shah's appointment as chargé d'affaires and allegations of corruption brought against the embassy officials.¹⁸⁷ Meanwhile, Shah, in his interviews to the Indian media, denied any affiliation to any 'political party, group or movement' or having any direct contact with the Taliban.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ Laskar, 'Afghan Diplomats in Delhi Reject Taliban-appointed CDA, Block Entry into Mission', n. 181.

¹⁸⁶ 'Letter from "Afghans Based in India"', *Tolo News*, Twitter Post, 14 May 2023, 3:49 pm, at <https://twitter.com/TOLONews/status/1657692028346548225> (Accessed 4 December 2023). Also see Banafsha Binesh, 'Documents Produced to Support Claims of Fraud at Afghan Embassy in India', *Tolo News*, 15 May 2023, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-183374> (Accessed 16 May 2023).

¹⁸⁷ 'Press Statement: No Change of Leadership in Afghan Embassy in New Delhi, India', Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, New Delhi, Facebook Post, 15 May 2023, at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=644938204343884&set=a.361385459365828> (Accessed 4 December 2023); and 'Afghanistan Embassy Rejects Reports of Taliban Appointing New Charge d'Affaires in Delhi', *Hindustan Times*, 15 May 2023, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/afghanistan-embassy-rejects-reports-of-taliban-appointing-new-charge-daffaires-in-delhi-101684145580747.html> (Accessed 15 May 2023).

¹⁸⁸ Sushasini Haidar, 'MEA Faces Tough Choice as Taliban Pick a New Ambassador for Delhi', *The Hindu*, 15 May 2023, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/mea-faces-tough-choice-as-taliban-picks-a-new-ambassador-for-delhi/article66852411.ece> (Accessed 3 December 2023); Devirupa Mitra, 'A Week After Afghan Embassy Upheaval, Artful Politicking around "Taliban" Label', *The Wire*, 22 May 2023, at <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/afghan-embassy-taliban-farid-mamundzay-mohammad-qadir-shah> (Accessed 4 December 2023); and 'Is Taliban Taking

Reports about Shah's appointment as the chargé d'affaires were confirmed by the head of Taliban political office in Doha and permanent representative designate to the UN, Suhail Shaheen, around mid-May. He was cited by *Afghanistan Times* as having stated: 'Qadir Shah, who previously worked at the Afghan embassy in India, has been appointed as a charge d'affaires for the time being'.¹⁸⁹ Similarly, in his interview to *The Times of India*, Shaheen termed Shah's appointment as a rational move that 'will build trust and pave the way for better relations with India'.¹⁹⁰ A couple of weeks later, during the weekly media briefing held on 2 June, the MEA spokesperson stated that it was 'an internal matter of the Afghan Embassy' and it is hoped that the embassy would 'resolve it internally'.¹⁹¹

In the coming months, there were reports about the Afghan ambassador's prolonged absence from India; embassy officials seeking asylum in third countries; and the dismissal of Indian and Afghan staffers citing lack of funds.¹⁹² In late September 2023, there were reports

Over the Afghan Embassy in New Delhi?', *First Post*, 16 May 2023, at <https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/taliban-afghan-embassy-new-delhi-ambassador-farid-mamundzay-qadir-shah-mea-12602582.html> (Accessed 4 December 2023).

¹⁸⁹ 'Afghanistan Appoints New Head of Mission for Embassy in India', *Afghanistan Times*, 15 May 2023, at <https://www.afghanistantimes.af/afghanistan-appoints-new-head-of-mission-for-embassy-in-india/> (Accessed 4 December 2023).

¹⁹⁰ Sachin Parashar, 'In a first, Taliban Looks to Get Own Envoy for India Outreach', *The Times of India*, 15 May 2023, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/in-a-first-taliban-looks-to-get-own-envoy-for-india-outreach/articleshow/100234742.cms?from=mdr> (Accessed 15 May 2023).

¹⁹¹ 'Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson (June 02, 2023)', MEA, GoI, 2 June 2023, at https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/36642/Transcript_of_Weekly_Media_Briefing_by_the_Official_Spokesperson_June_02_2023 (Accessed 5 December 2023).

¹⁹² 'Crisis Hits Delhi's Afghan Embassy as Sacked Indian Staff Plan Protest, Ambassador Denies Graft Claims', *The Print*, 24 September 2023, at <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/crisis-hits-delhis-afghan-embassy-as-sacked-indian-staff-plan-protest-ambassador-denies-graft-claims/1775281/> (Accessed 29 September 2023).

about the Afghan Embassy sending a letter to the MEA, dated 25 September, stating that the embassy will ‘permanently cease all operations by the end of September 2023’ due to ‘unprecedented circumstances’ and the embassy’s ‘inability to maintain normal functioning due to lack of diplomatic considerations and systemic support’.¹⁹³

On 30 September 2023, the embassy issued a press statement publicly announcing its decision to cease operations from 1 October 2023, citing ‘lack of support from the host government’; ‘failure to meet expectations in serving Afghanistan’s interests’; and ‘reduction in personnel and resources’. The statement refuted claims about internal discord among the diplomatic staff, or diplomats seeking asylum in third countries, and verified the letter sent earlier to the MEA conveying the embassy’s decision to close the mission in Delhi.¹⁹⁴ Later, the Afghan consul generals at Mumbai and Hyderabad took over the functioning of the Afghan Embassy. However, the Afghan consul general at Mumbai, Zakia Wardak, announced her resignation on 4 May 2024, some 10 days after her detention at the Mumbai airport on 25 April

¹⁹³ Pia Krishnankutty, ‘Afghan Embassy in Delhi to Close Down in Next 2 Days? “Letter Sent to MEA” Days After Staff Sacked’, *The Print*, 28 September 2023, at <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/afghan-embassy-in-delhi-to-close-down-in-next-2-days-letter-sent-to-mea-days-after-staff-sacked/1782407/> (Accessed 6 October 2023); and ‘In Letter, Afghan Envoy Says Embassy to Close by Sept 30, MEA “Checking Authenticity of Letter”’, *The Wire*, 29 September 2023, at <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/afghan-embassy-to-close-new-delhi-mea-taliban-farid-mamundzay> (Accessed 7 December 2023).

¹⁹⁴ ‘Afghanistan is Closing its Embassy in New Delhi’, Facebook Page of Embassy of The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, New Delhi, 30 September 2023, at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=738010301703340&set=pcb.738010725036631> (Accessed 6 October 2023); and Amogh Rohmetra, “‘Lack of Support from Host Govt” — Afghan Embassy’s 3 Main Reasons for Shutting Down Operations’, *The Print*, 1 October, 2023, at <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/lack-of-support-from-host-govt-afghan-embassys-3-main-reasons-for-shutting-down-operations/1785446/> (Accessed 6 October 2023).

for reportedly smuggling 25 kg of gold worth Rs. 18.6 crore into India from Dubai.¹⁹⁵

As the Taliban regime had not been officially recognised, New Delhi probably wished the matter to be sorted and settled among and between the Afghan embassy officials and the Taliban-led foreign ministry in Kabul.

SUMMING UP

India's overall development assistance to Afghanistan over the past two decades, particularly the small development projects, was conceptualised and designed to cater to the diverse needs of the Afghan people spanning the length and breadth of the country. As a result, Indian presence and engagement spanned a broad spectrum of socio-economic sectors in Afghanistan.

While the Taliban regime has reached out to India seeking the resumption of development and capacity building projects, particularly the projects stalled since August 2021, it has yet to heed to the concerns expressed by the regional countries, including India, over its exclusionary policies towards women and ethnic minorities. The Taliban hardliners remain obsessed with unilaterally imposing their version of Sharia, without building any social-political consensus within the country, which could further widen the divide between the regime and the people. Such regimes, with time, prove to be a liability not only to the people they proclaim to lead and represent, but to the region as well. It will also make it difficult for trained, qualified and educated professionals to return and contribute to the growth of the country if their children, and particularly their daughters, cannot seek higher modern education or put their professional knowledge and skills to any use.

¹⁹⁵ Pia Krishnankutty, 'Afghan Consul General in Mumbai Steps Down Days After "Gold Smuggling" Incident at Airport', *The Print*, 4 May 2024, at <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/afghan-consul-general-in-mumbai-steps-down-days-after-gold-smuggling-incident-at-airport/2070029/> (Accessed 5 May 2024).

Forcing half of the population to stay literally uneducated and denying the remaining half access to modern education and knowledge, critical to the growth of any society and nation, directly calls into question their credibility to lead the Afghan nation. Interestingly, there have been news reports about the Taliban members based in Doha and in Pakistan quietly sending their sons and daughters to modern schools, including Iqra schools in Pakistan.¹⁹⁶ Absence of daily violence and casualty, as opposition for now is un-reared, may not necessarily mean sustainable peace and security, for that would require nationwide connect and acceptance at the grassroots level. The Taliban have already wasted the first three years of the second opportunity that had come their way to transform from a militia or mercenary force into a relatable governing force; to efficiently run the political-administrative affairs of the state and integrate with the Afghan society; and to not impose their ideology, which is inherently based on notions of exclusion and forbiddance, on the vast majority that never asked for it.

The Taliban's ideology was fundamentally not oriented at unifying the Afghan nation. It was never meant to transcend the traditional diversity of identities and cultures that define the Afghan mosaic. The obsession of the ultraconservative Taliban ideologues, running policy affairs from Kandahar, with forced regulation of dress codes for women and the length of men's beard and hairdo, and such other petty considerations, at a time when millions of people in the country are faced with hunger, poverty, and lack of access to basic healthcare, is a sheer show of authority and control over the helpless people. In the absence of an engaging enemy and engagements of jihad, the self-appointed custodians of religion and culture—who are not recognised or acclaimed as leaders

¹⁹⁶ Praveen Swami, 'School Ban for Afghan Girls, But Taliban Leaders' Daughters Play Football, Study Medicine Abroad', *The Print*, 13 April 2022, at <https://theprint.in/world/school-ban-for-afghan-girls-but-taliban-leaders-daughters-play-football-study-medicine-abroad/913150/> (Accessed 22 August 2022); and Sabawoon Samim, 'Who Gets to Go to School? (3): Are Taleban Attitudes Starting to Change From Within?', *Afghan Analysts Network*, 7 February 2022, at <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/rights-freedom/who-gets-to-go-to-school-3-are-taleban-attitudes-starting-to-change-from-within/> (Accessed 23 August 2024).

by a vast majority of the country's population—have been coercing the people to look at all worldly affairs only through their lens and not question their “divine” authority. They want all Afghans, and also the Taliban rank and file, to look and think alike. They are doing only what they are capable of, or whatever gives them a sense of power, control and purpose. It rather speaks of their insecurities than the confidence of a “victor”. Their notions about governance are limited to exerting unlimited and often unsolicited control over social and public affairs and seeking complete compliance of the people in general and women in particular to their idea of “emirate”. The objective perhaps is also to ideologically discipline the Taliban rank and file, lest exposure to urban life and interactions with the outside world moderates its worldview. A somewhat diminished Kabul is still to find a way around the tyrannical will of those unqualified to run the affairs of the state and conduct the country's international relations.

However, at the same time, simply labelling the Taliban regime and its ideology as regressive would not serve any purpose. Unlike in the 1990s, both regional countries and the broader international community have decided not to abandon the Afghan people or isolate the Taliban regime. The sustainability of such an approach would depend on the Taliban regime's willingness to effectively address threat perceptions prevalent in the region, and the capability to deal with nuances of state governance and international relations and the responsibilities that come with it.

Meanwhile, with approximately over a million Afghans having returned from Pakistan and Iran since September/October 2023, with more to follow even as the country grapples with frequent natural disasters and lack of employment opportunities, the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is unlikely to abate soon. As millions of Afghan men, women and children continue to suffer, it is incumbent upon the Taliban regime in Kabul to create a conducive environment for flow of increased aid and assistance to the most vulnerable and neediest among all sections of the Afghan population. Kabul also needs to create an enabling social and political environment for flow of foreign trade and investments.

As far as India's ties with the people of Afghanistan are concerned, there are clearly no timelines and sunset clauses to it. Despite several rounds of attack on Indian diplomatic missions (embassy and four

consulates) and project personnel engaged on the ground, including a deadly suicide attack on the embassy in July 2008, in which Indian defence attaché and counsellor lost their lives, and various logistical challenges due to Pakistan blocking the overland access, India has successfully executed several large infrastructure and hundreds of small community development projects across Afghanistan.¹⁹⁷

The interim Taliban government has clearly conveyed its interest in utilising Chabahar Port for transit trade. With Afghan investors committing \$35 million towards building logistics at the Chabahar free zone, right before the signing of the long-term contract between the IPGL and the PMO of Iran in May 2024, the Taliban has clearly emerged as a stakeholder in the “India–Iran flagship project”.

Recently, there have also been a few reports of Indian investors looking for business opportunities in the country.¹⁹⁸ Similarly, in July 2024, the Taliban-led Afghan Ministry of Economy while presenting its annual performance report at a press conference informed that a

¹⁹⁷ ‘Terrorist Attacks and Threats on Indians in Afghanistan since 2003’, South Asia Terrorism Portal, Institute for Conflict Management, 2018, at <https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/database/afghanistanindianattack.htm> (Accessed 17 June 2023).

¹⁹⁸ ‘Energy Minister, Indian Company Talk Handover of Arghandi 500 KV Substation’, *Ariana News*, 2 September 2024, at <https://www.ariananews.af/energy-minister-indian-company-talk-handover-of-arghandi-500-kv-substation/> (Accessed 3 September 2024); ‘Indian Investors to Establish Advanced Gemstone Lab in Panjshir’, *Bakhtar News Agency*, 13 July 2024, at <https://www.bakhtarnews.af/en/indian-investors-to-establish-advanced-gemstone-lab-in-panjshir/> (Accessed 7 September 2024); ‘Indian Merchant Expresses Interest in Investment in Panjshir Mines’, *Al Emarah*, 13 April 2024, at <https://www.alemarahenglish.af/indian-merchant-expresses-interest-in-investment-in-panjshir-> (Accessed 7 September 2024); and ‘Transparent and Confident Investment in Mineral Resources Encouraged by Mines Minister’, *Al Emarah*, 18 March 2024, at <https://www.bakhtarnews.af/en/transparent-and-confident-investment-in-mineral-resources-encouraged-by-mines-minister/> (Accessed 23 March 2024).

comprehensive report on the status of 70 India-funded development projects has been shared with India for ‘follow-up and completion’.¹⁹⁹

India has learned and gained experience in working at local levels, in spite of constant security and logistical challenges, and also through phases of political upheavals and uncertainties in Afghanistan. India has been sensitive and adaptive to the local conditions and requirements and has innovatively sustained the people-to-people connect, the most enduring link in the “Indo-Afghan” engagement and fundamental to India’s ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy. This is best reflected in India’s continued humanitarian commitment to the people of Afghanistan post-August 2021. In coordination with the UN and its humanitarian agencies, India will continue to contribute to non-discriminatory, broad-based efforts to help Afghan people tide over the current crisis.

¹⁹⁹ ‘Ministry of Economy: Over the Past Year, 2,194 Diverse Projects Implemented Through NGOs, Creating Employment for Over 200,000 Individuals’, Government Media and Information Centre, 1 August 2024, at <https://gmic.gov.af/2024/08/01/ministry-of-economy-over-the-past-year-2194-diverse-projects-implemented-through-ngos-creating-employment-for-over-200000-individuals/> (Accessed 7 September 2024).

*Clearly people may have many strategies and we will need to work on strategies but one strategy that we reject here in India is an exit strategy from Afghanistan.**

—Former Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid,
16 January 2014.

*India was and is an important stakeholder in Afghanistan. The special relationship with people of Afghanistan over centuries will guide India's approach. Nothing can change this.***

—Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, Dushanbe,
27 May 2022.

* 'Speech by External Affairs Minister at the Meeting of International Contact Group (ICG) on Afghanistan in New Delhi', MEA, GoI, 16 January 2014, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/22755/Speech+by+External+Affairs+> (Accessed 17 November 2023).

** 'India Important Stakeholder in Afghanistan, Nothing Can Change It: NSA Ajit Doval in Dushanbe', *News 18*, 27 May 2022, at <https://www.news18.com/news/india/india-important-stakeholder-in-afghanistan-nothing-can-change-it-nsa-ajit-doval-in-dushanbe-exclusive-5258209.html> (Accessed 2 June 2023).

CONCLUSION

BROAD OBSERVATIONS

Unlike the latter half of the 1990s when India had no direct contact with the Taliban regime or presence in Kabul, it was far better positioned this time around to deal with the challenges arising out of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Drawing upon its past experience with transitions in Afghanistan, India had all along adjusted, adapted and recalibrated its approach to the developing situation in the country.

As early as 2009, India supported the Kabul-led initiative aimed at seeking political reconciliation with the Taliban leadership based in Pakistan. The then Indian EAM, S.M. Krishna, in an interview in September 2009, reportedly stated:

India doesn't believe that war could be a solution for solving any problem and it applies to Afghanistan also. I think there could be a political settlement. I think we should strive towards a political settlement...If there [are] internal differences within Afghanistan I think the people of Afghanistan, the leaders of Afghanistan will sort it out by themselves.¹

However, at the same time, he cautioned that the Taliban and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence 'are a tandem' and both 'are still together'.²

The very next month, in October 2009, the then Indian Foreign Secretary, Nirupama Rao, while delivering a concluding address at an international

¹ Joe Lauria, 'Indian Minister Urges Afghan Political Settlement', *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 September 2009, at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125364105273431343.html> (Accessed 21 January 2019).

² Ibid.

seminar on Afghanistan held at the United Service Institution of India, stated:

...the existing process under the National Commission for Peace for reintegrating individuals with the national mainstream must be both enlarged and accelerated. We support the Afghan Government's determination to integrate those willing to abjure violence and live and work within the parameters of the Afghan Constitution, which provides the framework for a pluralistic and democratic society. This should, of course, go hand-in-hand with the shutting down of support and sanctuaries provided to terrorist groups across the border.³

Four years later, in November 2013, the former Taliban ambassador to Islamabad, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef—whom Pakistan had handed over to US after the 9/11 attacks and was held at the Guantanamo Bay for four years—was invited to participate in THiNK 2013 held in Goa. During the course of discussion that was held along with a former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) official who was stationed in Islamabad in 2001, Zaeef made several observations based on his personal experience about developments that took place before and following the 9/11 attacks.⁴ In November 2018, India participated in the second meeting of Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan

³ 'Concluding Address by Foreign Secretary at the International Seminar on Peace and Stability in Afghanistan: The Way Ahead', MEA, GoI, 7 October 2009, at <https://mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?1277/Concluding+address+by+Foreign+Secretary+at+the+International+Seminar+on+Peace+and+Stability+in+Afghanistan+The+Way+Ahead> (Accessed 16 January 2019).

⁴ 'THiNK2013: Mullah Zaeef and Robert Grenier', *YouTube*, 6 December 2013, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGHyK_E5EOg (Accessed 3 November 2023); and Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, 'Officials Defend Visit of Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef', *The Economic Times*, 13 November 2013, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/officials-defend-visit-of-taliban-leader-mullah-abdul-salam-zaeef/articleshow/25665779.cms> (Accessed 10 May 2023).

at the “non-official” level.⁵ India’s two former senior diplomats—former ambassador to Afghanistan, Amar Sinha, and former high commissioner to Pakistan, T.C.A. Raghavan—attended the meeting, which was also attended by Doha-based Taliban representatives.⁶ Two years later, India participated in the inaugural session of intra-Afghan negotiations held in Doha on 12 September 2020, with EAM Jaishankar addressing the participants via video conferencing and a delegation led by JS (PAI) J.P. Singh attending the session.⁷ Earlier, in February 2020, the then Indian ambassador to Qatar, P. Kumaran, had attended the signing ceremony of the US–Taliban agreement held in Doha.⁸

With the leaders of the second Taliban regime making a concerted effort to reach out to India, and India making it clear that it will remain

⁵ ‘Official Spokesperson’s Response to Queries Regarding India’s Participation in a Meeting on Afghanistan Hosted by Russia’, MEA, GoI, 8 November 2018, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/30577/Official+Spokespersons+response+to+queries+regarding+Indias+participation+in+a+meeting+on+Afghanistan+hosted+by+Russia> (14 October 2024).

⁶ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, ‘Seasoned Diplomats Raghavan & Sinha Represent India at Moscow Format on Afghanistan’, *The Economic Times*, 9 November 2018, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/seasoned-diplomats-raghavan-sinha-represent-india-at-moscow-format-on-afghanistan/articleshow/66551801.cms?from=mdr> (Accessed 14 October 2024); and Shubhajit Roy, ‘Taliban at Afghanistan Talks Table Today, Delhi Sending “Non-officials”’, *The Indian Express*, 9 November 2018, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/taliban-at-afghanistan-talks-table-today-delhi-sending-non-officials-5438521/> (Accessed 14 October 2024).

⁷ ‘India’s Participation in the Intra-Afghan Negotiations’, MEA, GoI, 12 September 2020, at https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32966/Indias_participation_in_the_IntraAfghan_negotiations (Accessed 12 September 2020).

⁸ ‘India to Attend US–Taliban Peace Deal Event in Doha Today’, *Hindustan Times*, 29 February 2020, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-to-attend-us-taliban-peace-deal-event-in-doha-today/story-JGDf4FhWvjnqJhUgtZqmTJ.html> (Accessed 14 October 2024); and Press Trust of India, ‘India Welcomes US–Taliban Deal in Qatar, MEA Reiterates Need to Bring Peace and Stability in Afghanistan’, *India Today*, 29 February 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-welcomes-us-taliban-deal-in-qatar-mea-reiterates-need-to-bring-peace-and-stability-in-afghanistan-1651219-2020-02-29> (Accessed 14 October 2024).

committed to Afghanistan and its people, the ground appears to have been laid for engagement based on a working understanding of sorts on mutual “non-interference” and “non-threat”. The current Taliban regime is, apparently, far more diplomatically invested and multi-aligned than the first Taliban regime of the 1990s.

Whatever be the challenges ahead, it is clear that the people of Afghanistan will remain central to India’s engagement with the country. However, to secure its security and long-term strategic interests in Afghanistan, India will have to continue to deal with the Afghan situation as it is, including with the new power holders in Kabul. At the same time, given India’s people-centric development approach towards Afghanistan, the people-to-people contact has to be sustained, which would require ease of visa and travel for Afghans, particularly those seeking higher education and medical treatment in India.

According to MHA’s annual report of 2021–22, 36,451 Afghans visited India in 2021 (January–December), and 237 long term visas (LTVs) were granted to minorities from Afghanistan from April 2021 to December 2021⁹—the year the Taliban took over Afghanistan and Western forces completely withdrew. MHA’s annual report of 2022–23 mentioned that 112 LTVs were granted to minorities from Afghanistan from 1 April 2022 to 27 September 2022.¹⁰ As per MHA’s annual report of 2020–21, before the Taliban took over power and at a time when the COVID–19 pandemic was at its peak, 11,212 Afghans visited India from April 2020 to December 2020, and 217 LTVs were granted to minorities from Afghanistan during the same period.¹¹ A

⁹ *Annual Report: 2021–22*, MHA, GoI, 24 November 2022, pp. 190 and 192, at https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/AnnualReport202122_24112022%5B1%5D.pdf (Accessed 28 November 2023).

¹⁰ *Annual Report: 2022–23*, MHA, GoI, 11 October 2023, p. 177, at https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/AnnualReport202122_24112022%5B1%5D.pdf (Accessed 28 November 2023).

¹¹ *Annual Report: 2020–21*, MHA, GoI, 22 April 2022, pp. 204 and 207, at https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/MHAARE_22042022%5B1%5D.pdf (Accessed 28 November 2023).

year before, in 2019, India granted 285 LTVs to Afghans.¹² In April 2024, the Taliban-led Ministry of Justice announced the establishment of a special commission to investigate all cases of usurpation of land from Afghan Hindus and Sikhs. According to the ministry's spokesperson, 'The Commission for the Prevention of Land Seizure has instructed provincial technical committees to thoroughly investigate the seized lands of Hindus in the provinces to prevent land seizure and return the seized lands to their rightful owners'¹³ This followed the return of a former Afghan Sikh parliamentarian to Afghanistan from Canada.¹⁴ The MEA Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal in the weekly media briefing described the Taliban's reported decision to restore the property rights to Afghan Hindus and Sikhs as a 'positive development'.¹⁵ Recently in July 2024, the MEA spokesperson in the weekly media briefing stated that 'visas to people in Afghanistan are being given and that to and fro movement is happening'.¹⁶ His statement was immediately picked up and widely highlighted by the Afghan media, including the official state news agency *Bakhtar*.¹⁷

¹² *Annual Report: 2019–20*, MHA, GoI, p. 242, at https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/AnnualReport_19_20.pdf (Accessed 28 November 2023).

¹³ Nazir Shinwari, 'Hindu, Sikh Citizens Lands to Be Returned: Ministry of Justice', *Tolo News*, 13 April 2024, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-188281> (Accessed 14 April 2024).

¹⁴ 'Taliban Announces Return of Former Representative of Sikhs & Hindus in Afghan Parliament', *Afghanistan International*, 9 April 2024, at <https://www.afintl.com/en/202404093921> (Accessed 10 April 2024).

¹⁵ 'Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson (April 12, 2024)', MEA, GoI, 12 April 2024, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/37778/Transcript+of+Weekly+Media+Briefing+by+the+Official+Spokesperson+April+12+2024> (Accessed 16 October 2024).

¹⁶ 'Transcript of Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson (July 25, 2024)', MEA, GoI, 25 July 2024, at https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/38010/Transcript_of_Weekly_Media_Briefing_by_the_Official_Spokesperson_July_25_2024 (Accessed 14 October 2024).

¹⁷ 'India to Resume Visa Issuance for Afghans, Strengthening Bilateral Ties', *Bakhtar News Agency*, 27 July 2024, at <https://www.bakhtarnews.af/en/india-to-resume-visa-issuance-for-afghans-strengthening-bilateral-ties/> (Accessed 30 July 2024); Fidel Rahmati, 'India Resumes Visa Issuance for

However, the way thousands of prisoners lodged in high security prisons in Bagram and Kabul were indiscriminately let loose by the Taliban in August 2021, that included not just the Taliban figures but also the ISK and Al-Qaeda members, including of foreign origin, had left regional countries worried about the emerging security scenario. Over the past three years, regional countries have been circumspect about admitting Afghan refugees, fearing possible infiltration by both local and foreign fighters or their family members into host countries. Indian security agencies too had reasons to be worried about it. The ISK's Srinagar-born chief recruiter for India, Aijaz Ahmad Ahanger, who as mentioned earlier was killed by the Taliban forces in February 2023, was among the prisoners let out from high security prison in Pul-e-Charkhi in Kabul in August 2021¹⁸. He was arrested in early 2020 from Kandahar along with the then ISK chief Aslam Farooqi by the Afghan forces.¹⁹

Similarly, the ISK bomber, identified as Abdur Rehman Al-Logari, who was said to have carried out the suicide attack at Abbey Gate just outside the Kabul Airport on 26 August 2021, in which 13 US service members and about 170 Afghan people were killed, was among the

Afghan Nationals', *The Khaama Press*, 27 July 2024, at <https://www.khaama.com/india-resumes-visa-issuance-for-afghan-nationals/> (Accessed 29 July 2024); 'India Emphasizes Visa Issuance and Engagement with Afghan People', *Tolo News*, 26 July 2024, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-189936> (Accessed 14 October 2024); and Abdullah Azizi, 'India Continues Issuing Visas to Afghan Citizens', *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 27 July 2024, at <https://pajhwok.com/2024/07/27/india-continues-issuing-visas-to-afghan-citizens/> (Accessed 14 October 2024).

¹⁸ Praveen Swami, 'Kashmir Jihadist, Trainer of Indian Fidayeen from Kerala, On the Run Again After Escape from Kabul Jail', *First Post*, 17 April 2020, at <https://www.firstpost.com/india/kashmir-jihadist-trainer-of-indian-fidayeen-from-kerala-on-the-run-again-after-escape-from-kabul-jail-9907871.html> (Accessed 20 October 2024).

¹⁹ Shishir Gupta, 'Kashmiri Terrorist Got Away 25 Yrs Ago, Caught with ISKP Chief in Afghanistan', *Hindustan Times*, 17 April 2020, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/kashmiri-terrorist-got-away-25-yrs-ago-caught-with-iskp-chief-in-afghanistan/story-QyTGhX6cQ4phcqw14TVbyJ.html> (Accessed 20 October 2024).

prisoners released just days before from the Parwan prison at Bagram Air Base. According to various media reports, Abdur Rehaman, son of a wealthy Afghan businessman who frequently visited India and Pakistan for business, was deported by India to Afghanistan in late 2017 based on a tip-off received from the US intelligence that he was plotting a suicide mission in Delhi. He was said to have enrolled himself at a private engineering college in Faridabad near Delhi and stayed at Lajpat Nagar in Delhi until his arrest by the Indian intelligence agencies.²⁰ India, however, continued to welcome thousands of Afghan students under its various scholarship and training programmes.

As discussed earlier, India as a policy remains committed to its people-centric development approach towards Afghanistan. It also has channels open with the interim Taliban government on issues of core concern. Both the sides appear cognisant of each other's political sensitivities. However, the challenge lies in building trust between the two sides to take the engagement forward. According to the July 2023 report of the Indian Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs on India's Neighbourhood First Policy (2022–23), which discussed the Afghan situation in detail, the MEA, in its response to a query raised by the committee, had stated:

...in view of our special historical and civilizational relationship with Afghan people, *a decision was taken to engage with the current Taliban authorities* to provide humanitarian assistance for welfare of the Afghan people. During the various official interactions, *Taliban authorities have assured India* of its core issues including that

²⁰ 'Kabul Bomber Was Deported by India 5 Yrs Ago: Magazine with IS Links', *The Indian Express*, 19 September 2021, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/kabul-bomber-was-deported-by-india-5-yrs-ago-magazine-with-is-links-7518265/> (Accessed 20 October 2024); Eric Schmitt, 'U.S. Military Focusing on ISIS Cell Behind Attack at Kabul Airport', *The New York Times*, 1 January 2022, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/01/us/politics/afghan-war-isis-attack.html> (Accessed 20 October 2024); and Vijaita Singh, 'Kabul Bomber Was on a Suicide Mission to India in 2017', *The Hindu*, 2 February 2022, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kabul-bomber-was-on-a-suicide-mission-to-india-in-2017/article38366734.ece> (Accessed 23 February 2022).

the Afghanistan's soil should not be used for anti-Indian activities and terrorism in any manner.²¹ [emphasis added]

While taking note of India's development partnership with Afghanistan the past two decades, as well as continued humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people post the Taliban takeover, the Committee on External Affairs recommended:

In view of the long standing civilizational relationship with the Afghan people, the Committee desire that *the Government should continue as per the past practice to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan* in times of need. As far as pending projects committed earlier are concerned, *concerted efforts should be made to complete them* and hand them over at the earliest possible and also *keep our arms open for other diplomatic gestures in the changed political scenario*.²² [emphasis added]

The Committee on External Relations (2023–24) reiterated the abovementioned recommendation in its report of February 2024, based on action taken replies by the government on observations/recommendations made in the July 2023 report.²³

Over the past three years, Kabul has come across as a “grey area” for New Delhi from the point of undertaking formal and structured political–diplomatic engagements with an unrecognised regime. However, India will have to factor in its almost seven decades of development assistance to Afghanistan and investments in building people-to-people ties, besides the long-term impact of the emerging political–Islamist landscape in Afghanistan, as it (re)calibrates a long-term policy approach towards Afghanistan. India will also have to

²¹ Committee on External Affairs (2022–23), ‘India's Neighbourhood First Policy’, Twenty-Second Report, Seventeenth Lok Sabha, Lok Sabha Secretariat, 25 July 2023, p. 27.

²² Ibid., Recommendation (Sl. No. 15), pp. 28–29.

²³ Committee on External Affairs (2023–24), ‘India's Neighbourhood First Policy’, Recommendation (Sl. No. 15), Thirtieth Report, Seventeenth Lok Sabha, Lok Sabha Secretariat, 7 February 2024, pp. 39–40.

factor in its ongoing efforts at developing capacities at Chabahar Port and, complementing it, the 218 km road constructed earlier by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) in south-western Afghanistan against great odds and loss of several Indian and Afghan personnel.

Realpolitik demands a nuanced long-term view of the developing situation in Afghanistan and its multiple impact on the region in the longer term. As stated earlier, this may require non-conventional approaches to deal with Afghanistan in times to come, but for that, New Delhi needs to sustain its presence on the ground and continue to explore ways to functionalise strategic convergences, historically inherent in the “Indo-Afghan” ties. Although it is arguably easier said than done, the current scenario suggests that whether the Taliban regime survives or falters, Kabul is least likely to see a non-Islamist regime any time soon. It is difficult to envision a scenario where various interest groups within the Taliban will altogether fade into political oblivion. It is also important to note that, historically, none of the Afghan regimes—whether monarchical, communist, Islamist or democratic—including ones installed by Pakistan, have been inherently or viscerally anti-India.

There are various moving parts to the Taliban “emirate”, with one projecting a relatively moderate face amenable to making tactical compromises and the other, replicating the rigid and uncompromising policies from three decades back. However, compared to the first Taliban “emirate” of the 1990s, the current “emirate” is a much larger entity, with far more diverse stakeholders. The Taliban, in its conception and organisation, has never been socially and politically oriented to be a nationally unifying force, transcending multiple ethnic, sectarian and cultural identities that defined the Afghan nation. The notably homogenous, compact and status quoist Taliban ideologues, mostly operating from Kandahar, have been asserting their authority over an assortment of interest groups that may seek a rebalance of power and reset of policy approaches to secure international legitimacy and recognition, in due course of time.

It has been over three years since the Taliban announced a caretaker/ interim cabinet, and almost all its senior ministers are still under the UN sanctions and serving in “acting” capacities. The Taliban also do not seem to have made any evident progress in drafting constitution and defining and delineating roles, powers and jurisdictions of various

organs of the government, leaving a lot to the imagination and speculation of one and all. Perhaps, such ambiguity and fluidity work to the advantage of the Kandahar cliché for it leaves much scope for manipulation and arbitration, and control over crucial policy matters, and thereby direct and decisive role in Kabul affairs.

Questions are being raised from within by a section of the political executive, largely excluded from core policy/decision-making processes centred away from Kabul in Kandahar, as the hardliners appear bent on repeating the mistakes of the past that led the regime into exile for full two decades in Pakistan. The more enterprising among the political executive, mainly operating from Kabul, seek a relatively practical approach to policy making and its implementation. The internal dissonance within the Taliban—which is not altogether a new phenomenon—however, need not necessarily mean irreconcilable rifts and drifts, not at least in the immediate foreseeable term, or not so long as the Taliban have the patience and hope to seek or secure international recognition. Pakistan's recent decision to uproot and deport millions of Afghan refugees, largely comprised of Pashtuns living for at least two generations, will also likely help the Taliban hold its rank and file, as well as its allies, closer and together. In the longer term, besides the frontier dynamics, along and across the Durand Line, much will depend on whether the key constituents of the Taliban regime consider maintaining unity in the face of continued international criticism and lack of international recognition of the regime as viable and sustainable.

There are conservative voices within the Taliban arguing that the regime can withstand sanctions and survive without any formal international recognition. They seem to underplay the significance of international recognition, suggesting that the “emirate” already has the necessary theological basis and required power credentials to not look outside, or look up to the “non-believers”, for legitimacy. However, if the lack of international recognition is seen as making the “emirate” vulnerable or impacting its stability, one cannot completely rule out the possibility, remote though for now, of relatively enterprising and ambitious stakeholders within the Taliban seeking greater devolution of power and role in core decision-making processes, or breaking ranks and seeking alliances and morphing into new entities. However, all of that

is still a matter of conjecture and largely in the realm of speculation. While it is important to keep a close watch on the evolving dynamics among interest groups within the “emirate”, and also their underlying links with other militant Islamist entities, including both the Al-Qaeda and the ISK and their regional affiliates, there is no point drawing hasty inferences from reports about dissension within the Taliban.

These alliances and allegiances among Islamist groups in the region, whether tactical or strategic, have been forged over the decades and have survived ideological contradictions and internal conflicts. The possibility of any fundamental shift in the overall thinking of the Taliban regime seems as remote as the possibility of a non-Islamist regime replacing it any time soon. However, with a territory to themselves, sections of the Taliban appear amenable to taking a relatively practical and moderate approach on issues of concern to both regional and Western countries. Aware of Afghanistan's vulnerabilities from regional geopolitics, Kabul continues to seek greater understanding with Washington, particularly in view of their experience with Pakistan both before and after the 9/11 attacks.

Historically, instability in Afghanistan has had long-term implications for both regional and international security. Post-August 2021, as global and regional Islamist networks, and their affiliates and allies, compete and collaborate to leverage their position and strategies in the region, and as the decades-old state-sponsored support structures remain intact across the Durand Line in Pakistan, (re)abandoning Afghanistan could prove to be catastrophic. What followed the Soviet withdrawal in early 1989, and subsequently the collapse of the state and the economy in Afghanistan in early 1992, is too well known to be forgotten.

The return of the Hanafi–Deobandi ‘emirate’ in Kabul has not only spurred the neo-Salafi ISK into greater action but has also impacted the entire Afghan social and political landscape, including the northern provinces and, by extension, the Pashtun territories across the Durand Line in north-west Pakistan. As stated earlier, today, one finds only Pashtun Sunni Islamist groups—the Afghan Taliban; the Haqqani Network (both as a distinct entity and as part of the Afghan Taliban); the ISK, comprised mostly of former elements from the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP or the Pakistani Taliban) and to a lesser extent, the Afghan Taliban; and the TTP—collaborating, competing and

warring to establish their power dominance and ideological hold in the region. The interlinkages and convergences and divergences between them and their regional affiliates point to a complex maze of resurgent Sunni jihadist entities seeking to dominate and transform society and politics in the 'Heart of Asia'.

There is also a growing threat from the southward flow of Afghan drugs, both by maritime and land routes, as evident from several large seizures of heroine of Afghan origin in India. The surge in trafficking and seizure of synthetic drugs, as noted by the UNODC in its November 2023 report, points to an emerging trend as poppy cultivation and opium supply sees reduction, for now. In September 2021, a month after the Taliban came to power, nearly 3 tonnes (2,988 kilogramme [kg]) of Afghan heroin, worth an estimated \$2.72 billion, was seized by the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) from two containers arriving at the Mundra Port, off India's western coast in Gujarat, from the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas. It was said to be one of India's biggest such hauls.²⁴ In February 2022, Indian Navy and Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) in a joint operation seized 529 kg of hashish, 221 kg of methamphetamine and 13 kg of heroin in the high seas off the Gujarat coast, all sourced from Baluchistan and Afghanistan. Soon thereafter, in another joint operation by Indian Navy and NCB in October 2022, an Iranian boat was intercepted off the coast of Kerala in which a total of 200 kg of heroin of Afghan origin was seized and six Iranian drug traffickers were arrested. In May 2023, a "Mother Ship" carrying about 2,500 kg of methamphetamine worth around Rs 15,000 crore from the Makran coast was seized in Indian waters off

²⁴ *Smuggling in India: 2021–22*, DRI, Ministry of Finance, GoI, p. 39, at https://dri.nic.in/writeraddata/2021_2022%20REPORT%20FINAL_14.pdf (Accessed 20 October 2023). Also see, 'India Seizes \$2.7 bn Afghan Heroin Haul Amid Kabul Takeover Chaos', *Mint*, 21 September 2021, at <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/india-seizes-2-7-bn-afghan-heroin-haul-amid-kabul-takeover-chaos-11632214544697.html> (Accessed 14 October 2021); and 'Massive Drug Haul: Indian Authorities Reveal How Heroin Worth \$2.7 bn was Busted on Way from Afghanistan', *WION*, 21 September 2021, at <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/massive-drug-haul-indian-authorities-reveal-how-heroin-worth-27-bn-was-busted-on-way-from-afghanistan-414687> (Accessed 14 October 2021).

the Kerala coast. It was said to be the largest seizure of methamphetamine in the country. A suspected Pakistani national too was detained from the ship.²⁵ In May 2023, the DRI seized a consignment of brooms from Afghanistan at ICP Attari, from which 5.480 kg of heroin valued at Rs 38.36 crore in the international market was recovered.²⁶ The DRI in its report on smuggling in India during 2022–23 noted that the trend of seizing large quantities of heroin and cocaine from containerised cargo in the Arabian Sea region continued during the year. The report pointed out that these heroin shipments primarily originated from Afghanistan and passed through Iran and the UAE.²⁷

In the past few years, both the pro-Taliban Al-Qaeda and the supposedly anti-Taliban ISK have escalated their rhetoric and propaganda campaigns against India, particularly since the Taliban takeover, and have sought to reinforce their respective India-focused modules and chapters to lure youth from India. India's National Investigation Agency has busted several ISIS and AQIS-affiliated modules in various parts of the country over the past years. The presence of Indian-origin fighters in the ranks of both ISIS and its regional affiliate ISKP or Wilayah Khorasan in Afghanistan has been a known

²⁵ Seizure of Approximately 2500kg High Purity Methamphetamine Sourced from Death Crescent Valued Around Rs. 15,000 Cr in the Indian Waters', PIB, GoI, 13 May 2023, at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1923937> (Accessed 13 September 2023); also see Bismee Taskin, 'Hidden 'Labs', Plant-based Ephedrine, Afghanistan Link — Why Meth is Rich Junkie's New Heroin', *The Print*, 23 May 2023, at <https://theprint.in/india/hidden-labs-plant-based-ephedrine-afghanistan-link-why-meth-is-rich-junkies-new-heroin/1587482/> (Accessed 23 May 2023).

²⁶ 'DRI Seizes 5.480 kg Heroin Worth Rs. 38.36 Crore Approx. in International Market Value of from Integrated Check Point, Attari, Amritsar', Ministry of Finance, PIB, GoI, 12 May 2023, at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1923685> (Accessed 30 November 2023).

²⁷ 'Smuggling in India Report 2022–23', DRI, Ministry of Finance, GoI, p. 3, at <https://dri.nic.in/main/smug2023> (Accessed 15 October 2024).

fact.²⁸ In late February 2023, the Taliban spokesperson had announced that the ISK intelligence and military operations chief and the ISK leader for India operations were killed by the Taliban forces on 26 February and 14 February, respectively.²⁹ Identified as Aijaz Ahmad

²⁸ Praveen Swami, 'Exclusive | Indians of the Islamic State, Held in Middle-East Prisons, Find Door to Homeland Firmly Closed', *News18*, 3 November 2020, at <https://www.news18.com/news/india/exclusive-indians-of-the-islamic-state-held-in-middle-east-prisons-find-door-to-homeland-firmly-closed-3037352.html> (Accessed 20 October 2024); Shishir Gupta, 'One of 4 Terrorists in Kabul Sikh Attack a 29-yr-old Kerala Man', *Hindustan Times*, 28 March 2020, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/one-of-4-terrorists-in-kabul-sikh-attack-a-29-yr-old-kerala-man/story-Kog7Thb0YF4AI0LO5qE6pJ.html> (Accessed 20 October 2024); Rezaul H. Laskar, 'Islamic State-Khorasan Province Member From Kerala Killed in Afghanistan', *Hindustan Times*, 11 March 2022, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/islamic-state-member-from-kerala-killed-in-afghanistan-101646970411115.html> (Accessed 15 October 2024); Suhasini Haidar and Vijaita Singh, 'India Unlikely to Allow Return of 4 Kerala Women Who Joined Islamic State', *The Hindu*, 4 December 2021, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-unlikely-to-allow-4-kerala-women-who-joined-is-to-return/article60677651.ece> (Accessed 15 October 2024); and 'What is Islamic State's Voice of Hind Propaganda Magazine, Seeking to Spread Terror in India?', *First Post*, 20 October 2022, at <https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/explained-what-is-islamic-states-voice-of-hind-propaganda-magazine-seeking-to-spread-terror-in-india-11488221.html> (Accessed 23 March 2024).

²⁹ Zabihullah Mujahid, Official Taliban Spokesperson, 'Intelligence and Military Chief of Khawarij Corruptors Killed', Twitter Post, 27 February 2023, 11:58 pm, at https://twitter.com/Zabehulah_M33/status/1630273780273561602 (Accessed 10 May 2023). Also see, Praveen Swami and Amogh Rohmetra, 'Top Kashmir Jihad Commander who led Indian Suicide Bombers in Afghan IS Attacks Believed Killed', *The Print*, 21 February 2023, at <https://theprint.in/india/top-kashmir-jihad-commander-who-led-indian-suicide-bombers-in-afghan-is-attacks-believed-killed/1385976/> (Accessed 23 February 2023); Fidel Rahmati, 'Top IS-Khorasan Commander Killed in Southern Afghanistan', *The Khaama Press*, 23 February 2023, at <https://www.khaama.com/top-is-khorasan-commander-killed-in-southern-afghanistan/> (Accessed 23 February 2023); and 'Top Islamic State Commanders Killed by Taliban Forces in Afghanistan', *India Today*, 28 February 2023, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/top-islamic-state-commander-killed-by-taliban-forces-in-afghanistan-2340498-2023-02-28> (Accessed 25 April 2023).

Ahanger, alias Abu Usman al-Kashmiri, the Srinagar-born ISK chief recruiter for India was listed as an individual terrorist, under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, by the Indian MHA just a month before in early January 2023.³⁰

The Taliban, this time around, seem to better understand the language of economic and political diplomacy and the geostrategic import as well as vulnerabilities of the country they claim to control and represent; although it remains to be seen to what extent they can possibly reinvent or recast themselves into a relatable governing state authority. For now, the Taliban have emerged as an unavoidable force in Afghanistan and, ironically so, have positioned themselves as indispensable to any counterterrorism or counter-narcotics or trans-regional connectivity efforts. Their regime will likely survive so long as it can hold the rank and file together, insulate the internal dynamics from broader intra-Pashtun dynamics and is not caught on the wrong side of the geopolitics. The Taliban's professed "balanced", "neutral" and "economic-centric" foreign policy stems not only from its quest for proto-legitimacy in the region but also from Kabul's traditional vulnerabilities from geopolitics and geo-economics around it.

India is no stranger to tectonic shifts in the Afghan political landscape or the totalitarian politics of authoritarian regimes in Kabul. Nations with rising economic and security stakes deal with various kinds of political system and regime, whether in immediate neighbourhood or distant regions, and prioritise and resource diplomatic and economic

³⁰ The MHA notification of 4 January 2023 described the Srinagar-born and Afghanistan-based Aijaz Ahmad Ahanger, alias Abu Usman al-Kashmiri, as 'one of the chief recruiters of Islamic State Jammu and Kashmir (ISJK)' and 'head of Islamic State (IS) recruitment cell for India'. The notification added that he was 'a wanted terrorist in Jammu and Kashmir for more than two Decades' and that he had 'started planning terror related strategies in Jammu and Kashmir by building coordination channels between various terrorist organisations'. See *The Gazette of India*, Extraordinary, PART II, Section 3, Sub-section (ii), MHA Notification No. 26, 4 January 2023, pp. 2–3, at https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/Individual_Terrorists/SL_NO_49_AIJAZ_AHMAD_AHANGAR.pdf (Accessed 17 June 2023).

instruments to turn or transform adversarial political relations into working relationships to secure their key interests, to the extent possible.

Afghanistan presents a unique challenge to Indian diplomacy, where New Delhi is committed to supporting its longest standing Afghan partner in need, the people of Afghanistan, without formal protocolised government-to-government relations. It means having limited ground presence and working with the UN agencies to deliver the much-needed humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people on the one hand, and working through a limited diplomatic channel to engage with the Taliban political executive to secure India's security interests on the other. Such an approach, while viable and recommended in the short term, may not retain much substance in the longer term, unless scope for India's development outreach to the Afghan people or avenues for people-to-people contact are augmented and broad based.

Meanwhile, it is perhaps an opportune time for the Indian foreign ministry to conceptualise an archival brochure capturing 75 years of India's development partnership with Afghanistan and its people, a journey that began in 1950, for release in 2025. It would be a befitting tribute to over seven decades of Indian endeavour to build Afghan capacities and a reminder to the new generation of Indians and Afghans, including the younger generation of the Taliban, of the essence of "Indo-Afghan" in the contemporary context.

However, should India decide to step up its engagement with Kabul, it will have to reconcile with the dilemmas and contradictions inherent in any policy approach towards Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. Such contradictions can be noted in this monograph. Given India's people-centric approach towards Afghanistan, and also its own inclusive, democratic and pluralistic ethos, it cannot simply recognise a regime that continues to deny basic rights to over half of the country's population. The Taliban's hardcore ideologues would be delusional to believe that theirs can be an open-ended rule, and that, sooner or later, the vast majority of people in the country will come around and embrace Taliban's *Amir-ul-Momineen* as their own.

The collapse of "Islamic Republic" and the return of "Islamic Emirate" marks yet another chapter, a phase, in Afghanistan's endless cycle of political transitions and regime changes since the 1970s. Afghanistan, as

a nation of many multiplicities, is a much larger reality. The new power holders in Kabul may have overrun the territories of Afghanistan, but their core leadership is yet to fathom the numerous challenges and responsibilities that come with it. The Taliban had earlier, on several occasions, stated that they do not seek to monopolise power and favour an “all-Afghan-inclusive Islamic government”, but the idea of intra-Afghan negotiations and an “inclusive emirate” never seemed to have resonated much with the Taliban rank and file.

Even if a section of the political leadership in Kabul has realised the need to conform to the universally accepted principles of governance, or at least adopt a more practical approach to deal with it, there is strong resistance and pushback from the more influential and uncompromising hardliners who have been increasingly assertive the past three years. While the power play within the “emirate” and around it will take its course, it would perhaps be prudent in the circumstances to work with the assumption that a Taliban in the open and under full international gaze is better than a Taliban shrouded in exile and dependent on Pakistan establishment’s whims and fancies.

In the end, for India, it is about weighing available options against potential challenges arising from political and ideological shifts in Afghanistan. As India patiently works its approach towards a Taliban-led Afghanistan, it would be instructive to recollect what Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first PM, had stated over six decades ago in his speech at the banquet held in honour of the visiting Afghan PM, Sardar Daoud Khan, in February 1959 in New Delhi:

Ever since India’s independence, we have grown closer to each other, for a variety of reasons. The long memory of our past was there, and the moment it was possible to renew them, we renewed them. And then came mutual interest, which is a powerful factor.³¹

³¹ ‘Extracts from Jawaharlal Nehru’s Speech at the Banquet Held in Honour of His Royal Highness Limar-e-Ali Sardar Mohammad Daud, Prime Minister of Afghanistan, in New Delhi on 5 February 1959’, in A. Appadorai (ed.), *Select Documents on India’s Foreign Policy and Relations, 1947–1972*, Vol. II, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1985, p. 5.

ANNEXURE I

PREFERENTIAL TRADE AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE REPUBLIC OF INDIA AND THE TRANSITIONAL ISLAMIC STATE OF AFGHANISTAN

6 MARCH 2003

NEW DELHI

PREAMBLE

The Government of the Republic of India and The Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, (hereinafter referred to as the “Contracting Parties”),

CONSIDERING that the expansion of their domestic markets, through economic integration, is a vital prerequisite for accelerating their processes of economic development.

BEARING in mind the desire to promote mutually beneficial bilateral trade.

CONVINCED of the need to establish and promote free trade for strengthening intra-regional economic cooperation and the development of national economies.

FURTHER RECOGNISING that progressive reductions and elimination of obstacles to bilateral trade through a bilateral preferential trading arrangement (hereinafter referred to as “The Agreement”) would contribute to the expansion of world trade.

HAVE agreed as follows:

Article I

Objectives

The Contracting Parties shall establish a Preferential Trading Arrangement in accordance with the provisions of this Agreement.

The objectives of this Agreement are:

- To promote through the expansion of trade the harmonious development of the economic relations between India and Afghanistan.
- To provide fair conditions of competition for trade between India and Afghanistan.
- In the implementation of this Agreement the Contracting Parties shall pay due regard to the principle of reciprocity.
- To contribute in this way, by the removal of barriers to trade, to the harmonious development and expansion of world trade.

Article II

Definitions

For the purpose of this agreement:

- “Tariffs” means basic customs duties included in the national schedules of the Contracting Parties.
- “Products” means all products including manufactures and commodities in their raw, semi-processed and processed forms.
- “Preferential Treatment” means any concession or privilege granted under this Agreement by a Contracting Party through the progressive reduction and/or elimination of tariffs on the movement of goods.
- “The Committee” means the Joint committee referred to in Article XI.

- “Serious injury” means significant damage to domestic producers, of like or similar products resulting from a substantial increase of preferential imports in situations which cause substantial losses in terms of earnings, production or employment unsustainable in the short term. The examination of the impact on the domestic industry concerned shall also include an evaluation of other relevant economic factors and indices having a bearing on the state of the domestic industry of that product.
- “Threat of serious injury” means a situation in which a substantial increase of preferential imports is of a nature so as to cause “Serious injury” to domestic producers, and that such injury, although not yet existing is clearly imminent. A determination of threat of serious injury shall be based on facts and not on mere allegation, conjecture, or remote or hypothetical possibility.
- “Critical circumstances” means the emergence of an exceptional situation where massive preferential imports are causing or threatening to cause “serious injury” difficult to repair and which calls for immediate action.

Article III

Elimination of Tariffs

The Contracting Parties hereby agree to establish a Preferential Trading Arrangement for the purpose of free movement of goods between their countries through reduction of tariffs on the movement of goods in accordance with the provisions of Annexures A & B which shall form an integral part of this Agreement.

Article IV

General Exceptions

Nothing in this Agreement shall prevent any Contracting Party from taking action and adopting measures, which it considers necessary for the protection of its national security, the protection of public morals, the protection of human, animal or plant life and health, those relating to importation or exportation of gold and silver, the conservation of exhaustible natural resources and the protection of national treasures of artistic, historic and archaeological value.

Article V

National Treatment

Both Contracting Parties agree to accord to each others products imported into their territory, treatment no less favourable than that accorded to like domestic products in respect of internal taxation and in respect of all other domestic laws and regulations affecting their sale, purchase, transportation, distribution or use.

Article VI

State Trading Enterprises

Nothing in this Agreement shall be construed to prevent a Contracting Party from maintaining or establishing a state trading enterprise. Each Contracting Party shall ensure that any state enterprise that it maintains or establishes acts in a manner that is not inconsistent with the obligations of the Contracting Parties, under this Agreement and accords non-discriminatory treatment in the import from and export to the other Contracting Party.

Article VII

Rules of Origin

Products covered by the provisions of this Agreement shall be eligible for preferential treatment provided they satisfy the Rules of Origin as set out in Annexure C to this Agreement which shall form an integral part of this Agreement.

For the development of specific sectors of the industry of either Contracting Party, lower value addition norms for the products manufactured or produced by those sectors may be considered through mutual negotiations.

Article VIII

Safeguard Measures

If any product, which is the subject of preferential treatment under this Agreement, is imported into the territory of a Contracting Party in

such a manner or in such quantities as to cause or threaten to cause, serious injury in the importing Contracting Party, the importing Contracting Party may, with prior consultations except in critical circumstances, suspend provisionally without discrimination the preferential treatment accorded under the Agreement.

When action has been taken by either Contracting Party in terms of paragraph 1 of this Article, it shall simultaneously notify the other Contracting Party and the Joint Committee established in terms of Article XI. The Committee shall enter into consultations with the concerned Contracting Party and endeavor to reach mutually acceptable agreement to remedy the situation. Should the consultations in the Committee fail to resolve the issue within sixty days, the party affected by such action shall have the right to withdraw the preferential treatment.

Article IX

Domestic Legislation

The Contracting Parties shall be free to apply their domestic legislation to restrict imports, in cases where prices are influenced by unfair trade practices including subsidies or dumping.

The contracting parties undertake to notify at the earliest opportunity, through the competent bodies, of the opening of investigations and preliminary and final conclusions regarding such unfair trade practices that affect reciprocal trade.

Article X

Balance of Payment Measures

Notwithstanding the provisions of this Agreement, any Contracting Party facing balance of payments difficulties may suspend provisionally the preferential treatment as to the quantity and value of merchandise permitted to be imported under the Agreement. When such action has taken place, the Contracting Party, which initiates such action shall simultaneously notify the other Contracting Party.

Any Contracting Party, which takes action according to paragraph 1 of this Article, shall afford, upon request from the other Contracting

Party, adequate opportunities for consultations with a view to preserving the stability of the preferential treatment provided under this Agreement.

Article XI

Joint Committee

1. A Joint Committee shall be established at Ministerial level. The Committee shall meet at least once a year to review the progress made in the implementation of this Agreement and to ensure that benefits of trade expansion emanating from this Agreement accrue to both Contracting Parties equitably. The Committee may set up Sub-Committees and/or Working Groups as considered necessary.
2. In order to facilitate cooperation in customs matters, the Contracting Parties agree to establish a Working Group on Customs related issues including harmonisation of tariff headings. The Working Group shall meet as often as required and shall report to the Committee on its deliberations.
3. The Committee shall accord adequate opportunities for consultation on representations made by any Contracting Party with respect to any matter affecting the Implementation of the Agreement. The Committee shall adopt appropriate measures for settling any matter arising from such representations within 6 months of the representation being made. Each Contracting Party shall implement such measures immediately.
4. The Committee shall nominate one apex chamber of trade and industry in each country as the nodal chamber to represent the views of the trade and industry on matters relating to this Agreement.

Article XII

Consultations

1. Each Contracting Party shall accord sympathetic consideration to and shall afford adequate opportunity for, consultations regarding such representations as may be made by the other Contracting Party with respect to any matter affecting the operation of this Agreement.

2. The Committee may meet at the request of a Contracting Party to consider any matter for which it has not been possible to find a satisfactory solution through consultations under paragraph 1 above.

Article XIII

Settlement of Disputes

1. Any dispute that may arise between commercial entities of the Contracting Parties shall be referred for amicable settlement to the nodal apex chambers. Such references shall, as far as possible, be settled through mutual consultations by the Chambers. In the event of an amicable solution not being found, the matter shall be referred to an Arbitral Tribunal for a binding decision. The Tribunal shall be constituted by the Joint Committee in consultation with the relevant Arbitration Bodies in the two countries.
2. Any dispute between the Contracting Parties regarding the interpretation and application of the provisions of this Agreement or any instrument adopted within its framework shall be amicably settled through negotiations failing which a notification may be made to the Committee by any one of the Contracting Parties.

IP/C/W/196 12 July 2000, Article XIV

Duration and Termination of Agreement

This Agreement shall remain in force until either Contracting Party terminates this Agreement by giving six months written notice to the other of its intention to terminate the Agreement.

Article XV

Amendments

1. The Agreement may be modified or amended through mutual agreement of the Contracting Parties. Proposals for such modifications or amendments shall be submitted to the Joint Committee and upon acceptance by the Joint Committee, shall be approved in accordance with the applicable legal procedures of each Contracting Party. Such modifications or amendments shall become effective when confirmed through an exchange of

diplomatic notes and shall constitute an integral part of the Agreement.

2. Provided however that in emergency situations, proposals for modifications may be considered by the Contracting parties and if agreed, given effect to through an exchange of diplomatic notes.

Article XVI

(Annexures)

The list of items covered under preferential tariff by the Government of Afghanistan is at Annexure – A and the list of items covered under preferential tariff by the Government of India is at Annexure – B which are integral parts of this Agreement.

Article XVII

Entry into Force

1. The Agreement shall enter into force on the thirtieth day after the Contracting Parties hereto have notified each other that their respective constitutional requirements and procedures have been completed.
2. In witness whereof the undersigned, duly authorised thereto by their respective Governments, have signed this Agreement.
3. Signed at New Delhi on the 6th day of March 2003 in two originals each in Hindi, Dari and English languages, all of them being equally authentic. In case of any divergence in interpretation, the English Text shall prevail.

(ARUN JAITLEY) MINISTER
OF COMMERCE AND
INDUSTRY
GOVERNMENT OF THE
REPUBLIC OF INDIA

(SAYED MUSTAFA KAZEMI)
MINISTER OF COMMERCE
TRANSITIONAL ISLAMIC
STATE OF AFGHANISTAN

ANNEXURE – A: THE LIST OF ITEMS WHERE PREFERENTIAL TARIFF IS GRANTED BY THE GOVERNMENT OF AFGHANISTAN

S.NO.	HS CODE	PRODUCT DESCRIPTION	MFN DUTY %	MOP %*
1	090230	Black Tea (fermented)	Temporary Exempted	100
2	090240	Other Black Tea	Temporary Exempted	100
3	300210	Antisera & Other BLD Frctn; Mdfd Immunlgcl products	7	100
4	300390	Other Ayurvedic, Homeopathic Medicine	7	100
5	300490	Other Medicine for retail sale	7	100
6	170199	Sugar refined	Temporary Exempted	100
7	252310	Cement Clinkers	25	100
8	252321	White Cement	25	100

ANNEXURE – B: THE LIST OF ITEMS WHERE PREFERENTIAL TARIFF IS GRANTED BY THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

S. No.	H.S. Code	Product Description	MFN Duty %	MOP*
1	080620	Green Raisins	105	50%
2	080620	Green Large	105	50%
3	080620	Black Raisins	105	50%
4	080620	Red Raisins	105	50%
5	081310	Dried Apricots Nuts	30	50%
6	081310	Dried Apricots	30	50%
7	080420	Fig Dried	30	100%
8	080250	Pistachios Closed Shell	30	100%
9	080250	Pistachios Open Shell	30	100%
10	080250	Pistachios Shelled (Kernall)	30	100%
11	080231	Walnuts Unshelled	30	50%
12	080232	Walnuts Shelled	30	50%
13	081340	Plums Dried	30	50%
14	080212	Almond Thin Shelled	Rs. 65/Kg.	50%
15	080212	Almond Hard Shelled	Rs. 65/Kg.	50%
16	080212	Almond Shelled	Rs. 65/Kg.	50%
17	081340	Mulberries Dried	30	100%
18	081340	Pine Nuts Toasted	30	100%
19	080620	Raisins Golden	105	50%
20	081310	Apricots Nuts, Bitter Unshelled	30	50%
21	081310	Apricots Nuts, Bitter Shelled	30	50%
22	080620	Green Raisins except Large	105	50%
23	081340	Cherries Sour Dried	30	50%
24	080610	Grapes fresh, All types	40	50%
25	080719	Melon fresh	30	100%

26	080810	Apples fresh	50	50%
27	080910	Apricots fresh	30	50%
28	081090	Pomegranates	30	50%
29	090910	Anise Seeds	30	50%
30	090940	Caraway Seeds, White, Black Kajak	30	50%
31	120400	Linseeds	30	50%
32	120740	Sesame Seeds etc.	30	50%
33	121110	Liquorice Roots plants for Pharmacy etc.	30	50%
34	121410	Alfalfa Seeds	30	50%
35	130190	Asafeotida	30	100%
36	710310	Lapis Lazuli, Ruby, Emerald etc. (Unworked)	30	100%
37	710391	Emeralds (Otherwise worked)	30	100%
38	710399	Lapis Lazuli, Ruby (Otherwise worked)	30	100%

ANNEXURE – C: RULES OF ORIGIN

1. Short title/commencement: -

These rules may be called the rules of Determination of Origin of Goods under the PTA between Afghanistan and the Republic of India.

2. Application: -

These rules shall apply to products consigned from the territory of either of the Contracting Parties.

3. Determination of Origin: -

No product shall be deemed to be the produce or manufacture of either country unless the conditions specified in these rules are complied with in relation to such products, to the satisfaction of the appropriate Authority.

4. Declaration at the time of importation: -

The importer of the product shall, at the time of importation: make a declaration that the products are the produce or manufacture of the country from which they are imported and such products are eligible for preferential treatment under the Agreement, and produce the evidence specified in these rules.

5. Originating products: -

Products covered by the Agreement imported into the territory of a Contracting Party from another Contracting Party which are consigned directly within the meaning of rule 9 hereof, shall be eligible for preferential treatment if they conform to the origin requirement under any one of the following conditions:

Products wholly produced or obtained in the territory of the exporting Contracting Party as defined in rule 6; or

Products not wholly produced or obtained in the territory of the exporting Contracting Party, provided that the said products are eligible under rule 7 or rule 8 read with rule 7.

6. Wholly produced or obtained: -

Within the meaning of rule 5(a), the following shall be considered as wholly produced or obtained in the territory of the exporting Contracting Party:

- raw or mineral products extracted from its soil, its water or its seabed;
- vegetable products harvested there;
- animals born and raised there;
- products obtained from animals referred to in clause (c) above;
- products obtained by hunting or fishing conducted there;
- products of sea fishing and other marine products from the high seas by its vessels;

- products processed and/or made on board its factory ships exclusively from products referred to in clause (f) above;
used articles collected there, fit only for the recovery of raw materials;
- waste and scrap resulting from manufacturing operations conducted there;
- products extracted from the seabed or below seabed which is situated outside its territorial waters, provided that it has exclusive exploitation rights;
- goods produced there exclusively from the products referred to in clauses (a) to (j) above.

7. Not wholly produced or obtained: -

- Within the meaning of rule 5(b), products worked on or processed as a result of which the total value of the materials, parts or produce originating from countries other than the Contracting Parties or of undetermined origin used does not exceed 50% of the f.o.b. value of the products produced or obtained and the final process of manufacture is performed within the territory of the exporting Contracting Party shall be eligible for preferential treatment, subject to the provisions of clauses (b), (c), (d) and (e) of rule 7 and rule 8.
- Non-originating materials shall be considered to be sufficiently worked or processed when the product obtained is classified in a heading, at the four digit level, of the Harmonised Commodity Description and Coding System different from those in which all the non-originating materials used in its manufacture are classified.
- In order to determine whether a product originates in the territory of a Contracting Party, it shall not be necessary to establish whether the power and fuel, plant and equipment, and machines and tools used to obtain such products originate in third countries or not.
- The following shall in any event be considered as insufficient working or processing to confer the status of originating products, whether or not there is a change of heading:

- Operations to ensure the preservation of products in good condition during transport and storage (ventilation, spreading out, drying, chilling, placing in salt, sulphur dioxide or other aqueous solutions, removal of damaged parts, and like operations).

Simple operations consisting of removal of dust, sifting or screening, sorting, classifying, matching (including the making-up of sets of articles), washing, painting, cutting up;

- (i) changes of packing and breaking up and assembly of consignments,
 - (ii) simple slicing, cutting and repacking or placing in bottles, flasks, bags, boxes, fixing on cards or boards, etc., and all other simple packing operations.
- the affixing of marks, labels or other like distinguishing signs on products or their packaging; simple mixing of products, whether or not of different kinds, where one or more components of the mixture do not meet the conditions laid down in these Rules to enable them to be considered as originating products; simple assembly of parts of products to constitute a complete product;
- a combination of two or more operations specified in (a) to (f);
- slaughter of animals.
- The value of the non-originating materials, parts or produce shall be:
- The c.i.f. value at the time of importation of the materials, parts or produce where this can be proven; or The earliest ascertainable price paid for the materials, parts or produce of undetermined origin in the territory of the Contracting Parties where the working or processing takes place.

8. Cumulative rules of origin: -

In respect of a product, which complies with the origin requirements provided in rule 5(b) and is exported by any Contracting Party and which has used material, parts or products originating in the territory of the other Contracting Party, the value addition in the territory of the exporting Contracting Party shall be not less than 30 per cent of

the f.o.b. value of the product under export subject to the condition that the aggregate value addition in the territories of the Contracting Parties is not less than 40 per cent of the f.o.b. value of the product under export.

9. Direct consignment: -

- The following shall be considered to be directly consigned from the exporting country to the importing country:
- if the products are transported without passing through the territory of any country other than the countries of the Contracting Parties.

The products whose transport involves transit through one or more intermediate countries with or without transshipment or temporary storage in such countries; provided that

- the transit entry is justified for geographical reason or by considerations related exclusively to transport requirements; the products have not entered into trade or consumption there; and the products have not undergone any operation there other than unloading and reloading or any operation required to keep them in good condition.

10. Treatment of packing: -

When determining the origin of products, packing should be considered as forming a whole with the product it contains. However, packing may be treated separately if the national legislation so requires.

11. Certificate of origin: -

Products eligible for a Certificate of origin in the form annexed shall support preferential treatment issued by an authority designated by the Government of the exporting country and notified to the other country in accordance with the certification procedures to be devised and approved by both the Contracting Parties.

12. Prohibitions: -

Either country may prohibit importation of products containing any inputs originating from States with which it does not have economic and commercial relations;

13. Co-operation between contracting parties: -

The Contracting Parties will do their best to co-operate in order to specify origin of inputs in the Certificate of origin.

The Contracting Parties will take measures necessary to address, to investigate and, where appropriate, to take legal and/or administrative action to prevent circumvention of this Agreement through false declaration concerning country of origin or falsification of original documents.

Both the Contracting Parties will co-operate fully, consistent with their domestic laws and procedures, in instances of circumvention or alleged circumvention of the Agreement to address problems arising from circumvention including facilitation of joint plant visits and contacts by representatives of both Contracting Parties upon request and on a case-by-case basis.

If either Party believes that the rules of origin are being circumvented, it may request consultation to address the matter or matters concerned with a view to seeking a mutually satisfactory solution. Each party will hold such consultations promptly.

14. Review: -

These rules may be reviewed as and when necessary upon request of either Contracting Party and may be open to such modifications as may be agreed upon.

Notes:

- Includes mineral fuels, lubricants and related materials as well as mineral or metal ores
- Includes agricultural and forestry products
- “Vessels” shall refer to fishing vessels engaged in commercial fishing, registered in the country of the Contracting Party and operated by a citizen or citizens of the Contracting Party or partnership, corporation or association, duly registered in such country, at least 60 per cent of equity of which is owned by a citizen or citizens and/or Government of such Contracting Party or 75 per cent by

citizens and/or Governments of the Contracting Parties. However, the products taken from vessels, engaged in commercial fishing under Bilateral Agreements which provide for chartering/leasing of such vessels and/or sharing of catch between Contracting Party will also be eligible for preferential treatment.

- In respect of vessels or factory ships operated by Government agencies, the requirements of flying the flag of the Contracting Party does not apply.
- For the purpose of this Agreement, the term “factory ship” means any vessel, as defined, used for processing and/or making on board products exclusively from those products referred to in clause (f) of Rule 6.
- Cumulation as implied by Rule 8 means that only products which have acquired originating status in the territory of one Contracting Party may be taken into account when used as inputs for a finished product eligible for preferential treatment in the territory of the other Contracting Party.

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGIN

Reference No.

INDIA–AFGHANISTAN PREFERENTIAL TRADING ARRANGEMENT (IAPTA)

(Combined declaration and certificate)

Issued in

(Country)

(See notes overleaf)

- Goods consigned from (Exporters’ Business Name, Address, Country)
- Goods consigned to (Consignee’s Name, Address, Country)
- Means of transport and route (as far as known)
- For Official use
- Tariff item number
- Marks and numbers of packages

- Number and kind of packages: description of goods
- Origin criterion (see Notes overleaf)
- Gross weight or other quantity
- Number and date of invoice
- Declaration by the Exporter

The undersigned hereby declares that the above details and statements are correct; That all the goods were produced in (Country) and that they comply with the origin requirements specified for those goods in IAPTA for goods exported to (Importing Country) Place and date, signature of the authorised signatory

- Certificate:

It is hereby certified, on the basis of control carried out that the declaration by the exporter is correct.

Place and date, signature and stamp of certifying authority.

To qualify for preference, products must:

- fall within a description of products eligible for concessions in the country of destination under this agreement.
- comply with IAPTA Rules of Origin. Each Article in a consignment must qualify separately in its own right; and
- comply with the consignment conditions specified by the IAPTA Rules of Origin. In general products must be consigned directly within the meaning of Rule 9 hereof from the country of exportation to the country of destination.

II. Entries to be made in Box 8

- Preference products must be wholly produced or obtained in the exporting Contracting Party in accordance with Rule 6 of the IAPTA Rule of Origin, or where not wholly produced or obtained in the exporting Contracting Party must be eligible under Rule 7 or Rule 8.

- Products wholly produced or obtained enter the letter 'A' in box 8.
- Products not wholly produced or obtained; the entry in box 8 should be as follows:
- Enter letter 'B' in box 8 for products, which meet the origin criterion according to Rule 7. Entry of letter would be followed by the sum of the value of materials, parts or produce originating from non-contracting parties or undetermined origin used, expressed as a percentage of the f.o.b. value of the products; (example B () percent).
- Enter letter 'C' in box 8 for products, which meet the origin criteria according to Rule 8. Entry of letter 'C' would be followed by the sum of the aggregate content originating in the territory of the exporting Contracting Party expressed as a percentage of the f.o.b. value of the exported product: (example 'C' () per cent).

Source: Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, at <https://www.commerce.gov.in/international-trade/trade-agreements/trade-agreements-2/>.

ANNEXURE II

RESOLUTION 2593 (2021)

ADOPTED BY THE SECURITY COUNCIL AT ITS 8848TH MEETING

30 AUGUST 2021

The Security Council,

Recalling its previous resolutions on Afghanistan and the relevant statements of its President,

Reaffirming its strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, and national unity of Afghanistan,

1. Condemns in the strongest terms the deplorable attacks of August 26, 2021, near Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, which were claimed by the Islamic State in Khorasan Province, an entity affiliated with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), and resulted in deaths and injuries of over 300 civilians and 28 military personnel, and takes note of the Taliban's condemnation of this attack;
2. Demands that Afghan territory not be used to threaten or attack any country or to shelter or train terrorists, or to plan or to finance terrorist acts, and reiterates the importance of combating terrorism in Afghanistan, including those individuals and entities designated pursuant to resolution 1267 (1999), and notes the Taliban's relevant commitments;
3. Calls for strengthened efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, calls on all parties to allow full, safe, and unhindered access for the United Nations, its specialized agencies and implementing partners, and all humanitarian actors engaged in

humanitarian relief activity, including with respect to internally displaced persons, to ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches all those in need, calls on all donors and international humanitarian actors to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan and major Afghan refugee-hosting countries, and underlines that all parties must respect their obligations under international humanitarian law in all circumstances, including those related to the protection of civilians;

4. Reaffirms the importance of upholding human rights including those of women, children and minorities, encourages all parties to seek an inclusive, negotiated political settlement, with the full, equal and meaningful participation of women, that responds to the desire of Afghans to sustain and build on Afghanistan's gains over the last twenty years in adherence to the rule of law, and underlines that all parties must respect their obligations;
5. Notes the Taliban statement of August 27, 2021, in which the Taliban committed that Afghans will be able to travel abroad, may leave Afghanistan anytime they want to, and may exit Afghanistan via any border crossing, both air and ground, including at the reopened and secured Kabul airport, with no one preventing them from traveling, expects that the Taliban will adhere to these and all other commitments, including regarding the safe, secure, and orderly departure from Afghanistan of Afghans and all foreign nationals;
6. Takes note of the dangerous security situation around Hamid Karzai International Airport and expresses concern that intelligence indicates further terrorist attacks may take place in the area, calls on the relevant parties to work with international partners to take steps to strengthen security and to prevent further casualties, and requests that every effort be made to allow for the rapid and secure reopening of the Kabul airport and its surrounding area;
7. Decides to remain seized of the matter.

Source: UNSC, Resolution 2593 (2021), S/RES/2593 (2021), 30 August 2021, at <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n21/238/85/pdf/n2123885.pdf>.

ANNEXURE III

DELHI DECLARATION ON AFGHANISTAN

10 NOVEMBER 2021

The Third Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan was held on 10 November, 2021 in New Delhi in an expanded format. The National Security Advisers/Secretaries of the National Security Councils of the Republic of India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan participated in the meeting.

The participants discussed the evolving situation in Afghanistan, especially the security situation and its regional and global ramifications. The sides paid special attention to the current political situation in Afghanistan and threats arising from terrorism, radicalisation and drug trafficking as well as the need for humanitarian assistance.

During the meeting, the National Security Advisers/Secretaries of the National Security Councils:

- I. Reiterated strong support for a peaceful, secure and stable Afghanistan while emphasizing the respect for sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity and non-interference in its internal affairs.
- II. Expressed deep concern over the suffering of the people of Afghanistan arising from the security situation in Afghanistan and condemned the terrorist attacks in Kunduz, Kandahar and Kabul.
- III. Emphasised that Afghanistan's territory should not be used for sheltering, training, planning or financing any terrorist acts.

- IV. Condemned in the strongest terms all terrorist activities and reaffirmed their firm commitment to combat terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, including its financing, the dismantling of terrorist infrastructure and countering radicalization, to ensure that Afghanistan would never become a safe haven for global terrorism.
- V. Called for a collective cooperation against the menace of radicalization, extremism, separatism and drug trafficking in the region.
- VI. Stressed the necessity of forming an open and truly inclusive government that represents the will of all the people of Afghanistan and has representation from all sections of their society, including major ethno-political forces in the country. Inclusion of all sections of the society in the administrative and political structure is imperative for the successful national reconciliation process in the country.
- VII. Recalling the relevant UN Resolutions on Afghanistan, the participants noted that the United Nations has a central role to play in Afghanistan and that its continued presence in the country must be preserved.
- VIII. Emphasized the importance of ensuring that the fundamental rights of women, children and minority communities are not violated.
- IX. Expressed concern over the deteriorating socio-economic and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, and underlined the need to provide urgent humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan.
- X. Reiterated that humanitarian assistance should be provided in an unimpeded, direct and assured manner to Afghanistan and that the assistance is distributed within the country in a non-discriminatory manner across all sections of the Afghan society.
- XI. Reiterated commitment to provide assistance to Afghanistan to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

XII. Reiterated the importance of their dialogue and agreed to remain engaged with each other in the future.

The participants thanked the Republic of India for holding the Third Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan in New Delhi. The participants agreed to hold the next round in 2022.

New Delhi

November 10, 2021

Source: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 10 November 2021, at https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34491/Delhi_Declaration_on_Afghanistan.

LIST OF PRIMARY SOURCES

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Bakhtar News Agency

Da Afghanistan Bank

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Embassy of India, Kabul

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Federation of Freight Forwarders' Associations in India

Indian Council for Agricultural Research

Indian Council for Cultural Relations

India Ports Global Limited

International Monetary Fund

International Organization for Migration

Lok Sabha (House of the People), Parliament of India

Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, India

Ministry of Civil Aviation, India

Ministry of Commerce and Industry, India

Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution, India

Ministry of Education, India

Ministry of External Affairs, India

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Afghanistan

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The World Bank

The White House

US Department of State

US Department of the Treasury

United Nations Children's Fund

United Nations Development Programme

United Nations General Assembly

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

United Nations Security Council

World Food Programme

World Health Organization

It is hard to think of a country other than Afghanistan where the interests of so many and such disparate actors—state and non-state, regional and global—have come into play and for decades together. The complete withdrawal of the US-led coalition and the dramatic return of the Taliban to power three years ago, marked yet another major shift in Afghanistan's political-ideological landscape. As a policy, India has remained committed to its people-centric development approach towards Afghanistan. It also has channels open with Islamist Kabul on issues of concern. However, the challenge lies in building trust between the two sides to take the engagement forward. Assuming that an independent Taliban is preferable to one in exile and under Pakistani tutelage, the monograph posits that if the engagement has to be taken forward, then developments in Afghanistan will have to be viewed in their overall social-political context, which has been upended and heaved multiple times over the past five decades, to better deal with its absurdities, contradictions, and layered complexities.

Mr Vishal Chandra studies Afghanistan at Manohar Parrikar IDSA, New Delhi. He is the author of *The Unfinished War in Afghanistan: 2001–2014* (IDSA, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2015) and the editor of *India and South Asia: Exploring Regional Perceptions* (Pentagon Press, 2015) and *India's Neighbourhood: The Armies of South Asia* (Pentagon Press, 2013).

Reviews on his book on Afghanistan have been published in *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* (Taylor & Francis), *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, *The Book Review*, *India Today* and *The Pioneer*. An abridged Farsi translation of the book was later brought out by an Afghan publisher.

He has travelled in Afghanistan and has participated in various national and international academic fora. He has delivered talks & lectures at various training academies and institutes. At MP-IDSA, along his research, he also had a decade long editorial stint with the Institute's website, including editor website from 2019 to 2022.



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