

From Freeze to Thaw: India and Afghanistan in 2015

By Chayanika Saxena

An idiomatic expression that can best capture the year that was for the relations between India and Afghanistan, it could be this: all is well that ends well! The relations between the two 'civilizational' partners have been a roller-coaster ride this year, with many high and low points alike. This annual review will present a review of the journey that India and Afghanistan charted with one another on the bilateral front.

In what follows, the review will delineate the significant developments that occurred, strengthening and challenging the Indo-Afghan ties. This review will begin by demarcating the political changes that took place in both the countries given the importance they have had in determining how India and Afghanistan interacted with each other. The political preview is followed by an assessment of all that which left their impressions on their ties.

Afghan Scenario

It was in September 2014 when the things appeared to have begun taking a U-turn for the relations between India and Afghanistan. It was the inauguration of the Mohammed Ashraf Ghani-led National Unity Government (NUG) that was to introduce many hiccups in a bilateral association which had otherwise been smooth. A professed emphasis on closer ties with Pakistan in Afghanistan's foreign policies implied that the latter's relations with India were to play a second fiddle as it was an unstated precondition by Islamabad. And, so it did especially if the greatest portion of the year rolling by is taken into account.

While a two-pronged government that NUG is-led by Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah alike—the international policies of Afghanistan came to be governed by the decisions flowing out of the former's office. As the President of the country in which the powers to make and implement foreign policies are rested constitutionally, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), which the latter is, could not be much more than a dissenting, disgruntled voice within the domestic order of things.

It is known that Abdullah has greater sympathies for India when compared to Pakistan for reasons including political—his political party, Etelaf-e-Milli owes its ideological allegiance to the Northern Alliance, which as a grouping of anti-Taliban factions did not trust the Pakistani establishment for their evident handiwork in its creation and success- and personal- his family stays in India. In contrast, Ghani is known to be a political pragmatist whose calculations, if no real ethnic sympathy, got him to get Pakistan on board for the peace process to take off in Afghanistan. Notwithstanding the successes or the lack of it, the decision to keep Pakistan closer emerged from a dire necessity to 'keep the friends close

and the enemies closer', particularly as the reins of Taliban are still evidenced to be resting in the hand of its military-intelligence establishment.

Interestingly, the foreign policy of Afghanistan under Ghani appeared to have strategized its relations in a more structural way than was the case under his predecessor, Hamid Karzai. Not that Karzai's policies were acts of whims and impulses; however, the foreign priorities of Afghanistan were now given a discernible order with Ghani's 'five-circle' policy.

According to the 'Five Circle Policy', the international relations were placed in the form of concentric circles, with the countries in the interior rings being of greater importance than those in the outer ones. Pakistan was placed closer, while India was situated in the second-most outer ring, highlighting what many have claimed as a scaling-down of India's importance to Afghanistan.

Given the amount of India's committed assistance to Afghanistan- with many estimates pegging it at a massive USD 2 billion- it was obvious that the South Asian giant would have been upset over a treatment that its overtures did not merit. Also, a simultaneous rise of Pakistan in Afghanistan's foreign policies, ostensibly, dealt a further blow to the Indo-Afghan bilateral ties for two reasons: one, the elevation of Pakistan to a position of prominence was in itself concerning (maybe, irksome too); two, this scaling-up would have meant a corollary scaling-down of Afghanistan's ties with India, and which did happen.

Indian Outreach

All this while, the new government in India which was inaugurated in May 2014 was following an evident 'neighborhood first' policy. Led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the initial impressions of 'South Asia first' were seen when the swearing-in ceremony of the present Indian government was attended by the heads of each of the eight South Asian countries. It is a different matter that back in May 2014, it was President Hamid Karzai and not Ghani who had attended the event; what mattered more was the fact that India had begun weighing South Asia more prominently in its foreign policies than it had done in the recent times.

It will be unfounded to claim that the preceding Indian governments did not do much in the context of strengthening Indian ties with Afghanistan. Here it becomes important to note that most of the financial, military and social support currently being extended to Afghanistan was set-in-motion by the central Indian governments of the past. Be it the Strategic Partnership Agreement (2011); the construction of the National Assembly (Parliament) for Afghanistan (begun in 2005), Salma Dam (2006) and the like were taken by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by the Indian National Congress (INC) in its two tenures beginning in 2004. Having said so however, it is equally important to reference the lack of constraining 'coalition dharma' on the present Indian government and the favorable international scenario (including a slumping Chinese economy)

which have placed it, circumstantially at least, on a firm footing vis-à-vis the promotion of its ties within the South Asian region.

While claiming to a strong civilizational connect- a kind that even gets stretched into the domain of mythology- the relations between India and Afghanistan are however, not as linear as they are made out to be. India's ties with Afghanistan feature a very vital 'other': Pakistan. Although intricately linked, India does not hold Afghanistan and Pakistan in an inextricably, hyphenated association. In the same breath however, India does recognize that Pakistan has a strategic interest in Afghanistan, much of which is geared at countering India's leverage as an economic, military and territorial giant in South Asia. Added to this is the fact the territory along the Afghanistan's side of the Durand Line has been used by the military-intelligence establishment of Pakistan to bid infiltration in Kashmir, deteriorating the delicate peace in this Indian province further.

As a result, India's response to the strategic crisis in Afghanistan has been tempered by its own security interests notwithstanding the cultural camaraderie that they often claim to. In fact, much of their cultural association has not translated into effective military cooperation; something that India has been reluctant in pressing forward with for both short and long term strategic considerations.

Distance Covered

Having begun on a rather lukewarm note, the relations between the new incumbents in India and Afghanistan towed their respective national interests particularly in the light of depleted international presence (and thus, security) in Afghanistan and a concrete shift in country's foreign engagements. What was lukewarm to begin with became frozen with the beginning of the Peace Talks. Conducted in the Pakistani town of Murree, the fact that Pakistan had to be taken on board for these discussions meant that the Indian presence would have been kept at bay, and so it was. A visible absence of India from the Talks had certainly rubbed the country on the wrong side; a fact that got demonstrated with India's low-key representation at the regional Summit RECCA VI.

However, as things were to take their course, the mounting attacks by Taliban in Afghanistan intensified the popular resentment against Pakistan, compelling the Ghani camp to check its skewing foreign policy. In fact, as the year 2015 came to a close, the relations between India and Afghanistan looked at an upswing, with the Indian PM's maiden visit to Kabul and the handing over of the Indian constructed Afghan National Assembly and four Mi-25 Choppers to Afghanistan cementing chances for revival of their camaraderie.

Peace Talks

Among the most significant developments to have taken place for Afghanistan was the initiation of the Peace Talks. Understanding that there can be no peace within its boundaries for as long as the trouble-makers (read Taliban) are given

safe sanctuaries across the Durand Line, Afghanistan in all the earnestness approached Pakistan (with the blessings of China and U.S.A.) to initiate the process of Peace Talks and Reconciliation. Organized in a town called Murree, it was during the Islamic Holy Month of Ramadan (July 2015) that the peace process was given a go-ahead. Hailed as successful, the talks however, collapsed soon in the wake of confirmations attesting the death of the (founding) Amer-al-Momenin (Leader of Faithful), Mullah Omar.

Interestingly, India did not figure anywhere in these talks, and which evidently did not go down well with the country. Reflecting its displeasure at its scaled-down importance, India did not send its highest presentation to the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference for Afghanistan (RECCA). This disaffection with its lowered significance however, took an about turn recently when the Indian foreign minister represented the country at the 'Heart of Asia' Conference on Afghanistan in Islamabad in December 2015, hinting that changes in the Indo-Afghan ties are underway.

Taliban Travails

The death of Mullah Omar, the speculations of which had been rife for years, was confirmed post what was believed to be a successful round one of the Peace Talks. Confirmed by agencies the National Directorate of Security (NDS) of Afghanistan, the peace talks took the blow and the Afghan government getting domestic rebukes for its blind, ignorant play. However, it was not the peace talks or the Afghan government that took the beating alone; the death of Mullah Omar also exposed the latent tensions within Taliban.

The race for succession to the status of the new Amer-al-Momenin was (and still is) fraught with violent and verbal struggles. Although Mullah Akhtar Mansour could manage to swing most of the Taliban in his favor, however, factions have emerged from within the movement opposing his ascension. Apart from the deadly infighting these differences have resulted in, the divergences within Taliban have cascaded into two even troubling developments: ceding of ideological and physical space to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS/IS) and the peace talks being have been put in space of doubt and lack of credibility.

Rise of ISIS

Having shocked the world with their dramatic display of monstrosity, ISIS has managed to make inroads into Afghanistan. While actual fighters from IS' army are not seen in thronging numbers in Afghanistan, however disaffected Talibs, particularly in the eastern province of Nangarhar, have sworn their allegiance to the Caliphate.

As its motivations find reception within Afghanistan, IS which is known for its ready usage of technology is employing media tools, such as an on-line magazine- *Dabiq* and radio- *Voice of Caliphate* to propagate their ideas in the country, mounting direct challenge against Taliban.

Aggravating Insecurity

Listed by the UN as one of the least safe places on earth, the increasing attacks on Afghanistan's provincial and national capitals have experienced a worrying rise. In the year 2015 itself, the assaults launched by Taliban increased so much so that these enabled them to capture almost 30% of Afghanistan's territory and retain it.

Following the collapse of the peace-talks, Kabul was rocked by successive attacks that were ostensibly planned from across the border-in Pakistan. Accusing the Pakistani establishment of willful neglect, the President and CEO of Afghanistan-Mohammed Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah said that peace cannot prevail for as long as the anti-Afghanistan activities are allowed a free hand in Pakistan.

From the national capital to a provincial capital that has not been a traditional stronghold of Taliban- *Kunduz*. It was in the last week of September 2015 that the capital of the province of Kunduz which goes by the same name had fallen to and remained occupied for almost three days by the forces of Taliban. Giving the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)- primarily the Afghan National Army (ANA)- a fierce fight, it was only with the American air support that the Taliban could finally be driven out. However, a lot of moral damage was done by then- on the psyche of the national forces of Afghanistan, the people at large and the government at the central level. The capturing of Kunduz was followed by a similar rebel occupation in the province of Faryab.

As this review is being written, the province of Helmand is under Taliban siege, with the town of Sangin, which was at the center of fierce battle between the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Taliban, having been re-taken by the latter.

Concerned over the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, especially in the light of increasing ISIS advance and rising assaults by Taliban, the international military assistance provided by countries including the United States, United Kingdom and Germany will continue to be extended at least until 2016. In particular, the United States has committed 9,800 boots on the ground for the year 2016, with about 5,500 expected to remain over four places- Bagram, Kabul, Kandahar, and Jalalabad- in 2017.

Indian Support

In terms of securing Afghanistan from the internal and external threats, the role of India is rather miniscule and does not include any physical presence within the international armed forces and otherwise. For reasons which include not disturbing its delicate strategic balance with Pakistan, India has not been an active contributor of military forces to Afghanistan, with its assistance to the Afghan defence sector confined to: military training of Afghan National Army

(ANA) cadets in the (Indian) National Defence Academy and provision of limited military hardware both directly and routed through Russia.

Taking a formal shape in the form of Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA, 2011) – which is one of the foremost agreements of this kind to have been extended by India- it was decided that defence related cooperation between the two countries would pan out in a way that will assist ‘in the training, equipping and capacity building programs for Afghan National Security Forces’.¹ Extending military training, training to the police forces and provision of non-lethal military hardware, the SPA was supplemented in the year 2015 with the provision of four Mi-25 attack helicopters in a move that signals a shift from the India’s position vis-à-vis Afghanistan’s security requirements. These helicopters were transferred by the Indian PM on his visit to Kabul after the port calls made by the Afghan National Security Advisor, Hanif Atmar and the deputy minister of External Affairs, Hekmat Khalil Karzai to New Delhi in November 2015.

Aiding Afghan Rebuild

India’s assistance to Afghanistan which stands at a massive figure of USD 2 Billion is expected to assist the country in four areas: ‘large infrastructure projects; humanitarian assistance; capacity building initiatives, and small Development Projects’². While most of the present Indian commitments to Afghanistan were made over the years post-Bonn conference of 2001, some of the major projects to have reached fruition in 2015 include: Afghan Parliament and Salma Dam.

Salma Dam which is built on the Harirod River in the western Afghan province of Herat was made operational (in part) in August 2015. Where the Indian government had committed itself to reconstructing the dam back in 1988 itself, however it was only in 2006 that the actual work could begin. Since then, India has committed almost INR 1460 crores to the construction of this dam which is expected to generate 42 MW of electricity and irrigation facilities for 75,000 hectares of land.³ At present, the reservoir of the dam that is getting filled with water captured from the river and the dam is expected to become completely operational in the year 2016.

The National Assembly of Afghanistan, which is known in India as the Afghan Parliament, has been constructed from the scratch with Indian financial and technical assistance. This project which began in 2005 is believed to have cost the Indian exchequer INR 710 crores.⁴ Inaugurated on the 25th of December 2015 by the Indian PM Narendra Modi, the Afghan Parliament is symbolic of India’s commitment to the strengthening and furthering of Afghanistan’s democracy.

Crystal-ball

Although renewed talks about the revival of the derailed Peace Talks sans India is bound to make it jittery, however, the country does sense a change in the

stance of Afghanistan towards it. With Ghani having realized- and that too very dearly- that the establishment in Pakistan makes it difficult to trust its intentions with eyes shut, the much hyphenated India-Afghanistan-Pakistan ties are bound to see changes in the coming year.

As India continues to invest in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, it would be unwise for this country to neglect India without inciting domestic discontent and hiccupping the disbursement of financial assistance. Also, as India too revises its plan after an initial expression of its discontent with Afghanistan's regional priorities, it too would seek to strengthen its bilateral ties with this country. In fact, if the emerging rivalry between India and Pakistan is anything to go by, Afghanistan, which finds a mutual mention in their respective agenda, will certainly stand to benefit from these bodings of peace.

China too has an important role to play in the process particularly as the ISIS is now seen knocking at its door. With the Xinjiang province already on the boil, it would be to China's benefit to rein in on the extremist elements entering its territory through the Wakhan Corridor. In doing so, its role in getting Pakistan on board and keeping it from dithering will remain significant. All of this also happens in the backdrop of border and military cooperation measures that India and China are undertaking.

As Afghanistan enters its second year without adequate international military presence, a fledgling economy, an expiring tenure of the National Unity Government and a highly fragile security environment, it is all but hoped that this country does not relapse into a condition to what it had in 1992. India as its partner in progress, development and democracy has a critical role to play as a guide and a benefactor. It is time that India invests in Afghanistan's long-term stability than be miffed at its immediate advances to other countries.

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Endnotes

¹ Full text of the Strategic Partnership agreement can be accessed here: <http://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/5383/Text+of+Agreement+on+Strategic+Partnership+between+the+Republic+of+India+and+the+Islamic+Republic+of+Afghanistan>

² For more information, refer to the following website: <http://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0707?000>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.