



A Vision of India's Afghan Policy: Challenges and Strategic Choices

Shoislom Akmalov

Candidate of Political Sciences, Associate Professor, International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan, Uzbekistan

<http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v9i5.3807>

Abstract

This article analyzes the interests and policies of India in today's Afghanistan and examines the challenges in front of New Delhi as well as strategic choices. The article discusses the strengths and weaknesses of India in this regard, its opportunities and threatening issues.

Keywords: *Taliban; SAARC; Chabahar; One Road (OBOR); Trans-Afghan Corridor; The Delhi Regional Security Dialogue; Kashmir; Aynak, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)*

Introduction

Today, a new geopolitical reality has emerged in Afghanistan. In August 2021, the re-capture of power by the Taliban forces and, in parallel, the withdrawal of the American military forces from the Afghan territory created conditions for the regional actors to increase their role in the Afghan chess board. From the geostrategic point of view, the establishment of the "Taliban" rule will not remain without affecting the balance of power in the region. These conditions created a number of opportunities for Pakistan, which is considered to be a close partner of the Taliban, as well as a number of calls for India, which is its geopolitical competitor in the region. In this context, there is a choice to develop a new Afghan strategy for New Delhi.

Methods

In the article, SWOT, event and comparative analysis methods were used.

Results

India considers Afghanistan to be its neighbor from the past to the present. While Pakistan is currently separating the two states, Delhi's policy has always been based on close neighborhood and broad cooperation with official Kabul.

However, as a result of the departure of American troops, who had an effective partner with New Delhi on the problem of Afghanistan, the re-establishment of the Taliban authority limited the influence

of India in Afghanistan from a geopolitical point of view. The possibility of a joint activity of regional powers in Afghanistan, such as Pakistan and China in the region, has further exacerbated these processes and Delhi concerns. These conditions are not grounds to say that India's influence in Afghanistan and the region as a whole has been severely limited. In this regard, the SWOT analysis of this issue offers a full-fledged answer to the above points and the opportunity to make the necessary conclusions:

Strengths

Among regional countries, India is considered the most active actor in the socio-economic recovery of Afghanistan. Arun Mohanty, a professor of Russian and Central Asian Studies at the university named after Javohirlal Nehru, said that India is the fifth in the world to support Afghanistan and the first among the countries of South Asia (Mohanty, Trenin, Topichkanov, 2013). It is known that after the establishment of the Taliban rule on August 15, 2021, the United States froze nearly 8 billion dollars of state assets of Afghanistan. As a result, there is a severe economic and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, and this country is now experiencing the most severe crisis in its history. According to the UN Secretary-General, over 24 million people will require humanitarian assistance in 2022, compared to 18.4 million in 2021. Almost 9 million of these will be at "emergency" levels of food insecurity – the highest number in the world. Half of all children under five years of age are facing acute malnutrition. As at 22 December, 157,820 people were confirmed to have contracted COVID-19, while some 7,337 had died since the start of the pandemic (The situation in Afghanistan..., 2022).

Naturally, the need for a regional leading donor like India for the leadership of the "Taliban" in the conditions of such a humanitarian crisis is incredibly necessary. The Afghan government, acting without the participation of official Delhi or with other powers, can not solve this problem. In 2020, the trade turnover of the two countries reached 2 billion dollars (Akbariy, 2020), up to 3 billion dollars (India-Afghanistan trade..., 2020), within the framework of bilateral and various organizations in turn, India's 116 largest projects planned in Afghanistan (Dixit, 2018) represent the need to re-attract Indian investment into the country. In particular, factors such as the fact that about 16 000 thousand Afghan young people study at Indian universities (Shanti, 2019) also indicate the economic strengths of official Delhi in Afghanistan.

In addition, India, as the largest state in South Asia, has the potential to seriously influence the integration of Afghanistan into the region. This can be cited as a vivid example of the potential in India to influence Afghanistan's membership and other activities in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The South Asian region has a 75% share of gross domestic product, more than 70% of the population accounted for India (Reddy Ramana, 2020, p.109-110) and given that the highest financial share of the organization is also under the control of India, the Taliban government will be forced to count with official Delhi on the prospects of Afghanistan's activities in this organization.

There are also geopolitical strong supports and interested partners in India's Afghan policy. The withdrawal of American military forces from Afghanistan did not mean that its influence on the region was completely lost, the main partner actor for Washington's reliance on the region at the moment is India. The US and India are calling on the Taliban to fight terrorism, respect human rights and form an inclusive government. These issues are noted in detail in the statement adopted by the leadership of Foreign Affairs and defense on the results of the meeting in the format "2+2" in April 2022. Ministers call on the Taliban to comply with paragraph 2593 (2021) of the UN Security Council: "never use the territory of Afghanistan to threaten or attack any state, hide or prepare terrorists, plan or finance terrorist attacks" (US and India call on..., 2022). The current situation in Afghanistan is likely to harmonize the interests of the United States and India in Afghanistan and bring the parties much closer. During his visit to India, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendi R. Sherman states that "now the US relations with Pakistan are based on short lines of cooperation, especially the intensification of China's policy in the region, will create the basis for the strong growth of US and Indian cooperation" (Gupta, 2021). Under these circumstances, one

of the parties that may have a geopolitical partner with India is the Iranian state. Iran's Chabahar port remains the only prospective corridor to connect India with Afghanistan and the Central Asian region. This port is an integral part of the "International North-South Transport Corridor" (INSTC), which is being seriously supported by India. Still, the fact that INSTC is an alternative to China's transport corridor "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) also encourages India to approach Iran on the issue of Afghanistan. According to the data, by 2024 year it was aimed to increase the total capacity of the Chabahar port to 86 million tons (Sawhney, 2018). In addition, India, with great probability, can also approach Russia in its Afghan policy. According to Alexei Kuprianov, head of the South Asian and Indian group of the Institute of world economy and international relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences, there are three reasons for this. Firstly, Russia has close relations with the Taliban, and secondly, Russia is also looking for partners in the region on the situation in Afghanistan and has repeatedly stated its readiness to cooperate with India on this issue. Third, in due time, Russia, India and Iran jointly supported the Northern Alliance (Kupriyanov, 2021).

In general, the strong aspects of India's Afghan policy rely on geopolitical and geo-economic factors.

Weaknesses

India does not have a direct border with Afghanistan. Pakistan's territory hinders for Delhi to establish direct close cooperation with Afghanistan or to have a leading influence position in it. The geographic barrier factor is the most vulnerable aspect of India's policy on Afghanistan. At the same time, this factor significantly limits India's direct and guaranteed connection with the Central Asian region, effective and full use of the energy potential of Central Asia, the possibility of its import through Afghanistan, as well as the goals of the development of regional transport corridors. In particular, the ongoing initiatives to link Central and South Asia, including the Mazari Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar Railway project, will further enhance Pakistan's position in the region by undermining India's geopolitical and geo-economic interests. According to Professor Rukhsana Iftikhar of Punjab University, the construction of the Transafgan corridor will change the geo-economic dynamics of the wider region and Pakistan will become a connecting transport hub of trade relations (Iftikhar, 2021, p.60-61). As noted by scholar Abdusamat Haydarov, the unstable situation in Afghanistan is the main obstacle to full cooperation between the regions of Central and South Asia. This makes it difficult for India to achieve its strategic goals in line with the countries of Central Asia (Khaydarov, 2007, p.40). Naturally, this situation is not beneficial for India and weakens the importance of its regional trade projects.

The second weakness of New Delhi's Afghan policy is that the Kabul authorities are in the hands of the Taliban forces. The fall of the official Kabul government led by Ashraf Ghani has severely weakened Delhi's influence in Afghanistan.

According to some reports, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) which is an Indian intelligence agency, had so far carried out various operations in cooperation with the intelligence service of the Afghanistan National Directorate of Security (NDS) in border areas against Pakistan. However, as "Taliban" came to the power, the work on security cooperation has completely ceased. And the most notable thing is that India has become the only regional power center that does not have a direct connection with the "Taliban". The traditional ties that Islamabad has maintained with the Taliban, in turn, Beijing also expresses sympathy for the Taliban interim government, which will not leave Delhi without worrying that. The following points of view of the former Indian Foreign Minister Somanahalli Krishna clearly express Delhi's views on this issue: "Delhi does not recognize the "good" of the Taliban as there is not the "good" of the terrorists" (Akmalov, 2013, p.189-193).

The third weakness is that India is currently unable to participate in the discussion format with Afghanistan's neighbours. This format, which is at the level of ministers of Foreign Affairs, will be held in Pakistan, Iran and China, will reduce India's active position in this regard and reduce its regional

opportunities to the level of the fourth-largest actor. Naturally, this creates the need to develop new tasks in front of India.

Opportunities

On the Afghan land, Indian opportunities were huge until the Taliban forces came to power. More precisely, the socio-economic recovery opportunities of Afghanistan, the issues of rapid development of infrastructure projects were closely depended on India. Although the scale of these opportunities has now decreased dramatically, the strengths of New Delhi, which we have listed above, in turn, provide some opportunities. In particular, India is trying to deliver humanitarian cargo to the Afghan people, albeit indirectly, to carry out trade relations. India sent a convoy of 50 trucks carrying 2500 MT of wheat as humanitarian aid for Afghanistan at the India-Pakistan integrated check post (ICP) on February 2022. Apart from wheat, India has already supplied 13 tonnes of essential medication and winter clothing, as well as 500,000 doses of COVAXIN to Afghanistan by commercial flights (Vasuduva, Haidar, 2022).

It is known that India occupies a great position in the regional security issues of South Asia. This potential allows India to create a regional security dialogue on Afghanistan. Delhi Regional Security Dialogue founded on the Indian initiative in November 2021, has become a platform specific to discuss regional security issues after the Taliban's authority. The following is stated in the Joint Declaration adopted with the participation of India, Russia, Iran and Central Asian countries:

- urgent humanitarian assistance in the conditions of the humanitarian and economic crisis in Afghanistan and the need for assistance in the fight against the COVID-19;
- the need to call on its suppliers to provide unhindered, unrestricted and direct access to Afghanistan and to distribute support among all sectors of the Afghan society;
- the importance of continuing the activities of the UN in Afghanistan, as well as ensuring the rights of women, children and ethnic minorities;
- the fact that the introduction of all parts of society into management and political structure is a necessary prerequisite for a successful national reconciliation process;
- not using the territory of Afghanistan as a shelter for terrorists, as well as the inability to plan or finance terrorist acts (Afghan territory..., 2021).

It is worth noting that, unlike Pakistan, India has experience of equal and close relations with all Central Asian countries in relation to Afghanistan. Especially after the "Taliban" took over the power of Kabul, New Delhi became more active in the region and became the initiator of the summit of heads of State in the form of "India-Central Asia". This summit with the participation of the leaders of the Central Asia countries, namely Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, which have direct borders with Afghanistan, unlike Pakistan, created the opportunity for India to develop common approaches to the issue of Afghanistan with all the countries of Central Asia. At the same time, the holding of the "India-Central Asia" format at the level of heads of State has the potential to transform India into a leading and enterprising locomotive of South Asia when connecting the regions of Central and South Asia through Afghanistan. Expert on Afghanistan, Suhrob Buranov proposed the concept of "Afghan regional dualism", although different views and approaches to the geographical location of Afghanistan have some scientific basis, today the factor of assessing this country not as a specific part of Central or South Asia, but as a bridge connecting these two regions, is a priority. (Buranov, 2022). Naturally, the prospects for such an approach India's broad capabilities in relation to Central Asia and Afghanistan cannot be overlooked.

Threats

The threat scenario of Afghanistan becoming an international terrorist and extremist space in the future is one of the most alarming dangers that India's leadership is facing. Therefore, Islamabad's close ties with the Taliban leaders in Afghanistan further intensify Delhi's concerns. Professor Joshi Nirmala

writes about the interests of India in this regard: “the main interest of India is not to accept Afghanistan as a center of religious extremism and terrorism. However, officially, India is concerned about the close contact of the Taliban movement with Pakistan, their fundamentalist agreement, as well as the wide involvement of Afghan mercenaries in the military operations of Jammu and Kashmir (Nirmala, 2013, p.265). In addition, the rapid withdrawal of the American military from Afghanistan and the transfer of a number of weapons and military equipment to the control of the Taliban or terrorist forces are raising new concerns before Delhi. Indian Major General Ajay Chandpuria said that the military equipment remaining in Afghanistan from America was found in Kashmir and these weapons were intended to be used by terrorists. Chandpuria claims that these weapons are transported to Kashmir through Pakistan, with approximately 150 to 200 terrorists activated in Kashmir, and that 40-45% of them are from Pakistan with experience of fighting in Afghanistan.

Another more dangerous aspect is the geopolitical implication of China-Pakistan cooperation. Afghanistan involvement in the OBOR corridor of China, while the direct negotiations with the Taliban leaders of Chinese companies on the implementation of various investment projects, can seriously concern Indian officials. The inclusion of Afghanistan in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was discussed during the visit of Pakistan former Prime Minister Imran Khan to Beijing, where he held talks with Xi Jinping (Hakimi, 2022). At the same time, three-way talks between the foreign ministers of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China took place in the Chinese city of Tiansi in March 2022 was also an important signal for India. In this way, after America, the Chinese policy in Afghanistan began to manifest itself with an economic factor. In particular, for the Aynak copper mine, the Chinese side planned to invest 400 million dollars a year in the current government of Afghanistan. The most notable, according to data, is that the China National Petroleum Corporation International has signed a 25-year contract for oil finds in the Faryab and Sar-e Pol regions of Afghanistan (Maa, 2022). Such actions will leave the fate of the future economic and other projects of India in Afghanistan under question.

Discussion

India’s policy on Afghanistan is always carried out on the basis of two important factors. The first is a geopolitical factor, in which the active influence of Pakistan and China on the internal political situation of Afghanistan is given special attention, the second factor reflects the geo-economic interests, which include Delhi’s regional transport projects aimed at connecting with the Central Asian region. The establishment of the Taliban authority weakened the political, trade-economic and other opportunities of New Delhi in Afghanistan, created a number of dangerous conditions. In this regard, India is facing the following strategic choices:

- 1) recognizing the Taliban government and establishing relations of all spheres;
- 2) supporting the National Resistance Front forces together with the powers belonging to Afghanistan and very close to the interests of Delhi and thereby reducing the influence of the Taliban in Afghanistan;
- 3) taking a temporary supervisory position, proceeding from the processes of recognition of the Taliban government by the world community and the region.

In general, if we draw conclusions from the strategic interests of India in Afghanistan as well as from the results of the SWOT analysis of the current realities, in the near and medium perspective, it is of paramount importance for Delhi to pay serious attention to the second and third choices and to conduct policies through them.

References

- Afghan territory must not be used for terrorism: Delhi dialogue on Afghanistan crisis (2021) The Economic Times. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/afghan-territory-must-not-be-used-for-terrorism-delhi-dialogue-on-afghanistan-crisis/articleshow/87625831>.
- Buranov S. (2022). Afghanistan as a Bridge Connecting Central and South Asia. *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding*, 9(2), 319-323.
- Dixit, G. (January 2018 – March 2018). The New Geopolitical Realities in Afghanistan: India's Constructive Role as US Partner. The United Service Institution of India. <https://usiindia.org/publication/usi-journal/the-new-geopolitical-realities-in-afghanistan-indias-constructive-role-as-us-partner/>.
- Hakimi, A. (2022). China, Pakistan Mull Afghan Membership in CPEC. TOLO news. Retrieved from <https://tolonews.com/business-176659>.
- India-Afghanistan trade likely to reach \$2 bn by 2020: Afghan Ambassador // The Economic Times, July 13, 2018. <https://m.economictimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/india-afghanistan-trade-likely-to-reach-2-bn-by-2020-afghan-ambassador/articleshow/64978930.cms>.
- Maa, A. (2022). China's prospects in Afghanistan: Opportunities and adversities. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/ht-insight/international-affairs/chinas-prospects-in-afghanistan-opportunities-and-adversities-101645181272767.html>.
- Nirmala, J. (2013). Indian perspectives on regional approach to Afghanistan. Буюк ипак йўлининг ўтмиши ва ҳозирги куни: ривожланишнинг ижтимоий-маданий, тарихий, сиёсий ва иқтисодий йўналишлари: халқаро илмий-амалий конференция материаллари тўплами. Тошкент: ТДШИ.
- Reddy, R. (2020). India's role in SAARC. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)* November 2020, Volume 7, Issue 11.
- Sawhney, A. Chabahar Port: Unlocking Afghanistan's Potential. Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/chabahar-port-unlocking-afghanistans-potential>.
- The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security (28 January 2022). Report of the Secretary-General, A/76/667-S/2022/64.
- Vasudava, Naidar. (2022). India sends first consignment of aid for Afghanistan. The Hindu.
- Акмалов, Ш. (2013) Афганская политика Индии в контексте ее стратегических интересов в Южной и Центральной Азии. ЎзМУ ХАБАРЛАРИ N 3/1, 2013.
- Гупта Арвин. (2021). Как крах правительства в Афганистане повлияет на отношения США и Индии. Международный дискуссионный клуб "Валдай". <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/afghanistan-indiya-ssha/>.
- Куприянов, А. (23 сентябрь, 2021) Участь Индии в Афганской игре. ЦентрАзия. <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1632380040>.
- США и Индия призвали талибов к борьбе с терроризмом (2022). Всё об Афганистане. <https://afghanistan.ru/doc/148809.html>.
- Хайдаров, А. (2007). Афганской фактор в индийско-центральнoазиатских отношениях. Политика Индии в Центральной Азии.

- Моханти А., Тренин Д., Топычканов П. (June 4, 2013) Политика Индии на афганском и центральноазиатском направлениях. Carnegie Moscow Center. <https://carnegie.ru/2013/06/04/russian-event-4148>.
- Shanti, N. (February 6, 2019). India-Afghanistan Relations: Gaining Strategic Bonding // The Economic Times. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/et-commentary/india-afghanistan-relations-gaining-strategic-bonding/>.
- Akbary, M. (January 29, 2020) Afghanistan-India Relations: A Good Example amongst Regional Countries. Daily Outlook Afghanistan, the Leading Independent. http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/topics.php?post_id=26249.
- Iftikhar, R. (October 2021). Pakistan: A connecting hub of trade in Central Asian Republics. His Excellency Shavkat Mirziyoyev – A Visionary Statesman. Center for Global and Strategic Studies, Islamabad.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).