



## **India and Germany in Afghanistan: Building platforms of cooperation**

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### **Abstract**

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India and Germany have made tremendous investments in Afghanistan since 2001. The present levels of violence combined with the uncertainties associated with the peace process are impacting on the role and commitment of both countries in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Amid concerns over backsliding of the country into further chaos and violence, Germany and India who have been important stakeholders in rebuilding Afghanistan need to explore and build platforms of cooperation for the long-term stabilization of the country. Given the convergence of interests in the stabilization of Afghanistan and strategic partnership, Germany and India are uniquely positioned to cooperate. More importantly, as Germany and India aspire to play a major role in the international arena, Afghanistan would be a test case of how these both countries develop joint strategies of conflict resolution, global governance, and formation of an alliance of multilateralists in a rapidly changing global order.

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## Analysis

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### Introduction

Despite sizeable investment in Afghanistan by the international community for the last 19 years, the task of stabilizing Afghanistan seems farfetched. Dwindling international financial assistance, talks of troop withdrawal and lack of economic stability in Afghanistan is leading to a constant flow of refugees out of Afghanistan, rise in unemployment, and increase in criminal, narco and insurgent activities. Most of the development projects initiated by the international community in post-2001 Afghanistan are winding down or have been abruptly closed, leading to an economic crisis in the aid dependent country.

In this context, Germany and India who have made huge investments in Afghanistan are uniquely positioned to help preserve and build on the gains achieved thus far. This is critical not only for Afghanistan but also for Germany and India as they aspire to play a major role in the international arena. The new "Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region"<sup>1</sup> issued by the German government in September 2020 is an important development to take cognizance.

### Germany's role in Afghanistan

Germany's engagement with post-2001 Afghanistan depicts a positive role in the reconstruction of the war-ravaged country in wide ranging sectors. Germany has contributed significant amount of resources to a large number of projects in the country. Since 2001 (till 2019), the German government has invested about AFN 345 billion (EUR 4.06 billion) in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> In the 2016 Brussels Conference, Germany committed to providing up to EUR 430 million per year in overall civilian assistance to Afghanistan. Accordingly, in 2020, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) committed to invest an overall amount of about AFN 21.3 billion (EUR 240 million) for financial and technical cooperation. Further funding is provided by BMZ directly to non-governmental organisations, and in addition the German Federal Foreign Office is supporting Afghanistan with up to AFN 16 billion (EUR 180 million) for stabilisation projects as well as AFN 1.7 billion (EUR 19.4 million) for humanitarian assistance in 2020.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, peace and stability remain elusive in Afghanistan. A report by the German Foreign Office on military and civilian engagement in Afghanistan, published in February 2018<sup>4</sup>, provided a rather gloomy picture about the progress made thus far. According to the paper, the security situation in the country has deteriorated substantially since the withdrawal of NATO forces in December 2014. "Combat actions, (terror) attacks and the risk of kidnapping now allow for investments and consulting services only under strict security precautions and make long-term, sustainable-oriented engagement by international specialists difficult." The report establishes

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<sup>1</sup> *Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region*, Federal Government of Germany, September 2020, <https://rangun.diplo.de/blob/2380824/a27b62057f2d2675ce2bbfc5be01099a/policy-guidelines-summary-data.pdf>. Accessed on 20 November 2020.

<sup>2</sup> "Germany Pledges Over \$66M For Afghanistan", *Tolo News*, 17 April 2019, <https://tolonews.com/business/germany-pledges-over-66m-afghanistan>. Accessed on 20 November 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Press Release, 'German Government to Continue Development Cooperation with Afghanistan: German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to Provide AFN 21.3 Billion', *Deutsche Zusammenarbeit*, 5 October 2020, <https://www.ez-afghanistan.de/en/news/german-government-continue-development-cooperation-afghanistan-german-ministry-economic-0>. Accessed on 20 November 2020.

<sup>4</sup> *Federal Government Report on the Status of and Outlook for Germany's Afghanistan Engagement*, Report to the German Bundestag, February 2018, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/1789270/e84f878742c319e5d93337c0b8b13c37/180315-perspektivbericht-data.pdf>. Accessed on 20 November 2020.



a link between the worsening security situation and the constraints it puts on effective provision of civilian assistance. Germany is being able to providing civilian assistance in "safe and accessible regions", according to the report. The developments on the ground demonstrate the limits of security dominated approach and the need to move to a more comprehensive approach of economic stabilization of Afghanistan.

More importantly, the report concludes that "Afghanistan is one of the world's main exporters of refugees." The reasons for this are "above all, unsatisfactory economic development and corruption, the security situation and population growth." It's conspicuous that economic development appears first in that list, with the lack of security coming second. In face of the rapidly deteriorating situation and rising number of refugees, there is an immediate need for German policy makers to reformulate and re-orient the present policy towards economic stabilization of the war-ravaged country.

### **India's role in Afghanistan's reconstruction**

India has contributed to the economic reconstruction of war-ravaged Afghanistan since 2001. Avoiding a security-centred role, India adopted a 'soft power approach'<sup>5</sup>, re-establishing cultural and historical links between the two countries; providing development aid; and assistance for economic, social, civilian, political, and administrative capacity building. Stability in Afghanistan would help India address its energy needs from and build trade routes with Central Asia in the long-term. Afghanistan's role as a 'land bridge' is crucial for fulfilling these objectives. The other primary interests include security and having a stable democratic regime in Kabul. India has emerged as the largest regional donor country, having pledged more than US\$3 billion and invested in diverse areas including healthcare, education, infrastructure, social welfare, and in the training of politicians, diplomats, and police.

The withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan since 2014 has continued to be a source of anxiety and uncertainty in Afghanistan, as well as in the region. In New Delhi too, there are concerns about an unstable Afghanistan yet again turning into a springboard for destabilisation and terrorism, with a direct impact on India's security. There are worries that a steady deterioration of conditions on the ground may limit India's long-term economic engagement with Afghanistan. The popular goodwill that has been generated for India by its development and economic assistance may not be sufficient enough to sustain India's economic engagement, reconstruction, and development activities. As New Delhi grapples with the rapidly changing dynamics inside Afghanistan and in the region, whether India can continue its present role in Afghanistan is a subject of growing concern in the strategic and policymaking circles in New Delhi.<sup>6</sup> The need for developing partnerships of collaboration seems to be taking place at a time when the type and period of US presence and commitment remains unknown in Afghanistan.

### **Convergence of interests**

The present state of affairs in Afghanistan is, therefore, is a testament to the fragile achievements of the international community. Enormous resources have been spent and yet, the achievement remains far too dispro-

<sup>5</sup> Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, "The Limits of India's Soft Power in Afghanistan", *Fair Observer*, 18 March 2019, [https://www.fairobserver.com/region/central\\_south\\_asia/afghanistan-taliban-peace-talks-india-south-asia-security-news-00081/](https://www.fairobserver.com/region/central_south_asia/afghanistan-taliban-peace-talks-india-south-asia-security-news-00081/). Accessed on 20 November 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, "In post-US Afghanistan, what are India's options?", *Deccan Chronicle*, 18 March 2020, <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/opinion/op-ed/180320/in-post-us-afghanistan-what-are-indias-options.html>. Accessed on 20 November 2020.



portionate to the efforts on the ground. Clearly, there is a need for an alternate approach to stabilizing Afghanistan. It needs to be beyond piecemeal approaches, transactional relationships and has to be based on convergence of interests. The deteriorating security situation and political uncertainties in Afghanistan impinge on Germany's and India's concerns and interests.

India and Germany signed a strategic partnership in May 2000.<sup>7</sup> The bilateral relations were augmented to a 'new level'<sup>8</sup> in 2017. Centred so far mostly on trade and development, the bilateral relations need to look for new and innovative areas for meaningful cooperation. Afghanistan where both India and Germany have a lot of stake can be an apt theatre for taking the lead in developing and strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Such cooperation, however, needs to emerge from the trap of the usual methods adopted in that country so far and need to evolve an alternate strategy for stabilization.

### Need for alternate approaches

There is to need to use alternate approaches to stabilize Afghanistan based on the strategic partnership between India and Germany. Both countries need to convert their convergence of interests in Afghanistan by building clusters of collaboration in three sectors- security, political and socio-economic. This would further strengthen India-Germany relationship and help carve out their role as major powers in conflict resolution and global governance at a time when both seek an expansion and reform of UN Security Council. In times of shifting global power dynamics, an alliance of democracies and multilateralists could play an important role in the global world order. Such cooperation would be within the broad ambit of the 2017 upgradation of the bilateral relations to a new strategic level.

Moreover, the new "Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region" that signals a significant change in Germany's approach towards the Indo-Pacific and has been welcomed by India<sup>9</sup>. These guidelines, in which India is assigned key role<sup>10</sup>, also provide a unique opportunity for India and Germany to increase their levels of cooperation and engagement in Afghanistan. Joint projects, investments and trilateral mechanisms (Afghanistan-Germany-India) in the economic and political sector would help in the long-term stabilization of Afghanistan. As Afghanistan traverses a difficult transition period and peace process, India and Germany can work together in preserving and building on the gains of the last decade and half and at the same time demonstrate their commitment and leadership on issues of global governance and conflict resolution.

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<sup>7</sup> Agenda for Indo-German Partnership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, 18 May 2020, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/218868/af3e4dead295ab34d23e25ac7b205f45/00-05-18-indo-german-agenda-data.pdf>. Accessed on 20 November 2020.

<sup>8</sup> "We have taken our strategic partnership to a new level", 30 May 2017, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/-we-have-taken-our-strategic-partnership-to-a-new-level--436212>. Accessed on 20 November 2020.

<sup>9</sup> "In a jolt to China, Germany shifts focus on Indo-Pacific strategy", *Jagran English*, 14 September 2020, <https://english.jagran.com/world/in-a-jolt-to-china-germany-shifts-focus-on-indopacific-startegy-10016701>. Accessed on 20 November 2020.

<sup>10</sup> "Germany launches Indo-Pacific strategy with 'key role' for India", *Economic Times*, 4 September 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/germany-launches-indo-pacific-strategy-with-key-role-for-india/articleshow/77922462.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on 20 November 2020.



**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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### About the Author of this Issue

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