



Issue Brief

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India-Afghanistan Air Corridor: Another Attempt to Isolate Pakistan?

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In a recent development and apparent attempt to further marginalize Pakistan, the first air cargo corridor was established between Afghanistan and India in June 2017.¹ An aircraft packed with 60 tons of Afghan plants with medicinal uses marked the opening of the first air cargo corridor between Afghanistan and India on June 19, 2017.²



Although the air corridor will help Afghanistan's economy since Afghan businesses have long wanted to exploit the potential of India's huge market, this trade route would, in the long run, prove to be more costly and hence, uneconomical. In New Delhi, officials hope the new corridor will increase annual trade between the two countries from \$700 million to \$1 billion in three years and give a lift to exports of Afghanistan's agricultural and carpet industries.³ Currently, the air cargo flights are once in two weeks, but plans are afoot to increase flights to several in a week. Current flights are from Kabul-Delhi and Kandahar-Amritsar, and the next step would be to other centers in Afghanistan like Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif and Jalalabad.⁴ Afghanistan is also looking for a special Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with India which will include 'capacity building, creation of special zones at airports for offloading and on loading all the items that are being imported or exported;' the MoU is under process and has been given to the Indian government.⁵

¹ "India and Afghanistan establish Direct Air Freight Corridor," Ministry of External Affairs Government of India, June 19, 2017, <http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28546/India+and+Afghanistan+establish+Direct+Air+Freight+Corridor>.

² Anjana Pasricha, "India and Afghanistan Open Air Freight Corridor to Bypass Pakistan," *VOA News*, June 21, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/india-afghanistan-air-freight-corridor-opens/3909537.html>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Tripti Nath, "Air Corridor Important but We Will Not Give up Efforts for Rail-Road Connectivity: Afghan Ambassador," *The Wire*, June 26, 2017, <https://thewire.in/151426/india-afghanistan-ambassador-on-air-corridor/>.

⁵ Ibid.

While Pakistan has not commented about the new India-Afghanistan air corridor, China has openly criticized it, referring to it as Delhi's 'stubborn geopolitical thinking.'⁶ China believes that regardless of its thinking and motives, India should not bypass Pakistan if it really wants to participate more in regional economic development as Pakistan offers the most efficient and cost-effective land route from Afghanistan to India.⁷ Moreover, China also claims that India's aim has always been to push back against China's Belt and Road Initiative and this air corridor appears to be a strategy to counterbalance the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), especially to bypass Pakistan.⁸ With India opposing CPEC, Afghanistan should favour strengthening regional connectivity with Pakistan and China, being one of the countries benefitting from this project.

Considering Pakistan's legitimate concerns over India's increasing role in Afghanistan, it was hoped that President Ghani would maintain his commitment of finding and providing a common ground in Afghanistan for both India and Pakistan to establish workable relations. However, instead of maintaining neutrality, it appears that Afghanistan has also joined India's efforts to not only accuse Pakistan of supporting terrorism, but also isolate Pakistan, as was witnessed in the 19th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit in 2016 which both India and Afghanistan boycotted, with Bhutan and Bangladesh following suit. India and Afghanistan also accused Pakistan of being the "greatest threat" to regional peace and stability during the Heart of Asia conference, making a clear attempt to marginalize Pakistan politically, diplomatically and economically.⁹ The recent Iran-India-Afghanistan trilateral meeting on operation of Chabahar Port and the expected Delhi-Kabul-Tehran trilateral consultations on the future of Afghanistan are seen as yet another attempt to isolate Pakistan.

While Afghanistan has continuously accused Pakistan of supporting terrorism and funding the Taliban, Pakistan has taken numerous steps to curb the terrorist threats and restrain the infiltration of terrorists along the porous Pak-Afghan border through fencing, stricter border management and surveillance. As a result, Pakistan witnessed an overall reduction in terrorism compared to previous years; in 2016 alone,

⁶ "India-Afghanistan air corridor reflects New Delhi's stubborn thinking: Chinese daily," *The Economic Times*, June 26, 2017, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-afghanistan-air-corridor-reflects-new-delhis-stubborn-thinking-chinese-daily/articleshow/59319640.cms>.

⁷ "China uses its Media to attack India's new air corridor with Afghanistan," *NDTV*, June 26, 2017, <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/afghan-air-corridor-shows-indias-stubborn-thinking-chinese-media-1717076>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Kanishka Singh, "After India's SAARC pullout, Pakistan now finds itself out of favour with Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh," *The Indian Express*, September 28, 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/web-edits/after-indias-saarc-pullout-pakistan-now-finds-itself-out-of-favour-with-afghanistan-bhutan-bangladesh-3054156/>.

the number of deaths (due to terrorist related violence) reduced to 2,033 - a drop of 66 per cent compared to 5,980 in 2015.¹⁰ On the other hand, Afghanistan has been reluctant in undertaking serious security measures on its side of the border. Growing Pak-Afghan border clashes and sudden upward surge in terrorist activities in Pakistan by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) based in Afghanistan were the grounds for the closure of trade route between the two countries. Hence, closure of the border proves that for Pakistan, security supersedes any other consideration.

Strategic rivalries over and in Afghanistan are one of the main obstacles to peace in Afghanistan and the region. India's looming presence in Afghanistan has been an issue of concern for Pakistan for many years. While India's relations with Afghanistan were limited during the Taliban rule, over the years, India has drastically enhanced its consular and intelligence presence and has increased its political and economic clout in Afghanistan. India has already established the future parameters of its relationship with Afghanistan through the signing of a Strategic Partnership in October 2011 which includes the extension of military and intelligence initiatives that do not include Pakistan. Since 2001, India has poured more than \$2 billion into Afghanistan, and has invested heavily in various development projects making it the largest regional donor and the fifth largest bilateral donor in the country.¹¹

Pakistan welcomes India's positive role in Afghanistan, so long as it is not detrimental for Pakistan or for peace and stability in the region.¹² However, Indian support and abetment to nationalist and secessionist elements particularly in Baluchistan and penetration of terrorist networks such as the TTP in FATA and other parts of the country in Pakistan, has only added to Pakistan's apprehensions. Although Afghan leaders, both previous and present, have made several public declarations and given private assurances that Afghan soil would not be allowed to be used against Pakistan, there is no evidence of this happening on the ground. In the recent past, the brutality and frequency of terrorist attacks against Pakistan have increased as was witnessed in February 2017, in which more than 100 people were killed due to terrorist attacks by TTP and its splinter faction Jamaat ul Ahrar (JuA) based in Afghanistan.

Apart from supporting terrorist groups inside Pakistan, India has been using the territory of regional countries, chiefly Afghanistan and Iran, to fuel terrorist activities and violence in Pakistan. One case is that of Kulbhushan Jadhav, an Indian spy who was arrested in a raid near the Pak-Afghan border town of

¹⁰ Tahir Khan, "Pakistan sees 66% drop in violence," *Express Tribune*, March 21, 2017

¹¹ "India offers \$1bn in fresh aid to Afghanistan," *DAWN*, September 14, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1283902>.

¹² "Pakistan welcomes India's positive role in Afghanistan: Aizaz," *The Nation*, January 27, 2015.

Chaman in Baluchistan who confessed that he had been posted by India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) at Chabahar, Iran, to conduct espionage and sabotage activities against Pakistan.¹³ He had been in contact with Baluch separatists and terrorists fuelling sectarian violence and subversion and also used Afghan territory against Pakistan. Similarly, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has openly supported the Baluchistan Liberation Organization (BLO) and Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA) and their 'struggle for freedom;' the BLO representative Balaach Pardili based in Delhi has publically stated that the BLA has the support of a section of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by R.S.N. Singh and Tejender Singh of Bhagat Singh Kranti Sena.¹⁴ Similarly, Ajit Doval, former Indian National Security Adviser, in 2014, stated that India "should immediately move to help the secessionists in Baluchistan."¹⁵

On a number of occasions, Indian officials have explicitly expressed their objectives vis-à-vis Pakistan. Indian Defense Minister, Manohar Parrikar threatened to 'neutralise terrorists through terrorists only'¹⁶ and it may be noted that Modi openly stated on June 7, 2015 that 'Indian forces helped East Pakistan turn into Bangladesh'¹⁷ and confessed to India's role in conducting unconventional guerrilla acts against the Pakistan.¹⁸ Hence, there is ample evidence to support the notion that India's presence in Afghanistan is less directed towards 'radical Islamists' or attaining peace and stability and more focused on undermining Pakistan.¹⁹

In the current scenario, Kabul should avoid indulging in the Indo-Pak rivalry and taking sides. President Ghani should avoid playing this dangerous game of pitting India against Pakistan or vice versa. Ghani must balance his ties with the two states instead of viewing Pakistan through India's lens or vice versa. The Afghan leadership should encourage India and Pakistan to have strong relations with Afghanistan,

¹³ Qadeer Tanoli, "Pakistan asks Iran to nail Indian spy's accomplice," *Express Tribune*, April 1, 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1076867/formal-request-pakistan-asks-iran-to-nail-indian-spys-accomplice/>.

¹⁴ Kallol Bhattacharjee and Suhasini Haidar, "After PoK, India turns focus on Balochistan," *The Hindu*, October 8, 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/after-pok-india-turns-focus-on-balochistan/article7735545.ece>.

¹⁵ Michael Kugelman, "Why does Pakistan accuse Indian Spies of Terrorism?," *War on the Rocks*, June 9, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/06/why-does-pakistan-accuse-indian-spies-of-terrorism/>.

¹⁶ "Have to Neutralise Terrorists Through Terrorists': Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar," *NDTV*, May 22, 2015, <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/have-to-neutralise-terrorists-through-terrorists-defence-minister-manoharparrikar-765218>.

¹⁷ "Modi admits to Indian role in Fall of Dhaka," *Dunya News*, December 17, 2016, <http://dunyanews.tv/en/World/365719-Modi-admits-to-Indian-role-in-Fall-of-Dhaka>.

¹⁸ 'Modi's remarks in Bangladesh aimed at fanning hatred against Pakistan,' *Times of India*, June 10, 2015, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Modis-remarks-in-Bangladesh-aimed-at-fanning-hatred-against-Pakistan/articleshow/47614611.cms>

¹⁹ Stephen P. Cohen, "Rising India has a Pakistan Problem," *Brookings*, April 9, 2009, <https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/rising-india-has-a-pakistan-problem/>.

so long as they are not detrimental to each other's interests. Afghanistan can, in fact, prove to be a common ground for both states to establish workable relations not just with each other, but also in Afghanistan.