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India, Afghanistan Ink Deal To Reopen Air Corridor: Reports

<https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/india-afghanistan-ink-deal-to-reopen-air-corridor-reports-530816>

The air corridor between India and Afghanistan has been reopened and the trade between the countries would resume, officials in the Ministry of Industry and Commerce in Kabul said. The trade between Kabul and New Delhi was halted after the Taliban took over Afghanistan last year. Afghanistan's commerce ministry spokesperson Abdul Salam Jaweed said India and Afghanistan signed a trade agreement on Monday. India has been a major importer of Afghani saffron, dry fruits, and asafoetida plant. The Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) hoped that trade of these goods would be conducted through the air corridor.

Comments

What started as a comradery between Prime Minister Modi & the erstwhile President Ghani at the sixth Heart of Asia Conference, the same warmth for the local Afghans has resulted in New Delhi to open new trade routes with Kabul, this time through air. First proposed during the visit of the then President Ghani in 2016, the idea was focussed on expanding Afghanistan's bilateral trade and investment with India over a period of five years. Re-opening the New Delhi-Herat & Kabul-New Delhi air routes not only signals New Delhi's commitment to stabilise Afghanistan's economy, but also revive the purpose of Heart of Asia initiative, to strengthen India's commitment towards the people of Afghanistan and opening new initiatives to promote their voice while providing alternate initiatives to promote bilateral trade. Reviving the air corridor will provide local Afghan traders greater access to markets in India, allowing it to leverage India's economic growth and trade networks for its benefit. For India, the corridor will mean an easy way to reach the markets of Afghanistan.

Cornering Pakistan

Reviving the air corridor between Afghanistan and India can also be interpreted as New Delhi's attempt to counter Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA), a bilateral agreement (currently on halt) and providing an alternative to the Taliban leaders, still pondering over APTTA's fate. Undermining APTTA, New Delhi will be providing a shorter, cheaper and more direct route to Afghanistan, questioning Islamabad's reliability as a partner.

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A stable New Delhi-Kabul relationship is not only a threat for Islamabad, but India's strategic victory by bringing Kabul closer than it ever did, both in policy and in practice. It will not be incorrect to state that these air corridors will make Islamabad feel insecure. It opens the possibility of reviving India-Iran-Afghanistan transit route linking Chabahar Port in Iran with India through Kabul, and extending transit through the air corridor. A revived India-Iran-Afghanistan route will also provide New Delhi access to Central Asian markets. The air corridor will further assist New Delhi in strengthening regional economic cooperation and emerging lucrative markets in East/South Asia.

Next Step: Revive the Air Freight corridor

It is without a doubt that the air corridor programme will expand Afghanistan's market reach in India but also in South & East Asia as a whole. India must not limit this air corridors to New Delhi, and must propose a dedicated freight corridor between Kabul-Mumbai & Kabul-Amritsar. The revival of these air & freight corridors will provide New Delhi to engage with the Ministry of Industry and Commerce on the lines of conducting joint exhibitions of Afghan made products through the aegis of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce in association with Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), and supported by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) & the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Such exhibition will enable a certain number of registered Afghan export firms to interact with the Indian traders and explore India's market, in particular, the agriculture sector. Such exhibitions will also provide financial maturity and confidence in Indian and Kabul based stakeholders and a paved road for New Delhi to identify lucrative initiatives for trade and partnership with Kabul.

Outcome: Strengthening Afghanistan's Connectivity in the Region

To improve Afghanistan's economic prosperity air corridors such as these will play a critical role. Afghanistan's landlocked geography has crippled its economic independence forcing it to rely majorly on Pakistan but the air corridors will accelerate India's economic partnership resulting in an increase in exports of fresh and dried fruits, Pharmaceutical medical equipment, spices. At a later stage, New Delhi may also provide training & research assistance to expand the functions of ACCI and push to operationalise the Kabul-New Delhi led Joint Chamber of Commerce.

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Iran, India, Russia To Hold Meeting On Afghanistan

<https://en.mehrnews.com/news/193746/Iran-India-Russia-to-hold-meeting-on-Afghanistan>

The fourth meeting of the Moscow format of consultations on Afghanistan will take place on November 16 in Moscow with India expected to play a major role in negotiations to establish stability in Afghanistan, The Economic Times reported. Interestingly, India-Russia-Iran will hold a trilateral meeting focusing on Afghanistan on the side-lines of the Moscow format meet. The source also claimed that Russia has concerns over Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

The Moscow format consultative meeting on Afghanistan is being held in Russia on Wednesday. Representatives of Russia, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan participated in the Moscow meeting. Zamir Kabulov, the Russian Special Representative for Afghanistan had earlier told TASS news agency, that the Taliban will not attend the Moscow format meeting.



Source: IRNA English

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Comments

Decoding Tehran-Moscow view on Taliban

With the emergence of Daesh or the Islamic State in Khorasan Province a.k.a the ISKP in early 2015, Tehran & Moscow are in agreement to the idea that Daesh is an immediate threat to their national security than Taliban. Both interpret Taliban as a radical islamists movement, Daesh on the contrary is a trans-national jihadist group. While occupied in Ukraine, Moscow does not presently see itself as a major actor in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, it is invested enough to ensure that the regional stability remains intact. Its primary concern is to secure the border between the Central Asian states and Afghanistan in an effort to prevent radical islamists factions seeping into Central Asian republics.

To ensure the aforementioned fact doesn't become a reality, Russia has undertaken three major steps since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul: It aims:

- 1) to put in a diplomatic engagement with Taliban without formally ratifying them;
- 2) keep the channel of communication open with the leadership directly in Kandahar;
- 3) influence Pakistan.

Without a doubt Moscow was supporting Taliban since the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom & Operation Resolute Missions, primarily as a local theatre to retain Washington in the graveyard of empire forever. To this end, it did not shy away from providing covert support to Taliban. Ultimately, a failed Afghanistan was in the interest of Moscow, as it was perceived as a Western puppet. It is of mutual interest to Tehran, Moscow and Kabul to eliminate Daesh in Afghanistan and prevent regional instability.

The author forecasts a probable Moscow & Tehran's shift towards Islamabad, which both the nations see as a natural ally to Taliban. This will be a tectonic shift in their foreign policy as India, Iran & Russia openly supported Taliban's arch-enemy, Northern Alliance. Taking a step beyond traditional Russian & Iranian interests in Afghanistan, the author sees emergence of a new partnership between Russia & Pakistan, as the latter is currently experiencing a dip in its relationship with Washington.

Hence, it will not be incorrect to say that this shift in Russia's policy is primarily due to Islamabad's reputation in Washington. Moreover, Russia's shift in policy towards Pakistan could also be seen from the latter's importance in Chinese sphere of influence which aims to eliminate Washington's presence in South Asia & interference in Afghan conflict. Tehran too, has found its place in this geo-political sphere of influence, even at the cost of a never ending ideological conflict between Khomeini's Islamism and that of Taliban, forcing Tehran to bet even against the odds on Afghanistan. That said, the continuous persecution of minorities in minority dominated regions of Afghanistan and Iran's economic interest in the region will play a decisive role in chartering a course of Iran-Afghanistan relations. Lastly, Russia like Iran will aim to prevent the flow of refugees entering in their regions while prohibiting the flow of opium and drug trade crossing through their borders.

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Indo-Russian engagement on Afghanistan will depend on Russia's play in Pakistan

The shift in the regional sphere marks a new entry with Russia developing ties with India's adversaries, impacting India-Russia relations. New Delhi is yet to decide its course of action in Afghanistan, keeping Pakistan in the policy focal point. Traditional friends and strategic partners, India & Russia have always supported each other in the context of Afghanistan and Pakistan. But recent developments have forced Moscow to partially deviate from its Afghanistan policy, especially after the US withdrawal. New Delhi will not formally acknowledge Taliban as a legitimate power even though Taliban & Pakistan do not share the same warmth in their relationship anymore. Moscow, continues to enjoy its partnership with Taliban, whereas India wants to ensure that Pakistan does not enhance its interference in Afghanistan. Islamabad has been actively cooperating with Washington to retain/exercise control. That said, the US withdrawal saw an unprecedented rise in terrorism, which brought Moscow & New Delhi close. Both agreed on the need to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorism. And like Moscow, New Delhi seeks stability in the region. But it remains apprehensive of Taliban's ability to exercise control over terror factions operating in the region. On the contrary, Taliban does not pose a direct threat to Moscow's national security. This is reflected in the comments of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who declared Taliban's commitment to curb the flow of radical militants in the central Asian republics. This differs from New Delhi's policy and brings Moscow close to Beijing, which has also been offered similar promises from the Taliban in the context of non-interference in the neighbouring province of Xinjiang. That said, Beijing will be ready to engage in dialogues or even ratify Taliban as legitimate, if the latter retains its promises made to the former. In this scenario, Moscow too can engage in bilateral relations with Taliban elevating it to the level of government-to-government interactions, if the latter is able to fulfil their promises.

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