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India May Restart 20 Stalled Projects In Afghanistan, Says Taliban: Report

<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-may-restart-20-projects-in-afghanistan-taliban-3567520>

The Ministry of Urban Development and Housing (MUDH) of Afghanistan said that the Indian charges d'affaires, Bharat Kumar, expressed India's interest in improving relations and the resumption of Delhi's projects in Afghanistan, reported Tolo News. Mr Kumar made the remarks in a meeting with the Minister of Urban Development and Housing, Hamdullah Nomani. The agency quoting the MUDH Ministry said, "It is expected that India will resume work on at least 20 projects in several provinces of the country. Mr Kumar made the remarks in a meeting with the Minister of Urban Development and Housing, Hamdullah Nomani, in Kabul.

"Projects that were implemented during the former government but were delayed due to political changes or other issues--they are now interested in resuming these projects, said Mohammad Kamal Afghan, a spokesman for the MUDH.

Comments

India has been providing economic reconstruction initiatives to Afghanistan since the US led invasion in 2001. New Delhi avoided a security perspectives as a policy, and adopted pillars to soft power whose foundations were laid on cultural and historical links between the two nations; aid and humanitarian/economic assistance to all Afghans while providing varied administrative support to civil, political & military leaders and social support to all walks to life. This enabled new Delhi to not only replenish domestic energy needs but also expand trade to neighbouring economies in Central Asia.

Strategically, Afghanistan is no longer a meagre 'bridging distant lands' and holds great vitality beyond topography. India was once the fifth largest donor in the region, pledging more than US\$3 billion and investing in critical infrastructure development initiatives not limited to healthcare, education, power & energy, social welfare, while providing career training programmes to political leadership, diplomats, and members of the military. The subsequent rise of Taliban's commitment to train members of the military in India has opened yet another opportunity for New Delhi to implement stalled initiatives and restart people centric development programs in accordance to its commitment to the local masses.

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With a technical team deployed in Kabul and an increased momentum in aggression from Daesh (IS-K), it is safe to say that New Delhi is weighing all options. But this ambiguity also provides an opportunity to relay an equal enthusiasm through long-term economic partnership with Kabul. This will enable New Delhi to retain confidence within local Afghans by providing vivid development and economic assistance initiatives with the intent to make their lives better. That said, as policy makers and members of the diplomatic corps argue on the frequently changing political dynamics in Afghanistan and in the region, and whether New Delhi has the means to sustain these initiatives in the region, it is highly unlikely that this ambiguous situation will change any time soon. While accepting the request to continue training of Afghan troops at the Indian Military Academy, New Delhi must not limit to engage in the context of strategic initiatives only. Economic assistance is a critical tool for securing New Delhi's interest in the region which it must incorporate in terms of assistance program initiatives.

As stated above, fall of Kabul has provided a unique opportunity to New Delhi in the context of expanding partnership with the political leaders in Kabul with an intent to pursue long-term economic stability. To this end, it must alter its traditional pattern of providing economic assistance and expand its development initiatives in the following **five sectors**:

Agriculture

The fall of Kabul has greatly impacted the agriculture sector in Afghanistan, which used to account nearly half of its GDP. With agriculture as primary source of income as much **as 85 percent of the population drew its livelihood from a rural economy**. However, poor governance has resulted in a sharp decline of cereals, cotton, fruits and nuts, livestock, milk, and karakul wool.

Hence, New Delhi must focus its attention on strengthening agriculture sector with direct impact on livelihood in the context of poverty and poppy production, providing them alternate source of income. Afghans are forced to grow poppy because of inadequate opportunities in agriculture. With Taliban's recent farman on poppy production, New Delhi has a limited window of opportunity.

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Irrigation

Today, the irrigation system in Afghanistan relies through informal systems in place. Transportation of water-to-water scarce areas is a greatest challenge with no institutions or government architectures present to support it. With frequent draught, prolong conflict and inefficient rainfall, only those with political connections or family members of the Taliban are able to afford farming. This has resulted in acute shortages of arable land, affecting crop yield and prohibiting any growth in the agriculture sector.

Minerals and natural gas

Afghanistan is resource-rich in unexplored minerals including iron, copper, silver, gold, sulphur, talc, magnesium, marble, lapis lazuli, asbestos, nickel, mercury, lead, zinc, lithium, and rubies, with huge potential for exploration of oil and natural gas reserves in unexplored parts of the region. However, prolonged conflict has directly impacted this sector, and according to one geologist of the erstwhile Afghan Ministry of Mines, the nation has an estimate of half a trillion cubic metres of liquid gas reserves. Through ONGC Videsh and other public/private entities, New Delhi must harness the Yatem Taq and Khuwaja Gogerdak gas fields of the Jowezjan province, among other unexplored gas reserves in Helmand, Kunduz, and Herat provinces, assisting Kabul to meet its long-term natural gas requirements.

Manufacturing and industrial parks

New Delhi is in a unique position to assist Afghanistan's manufacturing sector by initially strengthening state's capability to process primary goods such as cotton textiles, fertiliser, construction materials, agriculture-produced processing's, and promoting local handicrafts and then promoting private entities to partner with local stakeholders. However, decades of conflict and absence of government infrastructure under the Taliban regime, the manufacturing sector needs to be revived. Today, construction tools, power cables, oil, machineries, and mining equipment are largely leftovers from the hurried US led NATO allies' withdrawal. With no shortage in expertise, New Delhi can commence construction of industrial parks in provinces like Badakhshan, Baghlan, Takhar & Kunduz, will enable Afghan owned state enterprises to harness natural and mineral resources and develop a stable source of revenue.

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Roads and infrastructure development

For maximising benefits from natural resources and minerals, without road connectivity, there is no access to market. For a country landlocked, Afghanistan must expand its reach to markets beyond the seas. But without a stable road/transport infrastructure, connectivity is a major issue. With four provincial capitals completely disconnected to major roadway/highway or even un-paved regional network, according to a former ADB official, almost 80 percent of the inter/intra provincial and regional rural roadways are in a delapidated state. Motor Vehicles are inaccessible in many routes, and local Afghans willing to sell products in markets of hilly/mountainous regions face great difficulty due to absence of all-weather roads linking to the main network. Under the Taliban rule, there are no directives on travelling through public transport as it is scarcely available, overcrowded and highly expensive.

India's commitment: Large Scale Visibility to Small Scale Development Projects

As the author analysed India's investment graph during the erstwhile regime in Kabul, there emerged another pattern that indicated New Delhi's commitment which the author has classified as Large Scale Visibility- projects in major provinces and Small Scale Development Projects in remote isolated areas with minimal connectivity or direct impact on provincial economy. During the study, the author found New Delhi's Large-Scale Visibility projects to be concentrated in the North and West of Afghanistan, whereas the Small-Scale Development Projects were focussed on border regions. Drawing lessons from New Delhi's investment graph and its renewed commitment to the local Afghans, it is imperative for New Delhi to give a forethought on revising the erstwhile Agreement on Strategic Partnership with the incumbent Taliban leadership. This agreement will not only signal New Delhi's renewed commitment to the people of Afghan but also foster confidence within international/global economies as a legitimate partner and instil India as a regional voice for the local Afghans even in the most adverse and difficult times. It must involve expanding cooperation initiatives in varied sectors not limited to agriculture, rural development initiatives or rare earth elements but diverse industries focussing on green energy, new age information technology, fibre optic communications, and civil aviation.

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