

FDI Feature Interview

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Trends in Afghan-Australia Relations

Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe

Research Manager

South and West Asia Programme

Key Points

- Afghanistan's importance to Australia's security is essentially the same as it is for all other western countries that are threatened by violent transnational extremism.
- Although major inroads have been made there are concerns that the reduced Australian military presence in Uruzgan Province could undermine the achievements that have been made over the past decade.
- Even after Australian forces withdraw, Australian assistance is particularly sought after in developing Afghanistan's nascent resources sector and in building educational institutions that can train large numbers of Afghan professionals.

Summary

As a major troop-contributing nation to the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan, Australia's relations with Afghanistan have rapidly taken on new dimensions since troops were first deployed in Uruzgan Province. As Afghanistan's current Ambassador to Australia, **Nasir Andisha**, spoke to **Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe** about the changing nature of bilateral ties, the importance of Afghanistan to regional and international security and what he hopes to achieve during his tenure as ambassador.

Commentary

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Q: How would you describe the evolution of Afghan-Australia relations?

Nasir Andisha: Afghan-Australian relations can be traced back to the 1860s, when Afghan cameleers arrived in Australia. They played an important role in the exploration and development of the Australian outback and in ferrying supplies across the continent. Named in honour of those early Afghans, the Adelaide to Darwin train, the Ghan, is a notable legacy of their involvement. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many Australian tourists took the 'Hippie Trail' from Europe on their way to India and back to Australia. They often passed through the Afghan cities of Herat, Bamiyan and Kabul. I have met a number of Australians who spoke passionately about their remarkable experiences when visiting Afghanistan in its 'good old days'.

The first major wave of Afghan migration to Australia followed the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979, when thousands of Afghans were forced to flee their homeland. In response to an increase in the number of Afghan immigrants arriving in Australia, Afghanistan established an honorary Consulate in Canberra in October 1994. After the collapse of the Taliban regime and the establishment of the Afghan Interim Administration, the Consulate was upgraded to an Embassy.

In June 2002, exactly a decade ago, Mahmoud Saikal, the first Afghan Ambassador to Australia, presented his credentials to the Australian Governor-General. From April 2002 to September 2006, Australia's High Commissioner to Pakistan was also accredited as non-resident Ambassador to Afghanistan. In August 2006, senior diplomat Brett Hackett was appointed as Australia's first resident Ambassador to Afghanistan. Today, besides an active diplomatic presence, both countries engage in strong bilateral political, military, intelligence and development cooperation.

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Q: Why is Afghanistan important to Australia's security?

Nasir Andisha: Afghanistan's importance to Australia's security is the same as its importance to the national security of many other western countries. After the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, the Al Qaeda network demonstrated its global reach by subsequent attacks: in Bali in 2002 (which killed 88 Australians), Madrid in 2004, London in 2005, Mumbai in 2008, and other smaller attacks by Al Qaeda itself or its affiliated groups. The safe havens and training facilities in Afghanistan, provided by the Taliban regime, enabled Al Qaeda to prepare, plan and execute those spectacular attacks in the West.

In the past 10 years, the Al Qaeda network has suffered a devastating defeat, losing its safe havens, major commanders and top leaders, including Osama Bin Laden himself. This has compromised its ability to conduct major attacks. It has not been completely dismantled, however, and the possibility of a future resurgence should not be discounted; if that occurred, Australia's national security would also be affected.

The presence of the International Security Assistance Force, which includes 1,550 Australian Defence Force personnel, is essential to ensure the stability and security that will prevent Afghanistan and the region from again becoming a safe haven and training ground for extremists. Failure of the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan and the resurrection of

emboldened and united Al Qaeda/Taliban force would have dire long-term consequences for Afghanistan and for Australian national security.

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Q: What more could Australia do to be of assistance to Afghanistan?

Nasir Andisha: Although its role and overall presence in the field of development remained insignificant until very recently, Australia has made a significant contribution to reconstruction and development efforts in Afghanistan since 2002. Only in the past two years, however, has Australia taken an active role in supporting major development projects, particularly in public health, rural development, agriculture and education. Consequently, by 2011, development assistance had increased to AUD109.2 million. An additional contribution comes from the commendable jobs being carried out by: the ADF in training the Afghan Army's 4th Brigade in Uruzgan Province and the Australian Federal Police in training and mentoring the Afghan National Police.

Against the backdrop of political transition and the eventual withdrawal of the Australian forces from Afghanistan, Australia should consider broadening its development assistance, not just in Uruzgan Province, but also in other Afghan provinces. Australia can build on its past experience in working on small public health, agriculture, rural development and education programs, to focus on medium- and long-term development initiatives, such as: training doctors and midwives; expanding tertiary education and teacher-training; and expanding university-level agricultural research, particularly in dry-land farming, water management and conservation, food production and animal husbandry.

Due to its vast mining and minerals industry, Australia can offer Afghanistan assistance in creating its own industry. Some preliminary steps have been taken in this direction, with a number of scholarships offered to increase the capacity of the Afghan Ministry of Mines, under the Australian Government's new initiative "Mining for Development".

It is important for Afghanistan to establish a socially, environmentally and financially responsible mining industry. To achieve this, it needs trained and qualified engineers, geologists, lawyers, accountants, managers and entrepreneurs. Although I greatly appreciate the current level of assistance, achieving this goal will not be possible with the relatively few scholarships we receive from universities in Western Australia and Queensland.

We would like Australia's assistance in establishing Afghanistan's first university dedicated to the resources sector; with the task of training the young professionals and business leaders who will steer the country out of poverty and aid dependency. To do this, Australia could tap into the abilities of the Australian-Afghan Community. This project would be a long-lasting legacy; the kind of project that many generations of Afghans will remember. I have no doubt about its feasibility.

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Q: What do you hope to achieve in your term as Afghan Ambassador to Australia?

Nasir Andisha: Since the establishment of the Embassy in Canberra ten years ago, my predecessors have worked to create a solid foundation for a strong and expanding bilateral relationship between Afghanistan and Australia. Australia's military engagement in Uruzgan province and issues related to Afghan asylum seekers in Australia, are continuing to dominate the relationship. Addressing these issues, which keep Afghanistan constantly in the headlines, has been a major preoccupation for the embassy. My term as Ambassador to

Australia began at a critical point last year, with Australia preparing to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan by 2014.

The reduced military presence will also mean a reduced civilian and developmental presence in Afghanistan. Unfortunately this is likely to undermine the achievements that have been made in the past decade. At the macro level, my objective is to work with DFAT and other agencies in Canberra, to ensure that a strong civilian-led mission remains as Australian military forces leave. The successful completion of this transition will require a carefully crafted, long-term, bilateral framework, to guide us through 2014 and into the next decade.

At the micro level, our Embassy is focusing on: promoting Afghan culture and arts; building cooperation with Australian universities and schools; paving the way for self-financed Afghan students to gain admission to Australian education institutions; attracting investment from mining and exploration companies for projects in Afghanistan; creating a data base of Afghan-Australian professionals who are interested in working in Afghanistan; increasing the interaction between parliamentarians and civil society groups in the two countries; and working closely with the Afghan community in Australia.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

Published by Future Directions International Pty Ltd.
Desborough House, Suite 2, 1161 Hay Street, West Perth WA 6005 Australia.
Tel: +61 8 9486 1046 Fax: +61 8 9486 4000
E-mail: sdesilva@futuresdirections.org.au Web: www.futuresdirections.org.au