



SPOTLIGHTS

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Afghanistan, the Gateway to Silk Roads with Ambassador M. Ashraf Haidari

Interviewed by Charitha Fernando*

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In September 2020, M. Ashraf Haidari, the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to Sri Lanka, was warmly received by the former Executive Director of the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies, Dr Ganeshan Wignaraja, and staff.

During his visit, Ambassador Haidari shared insights on the historic linkages between Sri Lanka and Afghanistan and the way forward for maintaining stronger bilateral relations between the two countries, while collaborating on issues of shared interest and concern in South Asia.

This interview with Ambassador Haidari was conducted by Ms. Charitha Fernando, the Communications Manager of LKI. This Q & A is part of the LKI Spotlight series, which feature interviews with thought leaders, academics, diplomats, and professionals from around the world on the current and emerging issues concerning international relations.

LKI: *Could you give us a brief overview of the historical links between Sri Lanka and Afghanistan?*

Ambassador Haidari: Since time immemorial, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka have shared intertwined civilizational ties influenced by such major belief systems as Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism, which dominated much of the Gandhara region—including modern Afghanistan—from where Buddhism spread to South Asia, Central Asia, and East Asia. And history tells us that some of the early settlers of this paradise-island hailed from the northwest of India and the Indus River region, which Afghans then and today inhabit.

Indeed, the majestic Buddhas of Bamiyan are a testament to our shared heritage and to Afghanistan's cultural pluralism and diversity, which underpin the very Afghan identity today. That is why Afghanistan's former imperial powers, who later embraced and championed Islam in our flourishing region, revered and protected the Buddhas of Bamiyan, as have the many modern governments of Afghanistan, with the exception of extremist Taliban, who on orders from their foreign patron, tragically dynamited the sixth-century statues of Buddha. As the world watched the destruction of the world's heritage site in Bamiyan, the Afghan people, including our diaspora communities around the world, mourned the tragic loss of our cultural treasure.

In the modern era, our two beautiful countries established non-resident diplomatic relations on November 1, 1958. Our missions in New Delhi mostly handled our bilateral affairs, which, except for some intervals during the war years, continued after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. We initiated to elevate our diplomatic ties with Sri Lanka, following high-level fruitful exchanges between former President Hamid Karzai and former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, currently the Honorable Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, in 2011 and 2012. In 2013, we opened our Embassy in Colombo, which Sri Lanka reciprocated, opening your Embassy in Kabul in 2014.

LKI: *How do you see bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Sri Lanka moving forward?*

Ambassador Haidari: As two democracies, our fast-growing bilateral relations enjoy the strong and unreserved support of our two Government's leadership. Shortly after his notable electoral victory last November, H.E. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and I had a very friendly and fruitful meeting, in which I conveyed to him the warm congratulations of H.E. President Ashraf Ghani and his firm commitment to further expanding our bilateral relationship, which H.E. President Rajapaksa welcomed. I had a similar exchange with the Honorable Prime Minister Rajapaksa, a good friend of Afghanistan, under whose former presidency both sides initiated to elevate our diplomatic relations in 2013. We met following his landslide victory in last August's general elections, on whose success H.E. President Ghani congratulated the people of Sri Lanka and welcomed the outcome as a major win for democracy in Sri Lanka and South Asia.

In both meetings, we reviewed the status of our existing ties at the time and agreed on the importance of implementing the seven bilateral MOUs and agreements, which we have signed so far. We also agreed to expedite the procedural work of the seven pending MOUs and agreements to be signed, which, together with the signed ones, encompass cooperation in the political, socio-economic, security and defense, as well as cultural areas. We particularly took note of the low volume of bilateral trade and investment and stressed the importance of establishing reliable air and sea connectivity, deepening people-to-people ties through commercial and cultural exchanges.

Following our meeting, I greatly appreciate the immediate action by H.E. President Rajapaksa, who tasked the Sri Lankan Airlines to study options for a direct Colombo-Kabul flight. I have no doubt that this could have materialized by now if it had not been for the restrictions and closures caused by the COVID-19 since last February. But this remains under both sides' consideration, as Afghanistan and Sri Lanka look forward to establishing full-spectrum connectivity between our two countries towards achievement of our shared interests—be them in the economic and cultural areas or in those of political and defense—as we both remain concerned about the growing threats of terrorism, extremism, and criminality with implications for maritime security in the greater Indo-Pacific region.

LKI: *Are there lessons, which Afghanistan can learn from Sri Lanka in terms of tackling terrorism, peace-building, and post-conflict development?*

Ambassador Haidari: Indeed, Sri Lanka's overall experience, including its mediated peace process during the war years, remains instructive. Unlike Sri Lanka, however, Afghanistan is fighting multiple regional and global terrorist and criminal groups, which operate under the umbrella of the Taliban with safe havens in our neighbourhood. Since the end of the transition process in 2014, when most of the NATO troops withdrew from Afghanistan, our brave forces have been conducting over 95% of all military operations against terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda and ISIS. Afghan soldiers have not only given their precious lives and limbs for defending our beautiful homeland but they have also helped ensure regional stability and international peace.

As we continue defending our country against external aggression, the Government of Afghanistan has pursued a path to peace through a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. As we speak, the negotiating team of the Islamic Republic remains in Doha, continuing to wait for the Taliban to deliver on their commitments that include a results-driven negotiating process and a notable reduction in violence across Afghanistan followed by a humanitarian and permanent ceasefire in the country. These are the key demands of the Afghan people, whose representatives met in a Consultative Peace Jirga last August and authorized our Government to release over 5,000 Taliban prisoners as a concession for achieving dignified and sustainable peace.

So far, the Taliban have faltered and failed to engage with our negotiating team constructively, while escalating violence in much of Afghanistan, daily killing and maiming innocent civilians. But if they choose the right path, shed foreign influence and control, and give peace talks a genuine chance, I am confident that we would achieve lasting peace in Afghanistan. And, indeed, to foster post-conflict peace and prosperity, we would certainly draw on international experience, including relevant lessons to be learned from Sri Lanka, to implement effective peace-building programs.

LKI: *What are the benefits of Sri Lanka having a greater diplomatic presence in Afghanistan?*

Ambassador Haidari: Afghanistan is the heart of Asia; the gateway to all Silk Roads in all directions: north and south; east and west. We sit right between South Asia and Central Asia, awaiting sustainable peace to be achieved with regional cooperation and support so that Afghanistan can play our natural role as a land-bridge between the subcontinent, South West Asia, and Central Asia.

Given our geographic centrality for transit trade, including energy, no major connectivity project can bypass us. That is why Sri Lanka would greatly benefit from a beefed-up presence in Afghanistan (with a population of over 30 million consumers) where your Embassy should work to help the Sri Lankan private sector take advantage of the numerous investment opportunities in our virgin markets while looking northwards to explore similar opportunities in Central Asia (with a population of over 70 million consumers).

LKI: *In your opinion, what Sri Lankan industries and export sectors have the most potential in accessing markets in Afghanistan and Central Asia?*

Ambassador Haidari: Despite the COVID-19 challenge, I worked hard over the past few months to facilitate the recent signing of a cooperation MOU between the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Investment and the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce. I did so, knowing the vast trade and investment potential on both sides that need to be realized. As I discussed with H.E. President Rajapaksa and the Honourable Prime Minister Rajapaksa, as soon as we have established direct air connectivity between our two countries, Sri Lanka's tourism industry, including medical tourism and higher education tourism, would immensely benefit from Afghanistan's demand in this mega sector.

I have no doubt that within a year of such connectivity, we could easily need to operate a daily flight between Kabul and Colombo—carrying tourists seeking rest and recuperation, patients seeking treatment, students seeking quality education, and the business community seeking investment opportunities.

Moreover, Sri Lanka's principal products such as Ceylon tea; apparel and textiles; spices; food, feed, and beverages; and coconut and coconut-based products could easily find profitable markets in Afghanistan. For example, we are a tea-drinking nation, and every adult Afghan could consume more than six cups of tea a day, while we produce no tea. That is why I've been encouraging the tea industry of Sri Lanka to make a move and begin exporting your tasteful tea varieties to Afghanistan with consistent demand for this signature Sri Lankan product.

In the same vein, I have encouraged the jewellery sector of Sri Lanka to visit Kabul and see for themselves the endless investment opportunities in this virgin market in Afghanistan as one of the minerally richest countries in the world with large reserves of precious and semi-precious stones. Here, we not only need your exploration and extraction technical know-how but also Sri Lanka's experience and expertise in processing, designing, and marketing our precious and semi-precious stones, including emerald, ruby, lapis lazuli, garnet, tourmaline, and others.

LKI: *Is Sri Lanka a source of skilled labour for Afghanistan?*

Ambassador Haidari: Although Afghanistan has come a long way since the fall of the Taliban, continuing to develop the necessary skills and capacities, we still use external skilled and technical labour. That is why early on we signed an MOU on the export of Sri Lankan skilled labour to Afghanistan, under which many Sri Lankan professionals have filled positions in the private sector, NGOs, and the UN agencies across the country. Here, our Governments should look into growing opportunities for exchanging skilled and unskilled labour, as Sri Lanka lacks unskilled labour, which can be imported from Afghanistan to meet the high demand in your construction sector, especially once your economy takes off again, following the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

LKI: *How does Afghanistan see SAARC as a way forward in regional cooperation and what role can Afghanistan play within SAARC?*

Ambassador Haidari: As we continue advocating for cooperation against confrontation among our neighbours, Afghanistan has consistently pursued a foreign policy that promotes regional economic cooperation against zero-sum hedging strategies. We strongly believe that the replacement of confrontational policies at the regional level with those of cooperative, win-win partnerships would gradually minimize the existing interstate tensions in South Asia.

And this would enable SAARC to realize its vision, knowing that South Asia is an extremely young and naturally endowed region where our youths demand jobs and a secure future in a

common, interdependent neighbourhood. Indeed, this won't come to pass unless South Asian governments learn relevant lessons from pre- and post-war Europe that would encourage them to make tough but necessary policy choices against the status quo for achieving shared peace and prosperity across the region through economic integration.

The Government of Afghanistan has done our part and continues to do so. Despite the imposed security challenges facing our nation, we have put forth a strategic solution for adoption and implementation by our near and far neighbors: The Heart of Asia–Istanbul Process (HOA-IP) on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan and the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA). These Afghanistan-led processes were established to help secure regional cooperation for Afghanistan's stabilization and sustainable development, thereby ensuring regionwide stability and prosperity, which SAARC strives to accomplish.

Even though HOA-IP and RECCA remain underutilized so far, it is in the best short- and long- term interests of the countries — including India and Pakistan — that participate in the two processes to achieve the shared goals of the two platforms. Of course, every tangible step they take to utilize these interconnected processes will help minimize their own and other nations' security and socio-economic vulnerabilities against the terrorist-extremist-criminal nexus that mostly victimizes Afghanistan.

LKI: *For most of these to happen, there must be peace and stability in Afghanistan. How would you see Afghanistan progressing in terms of political stability, peace and security?*

Ambassador Haidari: The past four decades of imposed conflicts in Afghanistan have proven the fact that external aggression through direct or indirect means such as deployment of proxy forces, including the Taliban, have hardly ensured regional stability, even though the stated policies of our neighbourhood commonly acknowledge that a stable and peaceful Afghanistan best serves their own short- and long-term economic and security interests.

H.E. President Ghani has repeatedly drawn the attention of our neighbours to the many ways, in which the whole region would benefit from an end to the imposed war with many spill-over effects and return of peace and normalcy to Afghanistan, which remains every Afghan's key demand and desire. Hence, we have striven to further strengthen regional consensus for achieving sustainable peace in Afghanistan through a negotiated political settlement. This must preserve the Islamic Republic, our hard-earned democratic gains, including women's and human rights, as well as our notable state-building achievements against state failure and collapse that prevailed under the misrule of the Taliban in the late 1990s.

Such a necessary outcome underpinned by the UN Charter as a guardian of the principles of state sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity would enable us to work with our neighborhood, wider region, and others in the international system to help ensure a rules-based world order, currently threatened by such regional and global challenges as poverty, climate change, pandemics, terrorism and extremism, and organized crime.

LKI: *Do you think Afghanistan and Sri Lanka can play a greater role in combating the narcotics trade?*

Ambassador Haidari: Yes, there is much that we can do together to fight narcotics, including its cultivation, production, and trafficking to Sri Lanka and the rest of South Asia. That is why we have welcomed the appointment of Ambassador-Designate Piyal De Silva, who, as a former Navy Commander, possesses relevant counter-narcotics experience, and we look forward to working with him to develop the necessary security and law enforcement institutional ties to stem the flow of Taliban-produced drugs to Sri Lanka through Pakistan.

That said, however, drug production in Afghanistan is driven by constant and even growing regional and global demand for narcotics, which transnational criminal networks, with ties to regional intelligence outfits and their terrorist mercenaries, supply. As I said earlier, this global security and public health challenge needs the totality of international cooperation to defeat and eliminate drugs altogether. Afghanistan has so far done our lion's share, daily losing our brave police and soldiers in the fight against drugs. Others must do their part, including supporting our Government's counter-narcotics lead.

LKI: *How do you propose to strengthen trade between Afghanistan and Sri Lanka?*

Ambassador Haidari: We have now signed the MOU between our principal Chambers of Commerce, which I encourage to begin holding webinars, B-to-B meetings, organize trade delegations, host a business matchmaking conference, as well as planning trade fairs to exhibit our two countries' key products for bilateral import and export. In the coming weeks and months, this is what I will be working on with my Sri Lankan counterpart in Kabul to achieve, connecting businesspeople on both sides. And I am confident that once they learn about the numerous trade and investment opportunities on both sides, which I discussed earlier, they will lose no time ceasing them. It takes that first move and once made, both sides could easily reap windfall profits from their investments in Afghanistan's virgin and Sri Lanka's diverse and attractive markets.

H.E. Ambassador M. Ashraf Haidari



Ambassador Haidari was the Director-General of Policy and Strategy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan from 2015-2018, during which he worked closely with the Ministry's policy and Administrative Directorates to execute Afghanistan's long-term foreign policy objectives set by the Government of Afghanistan. In this cross-cutting role, he directly reported to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, while frequently collaborating with the Offices of the President, the former Chief Executive, and the National Security Council of Afghanistan.

From 2012-2015, Ambassador Haidari served as the Deputy Chief of Mission (Minister Counsellor) of Afghanistan to India. His responsibilities also included non-resident representation of Afghanistan to Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, as well as Sri Lanka, before Afghanistan elevated its relations with the country and opened an Embassy in Colombo in late 2013. From June 2011 to July 2012, he served as the Deputy Assistant National Security Advisor of Afghanistan, providing the Office of the National Security Council with policy and oversight advice on a range of domestic and foreign policy issues relating to national security.

During 2004 to 2011, Ambassador Haidari served the Embassy of Afghanistan in the United States in various capacities including: Chargé d'Affaires A.I.; Deputy Chief of Mission and Political Counsellor; Acting Defense Attaché; First Secretary for Political, Security & Development Affairs; and Director of Government and Media Relations. Moreover, he has worked with the United Nations (UN) at home and abroad, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Program (WFP).

Ambassador Haidari has represented Afghanistan in numerous bilateral and multilateral meetings to discuss the country's stabilization, reconstruction, peace and development processes, in partnership with the international community. He has held non-resident fellowships at the New America in Washington-DC; the Institute of National Security Studies of Sri Lanka (INSSSL) in Colombo; the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS) in Kabul; and the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and the Delhi Policy Group (DPG) in New Delhi. He is also a member of the editorial board of the Diplomatist Magazine in New Delhi and a blog-contributor at the Centre for Public Diplomacy, University of Southern California.

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