

## U.S.-INDIA INSIGHT

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*“Unlocking the full potential  
of the U.S.-India relationship”*

## Cutting Afghanistan’s “Gordian Knot”

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*We are encouraged by news that India and Pakistan are re-launching a dialogue aimed at building trust, and encourage them to work in that same spirit to support a political process in Afghanistan. We look to them—and all of Afghanistan’s other neighbors—to respect Afghanistan’s sovereignty, which means agreeing not to play out rivalries within its borders....—Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, February 18, 2011*

In her February speech to the Asia Society, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton focused on the many factors necessary for a successful outcome of the war in Afghanistan, both internal and external. But none of these factors may be as close to qualifying as a “Gordian knot” as the one involving India and Pakistan’s suspicions and interests, which are colliding in Afghanistan. Unless that Gordian knot can be cut, the prospects for a secure, stable, and prosperous Afghanistan over the long term are dim.

On July 19, Secretary Clinton will have the opportunity to restate her encouragement and strong support for India and Pakistan to engage on Afghanistan when she meets External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna for the next round of the U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue.

Minister Krishna will also have the opportunity this month to speak directly to his Pakistani counterpart, Hina Rabbani Khar, about Afghanistan when they resume their ministerial dialogue, the first formal meeting of foreign ministers since the November 2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai. There has never been a comprehensive dialogue between the leaders of India and Pakistan to address Afghanistan.

These two opportunities should be seized. The region’s future depends on it.

*Divining Afghanistan’s Future*

President Barack Obama’s June announcement that the United States will pull 33,000 troops out of Afghanistan by the end of next summer provides a strong catalyst for Afghanistan to assume a central focus in both meetings. India and Pakistan are in the midst of assessing the implications for their respective nations as the United States begins its withdrawal.

Pakistan regards having a friendly government in Kabul as essential to its national security, especially if instability and chaos rise as Western forces depart. Its great fear is that India will be able to step into this vacuum, leaving it the most influential outside power in the country. India will have, in effect, “encircled” Pakistan.

For its part, India says it is in Afghanistan for the same reasons as the rest of the international community: to prevent it from again becoming a safe haven for terrorists. It also cites historically close relations with Afghanistan and the importance of access to Central Asia.

## Talking Over the Arab Spring

As Washington has struggled to deal with the Arab Spring over the past few months, New Delhi has also watched developments in the Arab world with similar concern.

For India, the Middle East represents 70 percent of its imported petroleum reserves according to analysis from the Energy Information Administration. India also has over five and a half million of its citizens working in the Middle East. Indian citizens working in the Gulf provide remittances totaling \$14.3 billion, according to a 2009 study by the Reserve Bank of India.

Clearly, India and the United States have converging interests in the Middle East, including the free flow of energy, the security of their citizens, and the development of democratic norms to foster stability. As the exhilaration of the Arab Spring moves into the uncertainties of the Arab Summer, the United States and India have an opportunity to work together with regional partners to shape a new political complexion for the Middle East. The first manifestation of that opportunity will come this week when the United States and India meet in Washington for bilateral consultations on the Middle East, an idea that was initially raised during President Obama’s trip to India last year. As both sides sit down this week, there are three areas that could be useful discussion topics.

First, the United States and India should consider how best to coordinate their efforts on democracy promotion.

India is currently assisting Egypt’s democratic transition with electronic

While many of their interests remain at odds, it is also clear that Pakistan and India have several common imperatives, including a stable Afghanistan, one not dominated by extremist elements that will pose greater security risks to their countries, and a desire to pursue the potential of Central Asian energy and trade routes.

### *Toward a “Code of Conduct” and a Regional Compact*

When India’s external affairs minister and Pakistan’s foreign minister meet in New Delhi at the end of this month, they should place Afghanistan high on their agenda and launch a process to remove Afghanistan as a bone of strategic contention.

As a first step, India and Pakistan should increase transparency between them to bridge the “trust deficit” in Afghanistan. While Pakistan should not be indulged with concerns that are inaccurate or overblown, increased Indian transparency could enhance confidence in Islamabad.

Next, the two governments should work toward an agreed “Code of Conduct” that would recognize and respect the other’s embassies, consulates, reconstruction activities, and commercial interests in Afghanistan. They should also explore the feasibility of joint Indo-Pakistani development projects in Afghanistan, as well as ways to enhance trade, transit, and energy linkages throughout the region. The December agreement on the TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India) pipeline is a hopeful start.

Finally, both countries should pledge not to seek a military presence in Afghanistan or to use Afghan soil to undermine the other. The best way to do this would be for India and Pakistan to work with other regional states to agree on a Compact on Nonintervention and Noninterference in Afghanistan’s internal affairs. Several initiatives are already underway in this regard, including one launched by Turkey last year at its “Heart of Asia” summit in Istanbul. Unfortunately, India was not invited to participate. An announcement that Pakistan would welcome India at the next Istanbul conference would send a strong signal that Pakistan is now prepared to engage India on Afghanistan’s future in a regional setting.

### *Cutting the Knot*

At a meeting hosted last year by the Delhi Policy Group, Indian foreign secretary (and soon-to-be ambassador to the United States) Nirupama Rao said: “I think it is a truth universally acknowledged that India, Pakistan and Afghanistan share bonds and linkages that transcend the immediacy of the present.” She also reiterated India’s position that it has no interest in perpetuating a strategic rivalry or “proxy war” with Pakistan in Afghanistan. Pakistani representatives, including former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, have made similar statements. He recently called for a reappraisal of ties with India, saying Islamabad must stop treating New Delhi as its “biggest enemy.”

Were statements such as these put into effect, Afghanistan’s Gordian knot could be cut, paving the way for a broader, durable peace in South and Central Asia.

voting machines and advice about electoral systems. While India will most likely seek to implement its efforts unilaterally, both sides should discuss their respective current and planned efforts to promote coordination and avoid duplication.

Second, the U.S. military has deep relationships with various militaries in the Middle East. Perhaps India’s top military leadership could also engage with various militaries to reinforce the norms and principles of civilian control over the military.

Finally, a discussion about the current situation in Libya should be on the agenda since India abstained on the UN Security Council vote to use force. Such an exchange could be useful in helping India better understand U.S. rationale and support for the continuing NATO-led military action. The UN response to Syria should also be put on the table for discussion.

The United States and India will not always agree on their approach to the Middle East, but a Middle East dialogue is a good starting point on the road to reaching strategic convergence in this critical region.—*S. Amer Latif*

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#### Links of Interest

On June 9, the Wadhvani Chair and the Senate India Caucus cohosted an event on [U.S.-India Relations: A View from the Hill](#).

On June 22, the Wadhvani Chair and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry cohosted an event on [U.S.-India Cooperation on High Technology and Innovation](#).

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