India Looks to Afghanistan’s “Year of Transition”

Amb. Karl F. Inderfurth

2014 will be a critical year for Afghanistan. As the Economist has observed: “Tectonic plates are shifting in Afghanistan as the country nervously prepares itself for three big transitions, all related.” Afghanistan is not the only nervous country. Others in the region are too, including India.

Afghanistan’s security transition is already underway. By the end of 2014 all U.S. and NATO combat forces will be gone. Afghan troops will have full responsibility for the safety of the country. The political transition is set to begin with presidential and provincial council elections in April. With President Hamid Karzai constitutionally barred from running for a third term, the country is poised to have the first peaceful transfer of political power in its history. And then there is the economic transition, as the country begins to wean itself off the massive infusion of foreign aid of the past dozen years to a more self-reliant economy.

With these 2014 transitions in mind, Karzai has embarked on a series of high-level meetings with his neighbors to best position his country for the expected—and unexpected—jolts that are likely to occur. He has received Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan in Kabul, traveled to Tehran to meet with President Hassan Rouhani of Iran, and this month embarked on a four-day visit to New Delhi. This was his fifth visit to India in three years; his thirteenth during his tenure as president. In no other country in the region has he spent more time. Karzai is banking on India to assist Afghanistan make its way through the 2014 “Year of Transition.”

Karzai’s Visit to New Delhi

According to Afghan officials, Karzai intended to discuss several important issues during his stay in India, including Afghanistan’s negotiation with the United States on the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) and the transition process that will be unfolding in 2014. Regarding the first, an Indian government spokesman confirmed that the BSA was on the agenda of Karzai and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Given India’s longstanding desire not to see the United States abandon the region as it did after the withdrawal of the Soviet military in 1989, it was not surprising that Washington hoped that India would help persuade Karzai to sign the agreement. While few details were provided, the Indian spokesman did state: “Both India and Afghanistan see the BSA as important for the stability and security of Afghanistan. We are confident that President Karzai will do what is best for the

Region to the Rescue?

The international community, United States in particular, has invested a huge amount of blood and treasure in Afghanistan over the past dozen years. A lot has been achieved, but a lot remains to be done.

As noted in the accompanying piece, Afghanistan faces three transitions—political, security, and economic. The three are interconnected, but at present the political transition is of the utmost importance and urgency. The elections scheduled for April/May 2014 will set the tone for years to come and will determine the country’s future, whether it will enjoy peace and stability. The world will be watching the conduct of the elections and decide the scope of its future engagement in light of those elections.

Even if the elections are accepted by the Afghan people as reasonably free and fair, they will not by themselves ensure lasting stability. The primary cause of Afghanistan’s woes lies in external interference in its affairs by neighbors, near and distant. So long as the nation is vulnerable to foreign interference, it will not enjoy peace. Efforts have to be made to devise a set of principles, and a mechanism to facilitate and ensure their observance, to severely limit, if not eliminate, external interference.

The ideal means to keep external actors from interfering would be for Afghanistan to solemnly declare itself a neutral state, to have such declaration witnessed by its neighbors, immediate and proximate, to have it endorsed by the UN Security Council, and to have it registered with the United Nations. Turkmenistan’s unilateral declaration of neutrality was approved by the UN General Assembly, but given Afghanistan’s history, it would be advisable to involve the Security Council.

If Afghanistan’s future government is unwilling to follow this route, the alternative could be a compact among Afghanistan and its neighbors to mutually agree not to intervene or interfere in Afghan affairs, as
people of Afghanistan.” Reading between the lines of this statement does not require further elaboration.

Concerning the transition, it was also reported that Karzai had a “wish list” of military hardware that he wanted from the Indian government, including helicopters, tanks, and artillery. India was responsive, but modest in what it was willing to offer and stopped well short of agreeing to send lethal weapons. Indian-made light helicopters, plus transport and logistics equipment will be provided, as well as continued Indian training of Afghan security forces (current level around 400)—but in India. Fanning the flames of Pakistan’s “encirclement” theory of Indian involvement in Afghanistan is not something New Delhi wishes to encourage.

Indeed, it is clear from the Indian perspective that the primary focus of its partnership with Afghanistan is not military related but rather capacity building in the economic realm, especially in reconstruction and trade and investment.

India has already invested more than $2 billion in Afghan infrastructure, including highways, hospitals, and rural electricity projects. The Salma hydroelectric dam near Herat is within a year of completion, with the assistance of Indian engineers. India is building Afghanistan’s new parliament building and going ahead with the $11 billion Hajigak iron ore project. More will follow.

India’s Man in Kabul

At the center of India’s on-the-ground engagement with Afghanistan is career diplomat Amar Sinha, India’s ambassador in Kabul. It is a dangerous assignment. India’s embassy in Kabul has been bombed twice. Four officials were killed in the 2008 attack, which was blamed on the Haqqani network, a Taliban faction. Suicide bombers hit India’s consulate in Jalalabad in August.

I had the opportunity to sit down with Ambassador Sinha on a recent visit to Kabul to discuss the challenges Afghanistan will face in 2014. Of the three transitions facing the country, he believes India is best positioned to assist with Afghanistan’s economic development. Regarding the political transition, the 11 presidential and vice presidential tickets that have qualified (according to the government) were best expressed in a recent interview he did with the New York Times: “This scenario that it will all become chaos and unmanageable, I personally don’t subscribe and I don’t think the Government of India subscribes to the scenario that it will be doomsday.”

More to the point, Sinha also says, “The government has already said we will remain committed. And we don’t have an option of walking away from here.”

Strategic Convergence in Afghanistan

Both the United States and India have affirmed that they have strategic stakes in Afghanistan’s future as a sovereign, independent, and functioning state. In their Joint Statement following their September 27 meeting in Washington, President Obama and Prime Minister Singh highlighted the need for greater assistance during Afghanistan’s security transition: “The Leaders recognized that violent
Extremists continue to pose challenges to Afghanistan’s security and stability and, in this context, emphasized the need for coordinated international support to help build the capacity of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces.”

In addition to the security dimension, the United States and India are committed to seeing Afghanistan become a hub for regional economic development and prosperity, a goal articulated in the New Silk Road initiative launched by former secretary of state Hillary Clinton. India’s strategic partnership with Afghanistan is clearly part of a broader objective of better integrating Central Asia with the Indian subcontinent through trade, energy, and investment flows—one that would fully integrate and benefit all of Afghanistan’s neighbors, including Pakistan.

Bottom line: India will be a key partner in bringing stability to Afghanistan during its 2014 “Year of Transition.” The United States and India should continue to find ways to strengthen their partnership in Afghanistan during this critical time.

POSTSCRIPT: This edition of the U.S.-India Insight will be my last as the Wadhwani Chair in U.S.-India Policy Studies. My three-year appointment concludes at the end of the month. CSIS is currently in the process of identifying a successor for this position. I will remain affiliated with the Center as a nonresident senior adviser.

It has been my pleasure to focus on further advancing U.S.-India ties these past 36 months. Our goal—and motto—has been “Unlocking the full potential of the U.S.-India relationship.” This, of course, has not been fully accomplished, but a few more doors have been opened. Much more can and, I am confident, will be done in the years ahead. The importance of doing so is, in my view, self-evident. As former secretary of state Madeleine Albright has rightly observed: “Without a doubt, the world benefits from close cooperation and collaboration between the United States and India.”

—Amb. Karl F. Inderfurth