

SOUTH ASIA MONITOR

Number 144
August 01, 2010

A Difficult Road Ahead: India's Policy on Afghanistan

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Common wisdom in Afghanistan says, "The West has all the watches but the Taliban has all the time." Following the decision by U.S. president Barack Obama in December 2009 to announce that the United States will begin to reduce its presence in Afghanistan by July 2011, the region has taken this as a signal of U.S. disengagement. India's goals are a dismantled Afghan Taliban; an inclusive, democratic state with normal relations with India; and better transport and economic ties through Afghanistan into Central Asia. India has been a major contributor of economic aid, but has been kept at arm's length on security issues. As Afghan president Hamid Karzai pursues reconciliation efforts with militants and Pakistan attempts to tilt this process in its favor, New Delhi must recalibrate its strategic calculus in Afghanistan.

Friendly ties with Afghanistan have been a constant in Indian foreign policy and an equally consistent source of anxiety for Pakistan. During the years of Taliban control, India maintained close relations with the Northern Alliance. India saw the fall of the Afghan Taliban government in 2001 as a major strategic gain. India participated in the 2001 Bonn conference, which determined the basic outlines of the political and constitutional structure for Afghanistan. In contrast to its perspective during the Soviet intervention, India has looked favorably on the U.S. and NATO military involvement in Afghanistan and has made clear that it does not want this role to end prematurely.

Insecurity, feckless governance, and a revitalized insurgency threaten Afghanistan's future. With tapering American public support for the Afghan war, New Delhi worries that the mess left behind will damage the region's security and put India at risk of increased Islamic militancy. India's involvement has primarily been in economic reconstruction. It is watching with some anxiety U.S. plans for its future presence and the moves toward negotiations with elements of the Taliban. Afghanistan was the only foreign policy issue mentioned in every speech by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during his November 2009 visit to Washington, and the subject occupied a similarly high profile during the June 2010 Indo-U.S. Strategic Dialogue.

The Afghan-Indian Connection: Polls and surveys find that Afghans generally have a positive view of India, whereas Pakistan is seen as meddling, causing instability in the country. When the Taliban regime fell, Bollywood music blared in the streets of Afghanistan. Today, Indian soap operas and films are still incredibly popular across the country. At the diplomatic level, India and Afghanistan have generally had cordial relations. President Karzai—who was educated in Simla, in India—gets along well with Prime Minister Singh. India has opened an embassy in Kabul along with four consulates in Herat, Kandahar, Jalalabad, and Mazar-e-Sharif. The only other country to host as many is Pakistan, whose consulates are also located in these cities.

Pakistani Suspicions: Pakistan is deeply suspicious of Indian influence across its western border. For much of its history, Pakistan has pursued a policy of "strategic depth" in Afghanistan by training, funding, and arming groups that can act as proxies for Pakistani interests. Pakistan is concerned that India's economic and political linkages are building up Indian capacity to destabilize Pakistan. It is widely believed in Pakistan that the Indian consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar are covertly supporting Balochi insurgents against Pakistan. The Indian consulates and embassy in Kabul have been targeted in a number of attacks by Pakistani-linked militant groups.

High-level members of the Pakistani military have opposed any Indian involvement in Afghanistan. As a result, the United States has discouraged Indian involvement in the security sphere. While India has some programs to train the Afghan National Army in India, that exchange involves only a handful of officers and senior enlisted personnel.

Indian Economic Initiatives: India is one of the largest providers of economic assistance to Afghanistan, with commitments thus far of \$1.3 billion in support for reconstruction projects and development aid. India has made a major contribution to rebuilding Afghanistan's roads. The Border Roads Organization (BRO) recently completed the 215-km Zaranj-Delaram highway. The BRO is an object of Pakistani suspicion because its work in India is concentrated in areas with a large police or military presence; by the same token, however, it is the organization best qualified to work in the unsafe environment of Afghanistan. India has also supported the idea of Afghanistan regaining its historical role as a transit hub linking Central and South Asia.

Other infrastructure projects India is financing include the construction of the Salma Dam hydropower project in Herat province. India is also a proponent of the proposed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India oil pipeline, which is being financed by the Asian Development Bank. With Indian assistance, the new Afghan Parliament building will be completed in 2011. Additionally, India has donated 1 million tons of wheat in the form of biscuits through the World Food Program, set up power transmission lines, and organized health and sanitation projects. India and Afghanistan concluded a Preferential Trade Agreement in 2002; Afghan exports to India—such as pomegranates, dried fruits, and nuts—have risen sevenfold since then.

A recent study by the U.S. Geological Survey, released by the Pentagon in June 2010, reported that Afghanistan had mineral reserves valued at close to \$1 trillion. Copper, iron ore, gold, coal, cobalt, and lithium are among the minerals obtainable. So far, only China has attempted to exploit the mineral reserves, through a state-owned mining company developing a copper mine in northern Afghanistan. The Afghan Ministry of Mines has invited India to bid for the right to tap mineral deposits, and several Indian firms have expressed interest.

A Regional Solution? As the conflict in Afghanistan continues, some have suggested that the best path to a political solution would be a regional approach that would bring together Afghanistan's neighbors and nearby powers in South and Central Asia. China, Russia, Iran, India, and Pakistan would jointly consider their common interest in stability in Afghanistan. Such a solution would at a minimum acknowledge Afghanistan's historic role as a site for proxy conflicts and attempt to persuade the regional powers to stop conducting their rivalries on Afghan soil.

While such a strategy would be desirable for future Afghan stability—and would be very welcome in Delhi—it has two major drawbacks. First, the countries involved have very different interests. In the case of India and Pakistan, for example, while both countries ultimately desire stability in Afghanistan, they have incompatible views about what that means. It is difficult to imagine a scenario in which the international community has enough influence to broker a common understanding between them on Afghanistan. Second, there does not seem to be any way of compelling reluctant neighbors to exercise the self-restraint on which a regional solution depends. One might envisage an arrangement under which different countries provided assistance to different parts of Afghanistan, which would provide a bit of space for the Afghan government to exercise greater authority. Ultimately, however, it would still be dependent on the self-restraint of the neighboring countries.

Reconciliation and Deal Making in Afghanistan: Since early 2010, efforts to lay the groundwork for Afghanistan's political future have focused increasingly on the internal Afghan scene, and specifically on reconciliation between the Karzai government and some elements of the Taliban. Afghanistan, the United States, and Pakistan all have their own definitions of reconciliation. For the United States, the initial concept was bringing minor ex-Taliban figures to the government's side. For the Karzai government, the goal was more ambitious: deal making with leading Taliban personalities, but with Karzai in the driver's seat. The United States appears to have come closer to this perspective. Richard Holbrooke, the Obama administration's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, has spoken of "Afghan-led reconciliation" and has noted that it should include only people who have broken their ties to Al Qaeda.

Pakistan, on the other hand, clearly intends to put itself at the center of any reconciliation process. And for India, any form of rapprochement between the Taliban and the Afghan government is troublesome.

Reconciliation captured the headlines at the January 28 donors' conference in London. India was marginalized at the conference and found the emphasis on negotiations with the Taliban disquieting. The late July Kabul conference led by the Karzai government attempted to build on efforts in London and initiate effective reintegration plans with certain elements of the insurgency. This time, India was involved in the preparations and was represented by a delegation led by External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna. Recognizing that some form of outreach to Taliban elements was inevitable, India softened its position, accepting the idea of reintegration of Taliban elements that have promised to lay down arms, albeit under the leadership of the Afghan government. This represents an acknowledgment in New Delhi that it will need to have linkages with power brokers in Afghanistan whatever the composition of the government. Unfortunately, political instability and the fluidity of Afghan politics mean that conditions laid down before negotiations may be difficult to enforce—for Delhi or indeed for anyone else.

Pakistan, meanwhile, is acting as if it expects to be able to call the shots. Both Karzai and the Pakistanis believe that the U.S. and NATO forces are on their way out. In the short term, this is apparently leading Karzai to mend fences with Pakistan and its Afghan friends. The arrest of Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Baradar in February seemed to be a signal that Pakistan would neutralize any Taliban personality who sought to negotiate with the Afghan government on his own, as Baradar was believed to have done. There is a perceptible warming of relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The two countries signed a transit agreement just before the Kabul conference, and Afghanistan decided to allow Afghans to take up scholarships in Pakistan (which they already do in India). Afghanistan has also agreed to some military officers' training in Pakistan. Recent news reports suggest that Pakistani Army Chief of Staff General Ashfaq Kayani has facilitated meetings between Karzai and Pakistani militant leader Sirajuddin Haqqani, although both Kayani and Karzai deny those reports. A report in June issued by the London School of Economics concluded that the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence agency remains involved with the leadership of the Quetta Shura Taliban. This too was denied by Pakistan, but the careful sourcing and drafting of the report gives it credibility.

Issues and Options for India: The short-term indicators point toward increased Pakistani influence in Afghanistan. India is rethinking how best to protect its strategic stake in preventing an upsurge of Islamic extremism and enhancing its economic and political connectivity with Afghanistan and Central Asia. One clear asset is its historical tie with Afghanistan and generations of Afghan leaders' distaste for being manipulated from Islamabad. Afghanistan has generally had difficult relations with Pakistan, and it would be unrealistic to expect that rivalry to remain suppressed forever. Karzai is trying to protect his relationship with Delhi even as he builds up ties with Islamabad. He visited Delhi and Islamabad in April 2010 and pleaded for an end to the proxy wars, even as he sought civilian help from both.

Another asset India has is its capacity to help the Afghan economy through both export markets and reconstruction. And India will be looking to make common cause with other outside powers whose goals in Afghanistan are close to India's. Russia and Iran fall into this category. So does the United States, if one looks at longer-term U.S. interests in a peaceful and non-extremist Afghanistan. Foreign Minister Krishna's statement that "an international presence" will be needed for a long time in Afghanistan illustrates India's hope that the United States and other like-minded countries will remain engaged.

The issue between India and the United States is the U.S. belief that Pakistan is in a position to block an acceptable outcome unless its strategic objectives are also met. The vital question, in these circumstances, is to what extent Pakistan is willing to honor U.S. strategic objectives in protecting its own. The answer to that question is critical for both Washington and Delhi.

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