



“U.S.-INDIA STRATEGIC DIALOGUE”

MOVING AHEAD IN AFGHANISTAN: THE U.S.-INDIA-PAKISTAN DYNAMIC RICHARD FONTAINE

INTRODUCTION

In his West Point speech announcing a new Afghanistan strategy, President Obama mentioned Pakistan no less than 25 times. India did not come up once. This absence marked the Administration’s stark break with at least one prevailing theory about the role India might play in improving conditions in Afghanistan. Echoing statements he made on the campaign trail, the President-elect spoke during his transition of a U.S. role in helping to resolve the Kashmir issue, thereby allowing Pakistan to focus on militancy along its borders, rather than a perceived threat from India.

This approach never translated into Administration policy, and the statements surrounding Prime Minister Singh’s state visit to Washington evinced no hint of U.S. pressure on India to shift on Kashmir. Indian officials stated that American officials did not privately prod India on the issue, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has publicly remarked that, while the United States ardently seeks greater Pakistani action against insurgent groups active in Afghanistan, the Kashmir issue should remain primarily in India-Pakistan bilateral channels.

Yet, while this U.S. posture no doubt allays Indian suspicions that Washington seeks a Kashmir mediation role—or an Indian military shift that would prompt a redeployment of Pakistani troops from their eastern border to their west—it also leaves hanging the question of Indian involvement in Afghanistan. This involvement has been productive, and it has the potential to become even more so. Washington’s new Afghanistan strategy should take into account India’s dominant role in South Asia, its longstanding ties to Afghanistan, and the positive role India might play there.

CONFLICTING VIEWS IN NEW DELHI AND ISLAMABAD

In Afghanistan, the U.S. and India share nearly identical interests. Both wish to avoid the reemergence of a sanctuary in Afghanistan for terrorists with international reach. Both wish to stem

the destabilizing effect that insurgent success in Afghanistan would have on Pakistan and the wider region. And both wish to avoid the perception of a superpower defeat at the hands of jihadists, which would provide a major boost for the global jihadist movement. These shared interests translate into a series of mutual objectives—to defeat the Taliban, help build the capacity and legitimacy of the government of Afghanistan, and aid the reconstruction of the country.

After last year's Mumbai attacks, India's interest in avoiding the expansion of terrorism in South Asia became even more acute than before. And India has additional reasons for supporting the emergence of a stable Afghanistan, including New Delhi's desire to access trade and transit routes through the country to Central Asia. In light of these interests, India has committed over \$1.2 billion in aid to Afghanistan since 2001, making it the sixth largest donor to the country, and has provided funds for education, health, power, telecommunications, infrastructure, and food aid. It has constructed Afghanistan's new parliament building, built roads, and is erecting a dam in Herat. Several thousand Indians are on the ground in Afghanistan engaged in development activities, and India maintains four consulates (in Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kandahar, and Jalalabad) in addition to its embassy in Kabul.

Pakistani officials have articulated deep concern about what they view as dangerous and growing Indian encroachment in Afghanistan.¹ Islamabad has repeatedly complained about Indian consulates in Afghanistan and suggested that personnel serving in them have provided money and weapons to separatists in Baluchistan—though without publicly offering any evidence to substantiate the claims. In addition, Islamabad views Indian support for the development of Iran's Chabahar port (which could provide a route for Indian trade with Afghanistan) as competition with Pakistan's new (Chinese-built) port at Gwadar. Pakistani officials fear Indian encirclement on both sides of their border, and have cited the new Indian air base in Tajikistan (India's first military base outside its borders) as an indication of New Delhi's growing regional presence. Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi made the broad connection in October, saying, "If you want Pakistan focused more on the [threat from Afghanistan in the] west, then we have to feel more secure on the east. There is a linkage there."²

The top U.S. commander in Afghanistan described a similar linkage. General Stanley McChrystal wrote in his August assessment that "Indian political and economic influence is increasing in Afghanistan, including significant development efforts and financial investment. . . . While Indian activities largely benefit the Afghan people, increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan is likely to exacerbate regional tensions and encourage Pakistani countermeasures in Afghanistan or India."

¹ Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, for example, told the *Los Angeles Times*, "If there is no massive reconstruction, if there are not long queues in Delhi waiting for visas to travel to Kabul, why do you have such a large presence in Afghanistan? At times it concerns us." Bruce Wallace, "Q&A," *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 2009.

² *Ibid.*

As a possible example of such countermeasures, credible reports suggest that Pakistan's ISI aided the Haqqani network in advance of its July 2008 attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul. The attack was not an isolated case; the Indian embassy was bombed in October 2009 and Indian personnel, including those working on reconstruction projects, have been subject to attack. While Pakistani officials vociferously deny any official contact with Afghan insurgent groups, it is widely believed that the Pakistani military maintains such contact as a strategic hedge against possible U.S. withdrawal or failure in Afghanistan. The Pakistani military also reportedly believes that support for insurgent groups, including the Afghan Taliban, constitutes a solid method for countering Indian influence in Afghanistan.

THREADING THE NEEDLE

Washington has attempted to manage two competing desires at once: to maximize support from the international community for the state-building project in Afghanistan, and to avoid fueling Pakistani suspicions of Indian encroachment. In pursuit of both, the U.S. has attempted to thread the needle. On the one hand, it has encouraged Indian reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. On the other, it has staunchly opposed Indian military or security involvement there—and India has accommodated this stance.³

As the United States ramps up in Afghanistan, further Americanizing an already heavily American effort, Washington and New Delhi could adopt one of at least four broad approaches.

- The two could pursue the status quo approach, including preserving the existing level of Indian reconstruction activity and avoiding Indian security involvement in Afghanistan.
- The two could yield to Islamabad's acute sensitivity to Indian influence in Afghanistan, and seek to reduce the Indian role there. This might be combined with renewed Indian diplomatic engagement on Kashmir (with or without an American role of some sort) in an explicit effort to enhance Pakistan's perception of security, thereby inducing Islamabad to cease hedging and crack down on militant groups on its soil.
- The two could significantly increase the Indian presence in Afghanistan, not only on the civilian side but also in security. This might include Indian police and army trainers, military advisors, or even Indian troops conducting combat or peacekeeping operations. Such an approach could include a strong message from each that Islamabad's fears are unfounded, inaccurate, or exaggerated, coupled with an explicit demand that Pakistani contacts with insurgent groups cease.

³ Indian Defense Minister A.K. Antony said, "I am saying categorically that there is no question of Indian military involvement in Afghanistan. I do not foresee such a situation, not now or in the future." Indo-Pak-Afghan knot: threat to region's stability?" Rt.com, December 9, 2009.

- The two could avoid an Indian security presence in Afghanistan, which would provoke the most acute fears in Islamabad, and expand India's civilian role in the country—perhaps in concert with American development and civilian advisory efforts there. This approach might be coupled with public and private assurances that the United States intends to prevail in the Afghan war and that—notwithstanding the July 2011 deadline announced by the President—the U.S. will not abandon Pakistan, Afghanistan, or the region.

This paper endorses the fourth approach. The status quo, while reasonable at first blush, is likely to continue undervaluing the potential Indian contribution to stability in Afghanistan. Pakistani fears of encirclement are bound to continue irrespective of Indian day-to-day behavior there. The question for Washington is not whether Islamabad's concerns will increase along with a commensurate rise in the Indian role—they will—but rather whether India's potential contribution is likely to outweigh any negative effect it engenders.

On this score, it is clear that the Indian contribution, while already substantial, could, if expanded, further contribute to Afghan success. India and Afghanistan's cultural and historic ties constitute an asset that Washington would be remiss to ignore. The American "civilian surge" remains underwhelming and a great source of frustration in both Washington and Kabul. In light of India's great civilian capacity, Washington and New Delhi should work to expand Indian efforts, including in the key area of training for Afghan civil servants. In addition, it is not often recalled that India trained roughly 1,000 Afghan police in India in 2002. The police training effort in India should be revived and expanded on a priority basis, given both the centrality of police to counterinsurgency efforts and the poor quality of the Afghan police force today.

While nothing will eliminate Pakistan's fear of Indian encirclement or political domination of Afghanistan, the introduction of Indian security forces into Afghanistan would be highly provocative, and the Pakistani countermeasures it engendered could well outweigh the benefit. The overarching aim of U.S. and Indian policy should be to transform Afghanistan from an area of strategic competition to a commons for strategic cooperation, including between New Delhi and Islamabad. This is, to say the least, no easy task. As Robert Kaplan has written, "Afghanistan has been a prize that Pakistan and India have fought over directly and indirectly for decades."⁴

A REGIONAL APPROACH

An attempt to encourage such cooperation should begin with a regional conference that would convene leaders to discuss the future of Afghanistan. In the Administration's March 2009 review of Afghanistan policy, the formation of an international contact group was proposed but

⁴ Robert D. Kaplan, "Behind the Indian Embassy Bombing," *The Atlantic*, August 1, 2008.

never implemented.⁵ A key element of such an approach should aim to increase the transparency with which various regional actors, including India, conduct their affairs in Afghanistan. While the United States should not indulge Pakistani concerns that are inaccurate or exaggerated, increased Indian transparency could enhance confidence in Islamabad.

A regional approach would also explore the possibility of joint Indo-Pakistani development projects in Afghanistan, as well as agreements that would integrate the three countries economically. The United States should encourage Pakistan to remove its restrictions on the transport of Indian exports through Pakistan into Afghanistan (Afghan exports to India are currently permitted). And both New Delhi, Washington, and states in the region should explore ways in which to enhance trade, transit, and energy linkages.

Some improvement in India-Pakistani relations is likely necessary to allow an improvement in Pakistan's ties to Afghanistan. The question for the United States is how, and whether, to play a role in promoting a thaw. In light of Islamabad's repeated requests for both American mediation on the Kashmir issue and American action to restrain Indian influence in Afghanistan, this question cuts to the heart of America's relationship with Pakistan. While the temptation is for the U.S. to get directly involved in trying to mediate talks or prod the two sides on Kashmir, the reality is that the greatest bilateral progress took place when Washington stayed out. Not only did the "back channel" nearly lead to a peace agreement on Kashmir, but between 2004 and 2007 the two sides inked a series of bilateral agreements, including pacts aimed at increasing people-to-people exchanges, enhancing bilateral trade, establishing cross-border bus and train services, and putting into place new visa regimes that encourage travel between India and Pakistan.⁶

New breakthroughs are unlikely to materialize, however, in the absence of Islamabad's moves against Lashkar e Taiba, which carried out the Mumbai attacks. In July, for instance, Prime Minister Singh said that he intended to move ahead with a "step by step" dialogue with Islamabad but will not reopen a formal peace process until Islamabad cracks down on LeT.⁷ As a result, urging Pakistan to crack down against LeT should constitute a key element of American strategy, and Washington should encourage other actors—including China—to urge Pakistan to do the same. Should bilateral talks resume, the U.S. should encourage the two sides to make discussions on the future of Afghanistan a key element. And Washington should avoid fueling the Pakistani fear that the U.S. will abandon the region (again) after 2011, giving India a free hand in Afghanistan. Given

⁵ Marshall Bouton and Alyssa Ayres, "We Need India's Help In Afghanistan," *Forbes.com*, November 24, 2009.

⁶ Lisa Curtis, "Afghanistan and Pakistan: Understanding and Engaging Regional Stakeholders," Testimony before the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, March 31, 2009.

⁷ Myra MacDonald, "Afghan campaign gains from India-Pakistan thaw," *Reuters*, July 30, 2009.

the President's announced deadline, and the way it has been interpreted in Pakistan, a good deal of repair work will be required.⁸

Even in the context of an Indo-Pakistani thaw, the challenges in Afghanistan would remain enormous. Yet, the U.S.-Indian relationship has progressed to the point where a concrete discussion about Afghanistan, and the ways in which the U.S. and India can work together to enhance stability there, is timely and appropriate. At this decisive moment in Afghanistan, this shared project is of singular importance for both the United States and India, and as a result should be a top priority as the two sides move forward in building the strategic relationship.

⁸ Shuja Nawaz, Director of the South Asia Center at the Atlantic Council, has written, "After eighteen months, our troops will begin to come home.' . . . These ten words are quite clear. The United States plans to start pulling out of Afghanistan in less than two years. . . .That is all the Pakistanis understood." Nawaz, "Coming up Short on Pakistan," Council on Foreign Relations Interview, December 14, 2009.