

# India in Post-ISAF Afghanistan

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*Afghanistan, Indien, Pakistan*

Indien macht sich Sorgen, ob seine betont nichtmilitärische Politik in Afghanistan nach Abzug der ISAF-Truppen Früchte trägt. Als einer der größten Entwicklungshilfegeber hat Indien nach Vertreibung der Taliban 2001 mehr als zwei Mrd. US-Dollar in das Land gepumpt und der Nachfrage nach militärischer Hilfe bislang erfolgreich getrotzt. Unter Umgehung des einflussreichen Grenzlandes Pakistan will Indien von den Bodenschätzen Afghanistans, seiner strategischen Lage und seinem Wirtschafts- und Handelspotenzial profitieren. Die Angst vor der Rückkehr der Taliban sitzt jedoch tief und die eigene Verwundbarkeit ist groß, wie die Bombenangriffe 2008 und 2009 auf indische Botschaften in Afghanistan zeigten. Langfristig wird Indien seine Interessen in diesem Raum nur über einen multilateralen Ansatz sichern können.

India's primary interests in Afghanistan after the terror strikes of 11 September 2001 on the American homeland need to be viewed in the context of its concerns over extremist takeover, terrorism and violence emanating from the extremely volatile Pakistan-Afghanistan border and spilling into India. A strong, stable, and democratic Afghanistan would reduce the probability of such dangers impinging on India's security and destabilising the region. New Delhi's worries are linked to its view that Pakistan's objective in Afghanistan is to regain its 'strategic depth' by reinstalling a pliant Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Following the ouster of the Taliban in 2001, India renewed its diplomatic ties with Kabul and adopted a 'soft power approach' in the reconstruction process of Afghanistan. Steering clear of a military role, India has concentrated on developmental aid, civilian, political and administrative capacity building, the re-establishment of cultural and historical links, and, for the longer term, trying to position its relationship with Afghanistan in the context of its energy and trade interests in Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> India has emerged



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1 Author's discussions with Ambassador Satinder K. Lambah, Prime Minister of India's Special Envoy on Afghanistan. New Delhi, October 2010. See also India Seeks Larger Role. Asia Times Online, November 28, 2001 at [www.atimes.com](http://www.atimes.com) (accessed November 26, 2013).

as the fifth largest bilateral donor country, having pledged US\$ 2 billion and invested in diverse areas including healthcare, education, infrastructure, social welfare, training of politicians, diplomats, and police, and institution and capacity building.

### Extremism and Terrorism

The much appreciated development role, notwithstanding, the recurring attacks by the Taliban and its affiliates (the Haqqani network) on Indian mission and personnel pose a significant challenge for investing in large scale high visibility projects in post-2014 Afghanistan. The gruesome and high profile symbolic attacks on the Indian Embassy in Afghanistan, in July 2008 and October 2009 continue to highlight India's vulnerabilities in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> Since 9/11, New Delhi's policy has broadly been in congruence with the US goal of destroying the Taliban-Al Qaeda combine and instituting a democratic regime in Kabul. However, years later, the Taliban has been able to regroup and resurge, in addition to further intensifying its linkages with anti-India groups based in Pakistan. A worrisome development has been the expansion of terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba's (LeT) activities beyond Kunar and Nooristan provinces to other parts of Afghanistan, which could emerge as a centre of anti-Indian and anti-Western operations. As military operations and drone attacks intensify in Pakistan's tribal areas, these groups could increasingly operate from other parts of Afghanistan.

To a large extent, India has steered clear of any direct military involvement in Afghanistan, in spite of Afghan interest and requests for military assistance. A complete international troop withdrawal would not be in India's interest, but an Indian military footprint would feed into the insurgent propaganda and dissipate the goodwill that India has earned among the Afghans. Having avoided the military option and provided huge developmental assistance instead, New Delhi intends to keep its image

2 The growing bonhomie between New Delhi and Kabul, coupled with the increased presence of India's development projects in Afghanistan, remains the target of the Taliban-led insurgency, which includes a huge array of insurgent and anti-government forces operating in tandem beyond south and east Afghanistan. While the Taliban-affiliated Haqqani network, aided by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), was blamed for the July 2008 attack on the Indian Embassy, the Taliban claimed responsibility for the October 2009 attack. See Wax, Emily: India's Eager Courtship of Afghanistan Comes at a Steep Price. The Washington Post, April 3, 2010 at [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) (accessed November 26, 2013).

as a 'friendly and neutral country' untarnished. In this context, India's lack lustre responses to Afghanistan's repeated requests for military hardware assistance,<sup>3</sup> including President Karzai's wish list during his visit in May 2013, is hardly surprising.

### Democracy, Reintegration and Reconciliation

India has invested heavily in political, administrative and civilian capacity building. During the two-day visit to Kabul in August 2005, by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, leaders of both countries reiterated their commitment to building a new partnership for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The highlight of the visit was the foundation-laying ceremony of the Afghan Parliament building to be built by India, which is a symbol of New Delhi's desire to play a catalysing role in the rebuilding of Afghanistan's democracy. Over the years, India has invested in training and capacity building, working with legislators, parliamentary staff, and diplomats to help build the political and democratic institutions.<sup>4</sup>

As the talk of western exit gathers momentum, the Afghan Government and international community have initiated various efforts at negotiations with the Taliban. While there has been a lack of clarity in the international community's attempts at finding a political solution to the Afghan war, New Delhi has indicated support for the Afghan-led reintegration process. In an interview with the "Wall Street Journal" on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2009, the then Indian External Affairs Minister, S. M. Krishna stated India did 'not believe that war can solve any problem and that applies to Afghanistan too'.<sup>5</sup> This line of thinking is indicative of New Delhi's recognition of the Afghan Government's efforts to build an inclusive political order much as the Indian government over the years has been involved in various such dialogues, negotiations, and reintegration mechanisms in dealing with its own insurgencies.

3 The key hardware Afghanistan wants include A2.A18 105-millimeter howitzer and assistance to get its mothballed fleet of Antonov An.32 medium transport aircraft back into the air. For further details, see Praveen Swami: Why India is concerned about supplying arms to Afghanistan. First Post, New Delhi, May 22, 2013; <http://www.firstpost.com> (accessed November 26, 2013).

4 In addition to regular parliamentarian visits to India, more than twenty Indian civil servants served as coaches and mentors under the Capacity for Afghan Public Administration programme supported by the UNDP and the governments of Afghanistan and India.

5 Indian Minister Urges Afghan Political Settlement. Wall Street Journal, September 23, 2009; <http://online.wsj.com> (accessed November 26, 2013).

There have also been indications recently that New Delhi is supportive of President Karzai's reintegration overtures towards the tribal fighters. India's then Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao, addressing an international seminar on Afghanistan in October 2009, declared that India would support the process of reintegrating individuals into the national mainstream – that is, India would back a dialogue with the moderate Taliban who agree to renounce violence.<sup>6</sup> This change, however, came with a qualification. Pakistan, which is widely believed to support the Taliban and provide shelter in Quetta to its leaders, would need to cease assistance to the Taliban. The concerns of New Delhi stem from the fact that the Pakistan military's continued support to the Afghan Taliban leadership, as a 'strategic asset', would make any meaningful reconciliation an exercise in futility.

As the possibility of negotiations with the Taliban has gained momentum, New Delhi has continued to adjust its posture. In a significant shift of thinking, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh expressed support for Kabul's decision to begin an Afghan-led process of negotiation and reconciliation with the Taliban.<sup>7</sup> There is a growing recognition in New Delhi that negotiations with the Taliban will occur, as the West's desire to exit mounts. New Delhi's more flexible approach is reminiscent of the policy it adopted following Soviet withdrawal in 1989, when Prime Minister Rao committed India to deal with whosoever rose to power in Kabul, providing it with the flexibility to engage with various stakeholders in the future. India's expansion of Social Development Programs (SDPs) in the insurgency prone south and east speaks volumes about the success of these local initiatives and has received grudging assent of the local Taliban.<sup>8</sup>

### Energy, Minerals, Resources and Trade

As a major regional economic power, with ambitions of extending its influence beyond its immediate neighbourhood, India has worked towards reviving the role of Afghanistan as a land

6 See Shukla, Ajai: India Supports Reconciliation with Taliban. *Business Standard*, October 8, 2009.

7 It should be noted that New Delhi emphasizes 'Afghan-led'. New Delhi does not support the involvement of other countries, individuals, and secret negotiations. See MEA Statements, Address by Prime Minister to the Joint Session of the Parliament of Afghanistan. Ministry of External Affairs website, May 13, 2011.

8 Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahid claimed the organization did not want India out of Afghanistan. See: Taliban Say They Can "Reconcile" with India. *Times of India*, March 26, 2010.

bridge connecting South Asia with Central Asia to tap energy resources and augment trade. Afghanistan's role as a connector with energy-rich Central Asia is critical for India's burgeoning energy needs. With this objective, India has been pursuing better relations with the Central Asian states. It has provided a US\$ 17 million grant for the modernisation of a hydropower plant in Tajikistan and has signed a memorandum of understanding with Turkmenistan for a natural gas pipeline that will pass through Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> The TAPI agreement (named after the initials of the four participating countries) signed by Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India in April 2008 envisages over a thousand miles of pipelines connecting Turkmenistan's natural gas fields with energy-deficient South Asia.<sup>10</sup> The pipeline would benefit other countries as well including Pakistan – an indication that India's role in Afghanistan may have collateral benefits for Pakistan.

A crucial focus for India has been the development of a southern trade corridor linking India with Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Russia. The establishment of a bilateral trade and transit agreement between Tehran and Kabul, leading to the creation of the Chabahar Free Zone Authority (CFZA) in 2002, was an important benchmark for the southern trade corridor. While the 218 km Zaranj-Delaram road provides economic opportunities for India in those countries, it also provides Afghanistan with an alternative in reducing its dependence on Pakistan for transit facilities. This is of particular significance given the difficult trade and transit arrangements and bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Additionally, it provides the international community with an alternative supply route through the northern distribution network (NDN), as the present routes through Pakistan are increasingly targeted by the insurgents or held hostage due to the fractious US-Pakistan relations.

A Preferential Trade Agreement was signed between India and Afghanistan in 2003, reducing customs duty on a range of goods. Bilateral trade has increased considerably as a result, worth over US\$ 600 million in 2011, with Indian markets



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9 See Bajoria, Jayshree: 'India-Afghanistan Relations', Backgrounder. Council on Foreign Relations, 22 July 2009; [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org) (accessed November 26, 2013).

10 See Foster, John: Afghanistan, the TAPI Pipeline, and Energy Geopolitics. *The Journal of Energy Security*, March 23, 2010 at <http://www.ensec.org> (accessed November 26, 2013).

absorbing the largest share of Afghan exports.<sup>11</sup> India has also promoted greater economic integration with Afghanistan through SAARC. Through the Agreement on Strategic Partnership (ASP) signed between the two countries in 2011, both countries have committed 'to deepening and diversifying co-operation in sectors such as agriculture, rural development, mining, industry, energy, information technology, communications, transport, including civil aviation.' Two Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) were signed for the development of minerals and natural gas in Afghanistan, which is said to hold mineral deposits worth USD 1 trillion. A consortium led by state-run Steel Authority of India (SAIL) could invest up to USD 6 billion in the Hajigak mines in the province of Bamiyan.<sup>12</sup> The Agreement is a reiteration of India's commitment to Afghanistan's economic progress and also its development as a bridge between South Asia and Central Asia.

### Challenges and Opportunities

New Delhi will be confronted by a host of rapidly changing scenarios in Afghanistan as the country heads for transition in the security and political sectors in 2014. The interplay between different actors jockeying for power could either allow India to retain its present level of engagement, provide opportunities to expand its influence or bring an abrupt end to its presence in that country. If it intends to remain relevant and engaged in playing a key role in the long-term stabilisation of Afghanistan, India will have to recalibrate its strategy to deal with a range of options from the unfolding scenarios.

In the rapidly changing scenarios, there continue to be serious concerns about whether India can sustain its present 'aid only' policy under the shrinking US security umbrella. If the West in a rush to exit leaves the door open for a Taliban take over, there is little doubt that India's options will be severely constrained. Even in the most likely scenario beyond 2014, which envisions a limited US troop presence in strategic bases leaving the country side open to Taliban influence, India might

11 See Press Trust of India, Afghanistan Seeks Indian Investment to Boost its Agri Sector, Business Standard, December 3, 2010.

12 See Miglani, Sanjeev: Indian Firms Eye Huge Mining Investment in Afghanistan, Reuters, September 14, 2011 at <http://www.reuters.com> (accessed November 26, 2013).

have to minimise its presence and restrict its developmental activities to key cities. Without a clear, coordinated, Afghan-led reconciliation policy and adherence to various red lines, the concerns of the present democratic regime being overrun by radical elements remains.

### Political, Diplomatic and Economic Tools

India will have to utilise a range of diplomatic, military, and economic tools and set clear policy makers to sustain the democratic order and deny the space for the return of the extremists. One of the most significant steps taken to cement the gains made in the decade long developmental assistance and aid policy has been the signing of the Agreement on Strategic Partnership (ASP) in October 2011. Building on the Treaty of 1950, the ASP is recognition of the need to restore and take forward the historical, traditional and civilisational relationship between both countries and as the Prime Minister of India indicated a serious attempt to 'to stay' in Afghanistan. The ASP deepens and diversifies cooperation in various sectors such as agriculture, rural development, mining, industry, energy, information technology, communications, transport, including civil aviation. The ASP has provided a much-needed institutional mechanism in terms of 'regular foreign office consultations and strategic dialogue' to sustain the Indian engagement beyond 2014.<sup>13</sup> The ASP has clearly signalled that New Delhi is ready to work with Afghanistan even in adverse and difficult conditions beyond 2014. There is, however, a need to provide teeth to the ASP to build on the gains of the last decade.

In the security sector, the near to medium-term projects could include training of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), particularly its officer corps, the police, paramilitary, and the air force, and also help build the justice sector. In the long term, security sector reform (SSR) and building sound civil-military relations would remain critical in preventing the disintegration or loss of civil control of the army. Given that funding, recruiting and sustaining a large Afghan army

13 Text of Agreement on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, October 4, 2011; D'Souza, Shanthie Mariet: Indian-Afghan Strategic Partnership: Perceptions from the Ground, The Af-Pak Channel, Foreign Policy, October 26, 2011 at <http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com> (accessed November 26, 2013).



is an economically unviable project in the near term, a capable police force is essential. In the south, there are requests for India's assistance in training Special Forces and in teaching techniques of community policing and police sensitisation programmes. The transition in the political sector is much more challenging. There is an immediate need for India to push for an inclusive national dialogue in Afghanistan which addresses the concerns of the impending election and reconciliation process. In addition to broad based engagement with the other political groups, New Delhi needs to work on strengthening the electoral reform process.

Indian investments in Afghanistan could evaporate if not translated into long-term influence. The high-visibility infrastructure projects have essentially involved building an asset and handing it over to the Afghan authorities. While this has given New Delhi prestige and a measure of gratitude, it is unlikely to give India enduring influence. What India needs is a shift from asset creation to programme delivery. By designing and running development programmes in the context of poverty, illiteracy, and systemic administrative dysfunction, India can fill a critical gap in rebuilding the economic, social,





and political capital of Afghanistan and thus sustain an enduring channel of influence. In the near- and medium-term, there is a need to establish small and medium enterprises, alternate livelihood programmes and revive the Afghan indigenous economic base.


### Economic Opportunities and Regional Connectivity

New Delhi has attempted to build on the 'narrative of opportunity' to counter the anxiety of withdrawal. From a narrow security centric approach, the attempt has been to shift focus to regional confidence building, development, governance, and most lately, trade and investment, aiming to use Afghanistan's resource potential to build its economic viability, sustainability and independence. The third in the series and the first in South Asia, an investment summit was organized by the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) on 28 June 2012 in New Delhi to attract investments for Afghanistan and ensure that the country's economic and transit potential becomes its inherent strength to accrue the much needed economic dividends for itself and the region.

To a large extent, the genesis of this thinking is based on the inadequacies of the decade-long narrow security-related approach that has produced fragile and reversible gains. As an alternate approach, a focus shift is needed to utilize Afghanistan's large deposit of mineral and hydrocarbon resources, its underdeveloped yet significant agricultural and human resource potential, and its strategic geographical location at the crossroads of Central, South, West Asia and Eurasia. These factors combined offer vast opportunities for foreign investment, trade and transit connectivity. Such potential can be harnessed by an assimilation of economic interests of regional countries through a mutually beneficial inter-dependent framework. This neo-liberal rationale indicates that the convergence of such interests could be the best leverage against the slide of Afghanistan into instability. It would mitigate the risks of negative zero-sum competition among regional countries and build stakes for long term economic engagement in the region. In the long run, this could pave the way for the transformation of the Afghan economy from a prolonged phase of being aid-dependent to self-reliant.

## Bilateral, Regional and Multilateral Cooperation

India will have to take a lead in preventing the reversal of gains or descent into civil war in Afghanistan in the light of receding military foot print and waning international attention. In all likelihood, this will involve forging a regional consensus on the future of Afghanistan. In chalking out a regional strategy, India will have to reach out to its extended neighbourhood and assume more leadership. However, India repeatedly signalled that it was ready to discuss the larger Afghan situation with Islamabad during foreign secretary-level talks. On several forums it has been clarified that both India and Afghanistan are willing to accommodate Pakistan's genuine interests.

The ASP has provided the basis for greater bilateral and regional measures of mutual interdependence and cooperation. As the date of draw down, draws near Afghanistan is going to witness increased internal and regional recalibration. In the run-up to the 2014 election and after, the state of the country gives India many opportunities to use its political, military and economic tools for long-term engagement. While some countries would continue their hedging strategies, including supporting their proxies, New Delhi will have to navigate the difficult regional contours. It's primary and secondary interests in the long-term can only be secured through a regional framework. In addition, its own relations with Pakistan and the directions of the confidence building measures, will remain crucial to allay concerns and devise joint strategies. By moving beyond bilateralism, New Delhi's regional and multilateral strategy seeks to bring in long term peace and stability in the region. 

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Indien – die größte Demokratie der Welt. Doch ein Blick hinter diese beeindruckende Fassade offenbart Erschreckendes: Fast die Hälfte der Bevölkerung lebt unter der Armutsgrenze, das archaische Kastenwesen spaltet die Gesellschaft, Gewalt – nicht zuletzt gegen Frauen – ist an der Tagesordnung, Bildungs- und Gesundheitswesen sind unterentwickelt. In krassem Kontrast dazu steht der Weltmachtanspruch der politischen Eliten. Experten diskutieren diese Kluft zwischen Vision und Wirklichkeit.

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