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## India in Afghanistan: Valuable Partner of the West

On 4 October 2011, India and Afghanistan signed the Agreement on Strategic Partnership, the first of its kind to be endorsed by President Hamid Karzai's government with any foreign country. This comprehensive deal envisages strengthening cooperation between both partners in four key areas: politics and security; trade and economy; capacity development and education; and social, cultural, civil society and people-to-people relations. It foresees more coordination in regional and international forums, including Afghan support for a permanent seat for India in the reformed UN Security Council; establishes a regular Security Dialogue to coordinate the fight against international terrorism, organized crime, illegal trafficking in narcotics and money laundering; calls for more trade, investments and the promotion of regional economic cooperation. Moreover, the deal stipulates joint efforts to develop the Afghan economy and civil service, improve women's rights and in other areas.<sup>1</sup> The deal is the natural fruit of India's decade-long, low-profile engagement in Afghanistan. During these years, India was extending strong political support and significant development assistance to the Afghans. It has risen to the position of a major trade and investment partner of Afghanistan and an "all-weather" friend.

At a time when NATO is preparing for a responsible exit from Afghanistan, its neighbours are there to stay. From a political perspective, there is better recognition recently that any meaningful approach to Afghanistan has to bring on board all the countries from the region, including India. This paper is aiming at analysing the role of India in the context of the so-called "regional approach" on three distinct levels: civilian, military and regional. It argues that, under some conditions India could be one of the most valuable partners of the West in preventing Afghanistan from descending into chaos while assisting in its peaceful development. It is important the international community fully acknowledge

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<sup>1</sup> *Agreement on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*, New Delhi, 4 October 2011.

these facts while preparing for crucial meetings on Afghanistan that will be held in coming weeks.

### **India in Afghanistan after 2001**

India is Afghanistan's pivotal political partner, and both countries share a centuries-old civilization and cultural and societal ties. After 9/11, India unanimously backed the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, welcomed the subsequent demise of the Taliban regime and offered full political support to the new Afghan government. Since 2002, President Karzai has paid nine visits to India (the last one on 4–5 October 2011), while Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has visited Kabul twice, in August 2005 and May 2011. During the meeting in Kabul on 11–12 May 2011, following the killing of Osama bin Laden in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad, both leaders called on all countries of the region to use this unique moment for united efforts to end the scourge of terrorism and India promised an additional \$500 million for development assistance to Afghanistan. The recent visit of President Karzai to New Delhi in October 2011 resulted in the signing of a wide-ranging strategic partnership that institutionalized high-level cooperation into the framework of the Partnership Council.

Following the regime change in Kabul, India didn't send troops for an international stabilization mission (apart from up to 400 paramilitary forces deployed eventually for the protection of diplomatic missions and strategic investments) but instead focused its engagement on civilian assistance and reconstruction of the war-torn country. With more than \$1.5 billion in assistance, India ranks as the sixth-largest contributor of bilateral aid to Afghanistan after such countries as the U.S., the UK, Japan, Canada and Germany. There were at times when up to 4,000 Indians were working on numerous development projects that covered all 34 Afghan provinces. More than 30 Indian citizens have died thus far in accidents or terrorist attacks.

The Indian assistance concentrates on areas such as humanitarian aid, infrastructure, electricity, agriculture, telecommunications and media, education, health and capacity-building. Among the most significant contributions are the Salma Dam power plant in Herat Province (worth \$184 million), construction of the Afghan Parliament building in Kabul (\$180 million), the Pul-e-Khumri electricity transmission line to the Afghan capital (\$120 million) and the 218 km-long Delaram–Zaranj road, which opened additional land access to Afghanistan through Iran. India also provides about 1,500 scholarships annually (both for long- and short-term training), offers a wide range of human-resources schemes for the Afghan administration and oversees almost 100 small development and community projects in remote and rural areas.<sup>2</sup> The value of Indian aid programs and projects rests in the fact that they follow priorities set by the Afghan government in the Afghanistan National

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<sup>2</sup> For details see Indian Ministry of External Affairs' publication: *India and Afghanistan: Development Partnership*, 2009, [www.mea.gov.in](http://www.mea.gov.in).

Development Strategy, focus on local ownership of assets and usually through completion use hired Afghan contractors and local staff.

Such civilian assistance is generally appreciated by Afghans and together with other assets of soft power helps to earn goodwill for India. Bollywood movies, Indian music and TV soap operas are among the most popular entertainment of their kind in Afghanistan. Many educated Afghans, including President Karzai, are graduates of Indian universities. Hospitals in Delhi and Mumbai are frequently visited by Afghans looking for good-quality health treatment for a reasonable price. In general, this combination of political support through Indian soft power and robust people-to-people contacts makes India one of the most positively perceived countries in Afghanistan. According to a joint survey in 2010 by the BBC, ABC and ARD, India was seen favourably by 71% of the Afghans questioned, which was the best result of any nation. For comparison, the favourable view of Afghans toward the U.S. was at 51%, Great Britain at 39%, Iran at 51% and Pakistan at 15%.

India's efforts in Afghanistan are understandable since it sees great national interest in helping Afghans build a "strong, stable, prosperous and democratic" country. First of all, it is crucial for India's security to prevent a return to a pre-9/11 situation in which the Taliban provided training camps for Kashmiri militants. Second, India invests in Afghanistan to weaken the country's dependence on Pakistan and in order to sustain its own precedence in the region. Furthermore, India, which lost direct land access to Afghanistan after the partition of British India in 1947, still considers it to be a neighbouring country (officially, they have a 106 km-long joint border high in the Himalayas, in a region now under Pakistani administration) and intends to reopen historical economic links.

On the one hand, for an energy-thirsty power looking for access to energy-rich Central Asia, a stable Afghanistan plays a pivotal role as a trade, transport and energy hub as well as a bridge linking Central, West and South Asia to the Gulf. On the other hand, the American-proposed initiative of a "New Silk Road" to re-establish commercial links between Central and South Asia would bear no fruit without the active engagement of India. It already stands as one of the biggest trading and investment partners of Afghanistan and a major destination for Afghan export goods. Last year, reports about vast mineral resources discovered in Afghanistan surely further reinforced India's interests in the country,<sup>3</sup> especially after China's recently investment of \$3 billion in a copper mine in Aynak. India can ill-afford to lose another battle in a global competition over mineral resources and markets.

### **Civilian Surge**

India's positive record in development aid encourages an additional surge in civilian assistance to Afghanistan. Due to historical links and its own multiethnic, multi-religious and multilingual character, India appears to have a better understanding of Afghan culture and

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<sup>3</sup> James Risen, "U.S. Identifies Vast Mineral Riches in Afghanistan", *The New York Times*, 13 June 2010.

more expertise in local settings than any Western country engaged there. Moreover, thanks to the geographical proximity and lower cost of doing business, India can provide assistance more effectively than a majority of the foreign donors. Besides increasing aid in the current areas, India can consider expanding it to new, promising sectors. A broad and ambitious plan to expand Indian civilian assistance to a number of sectors has been already exposed in the latest agreement on Strategic Partnership.

What more India could do in Afghanistan is to share more experiences with the functioning of its democracy in the Asian context and within its reality as a developing country. For example, introducing Electronic Voting Machines (EVM), which were tested successfully in the last two Indian votes, could dramatically reduce the time it takes to count ballots and, hence, would improve the transparency of the election process in Afghanistan and, eventually, the legitimacy of the young Afghan democracy. In addition, India's vibrant party system, electoral laws and voter registration procedures could serve as points of reference for political reforms in Afghanistan, thus an increase in the exchange of ideas between the countries in this regard should be encouraged. Also, the further expansion of a training program for civil servants could be an important Indian contribution to Afghan nation-building.

Next, India could be a valuable partner in discussions about the adjustments needed in the judicial sector and administrative reforms, which is an area often mismanaged by Western experts. As a country with a huge Muslim minority governed partly in accordance with its own religious regulations, India can share its expertise in combining Islamic personal laws with secular civil code and the obligations of the rule of law. The example of India's *Lok Adalats* (People's Courts) to settle disputes fast and free of costs through conciliation and compromise can have some resonance in the Afghan rural context. In terms of administrative reform, Indians can share their experiences with the system of *Panchayats*. This constitutionally endorsed, democratic model of local self-governance to deal with the most crucial social and economic issues at the village level may seem to be an attractive option in today's Afghanistan where traditional structures of leadership have been weakened by 30 years of war.

Last, although India struggles to lift millions of its citizens out of poverty, it already has some experiences that can help with social and economic progress in Afghanistan. For instance, relatively successful programs such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (a legal guarantee of 100 days of employment in public work to an adult member of any rural household) to address problems of economic and social backwardness, which is often being exploited by insurgents. Moreover, India could share its rich experiences to revive agriculture in Afghanistan and expand commercial investments, which can offer job opportunities for unemployed youth.

Leaked U.S. diplomatic cables disclosed last year show that in 2007 the Americans were fully aware of opportunities for India "to use soft power in helping Afghanistan's

reconstruction, including affordable Indian professionals, energy production, and training capabilities in areas such as law enforcement, election-commission training, foreign-service training, and administrative services.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, during President Obama’s visit to Delhi in November 2010, “the two sides resolved to pursue joint development projects with the Afghan Government in capacity-building, agriculture and women’s empowerment.”<sup>5</sup>

It also would be valuable for the EU to engage India in the field of development cooperation and prepare joint initiatives in Afghanistan in order to increase the effectiveness of assistance. Having unique expertise on regional cooperation and integration, the EU could discuss with India best practices applicable to revive cooperation within the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), engage financially in the implementation of interregional infrastructure projects. In a similar manner, since Afghanistan is one of the biggest beneficiaries of Polish development assistance, Poland could develop joint civilian projects with India in areas of mutual concern (infrastructure projects in Ghazni, training of civil service, small development projects, etc.).

### **Military Assistance**

Despite being one of the main external players behind the stiff resistance of the Northern Alliance forces against the Taliban regime in 1996–2001, after the U.S.-led invasion in Afghanistan, India’s military involvement in the country came to an end. Instead, India focused on executing its soft-power strategy. Gradually, however, New Delhi was exploring ways to strengthen security and defence ties with Afghanistan, and possibly it has been contributing to the capacity development of the Afghan Army for quite some time. Eventually, both countries openly acknowledged this cooperation and expanded it in the Agreement on Strategic Partnership, announcing that “India agrees to assist, as mutually determined, in the training, equipping and capacity-building programmes for Afghan National Security Forces.”

Systemic assistance from a professional army well-experienced in counter-insurgency campaigns could be a positive development for Afghan troops; however, one has to be aware of the adverse effect this can have on Pakistan. More transparency of Indian activities or pursuing cooperation within a broader framework that includes Western experts could serve as a viable confidence-building measure in the region, and as such should be encouraged by the EU and the U.S. Although the training of Afghan forces is the maximum India can offer at the moment, the question about Indian “boots on the ground” in Afghanistan is also grasping the attention of security experts around the world.

The Indian government is consistently rebuffing any suggestions to consider a military presence in Afghanistan. Opposition to the direct engagement of the Indian army in

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<sup>4</sup> “The US Embassy Cables: How India can help stabilize Afghanistan”, *The Guardian*, 28 March 2007.

<sup>5</sup> *Joint Statement by President Obama and Prime Minister Singh of India*, New Delhi, 8 November, 2010.

the Afghan mission is also a dominant perspective among strategic analysts in New Delhi. India, indeed, has many good reasons not to send troops to Afghanistan, but possibly the most appealing is that in the current situation while the Americans and NATO do the toughest job, partly on India's behalf, it can concentrate on Afghanistan's internal situation and economic development, and this is a relatively favourable scenario. Still, India might be forced eventually to change its Afghan policy for the simple reason that the current, quite comfortable status quo will not last forever. India probably has the most to lose if Afghanistan descends into chaos after 2014 while also having the most to gain if the country is stable and prosperous.

While noting this, it seems credible to argue that specific conditions in which India may take part in a UN peacekeeping mission to Afghanistan cannot be completely ruled out. Starting discussions now about India as an acceptable military player in Afghanistan can send a much-needed signal to Pakistan, which has for long time exerted its veto over such a possibility. In order to extract more constructive cooperation on Afghanistan from the Pakistan Army it is important to make it aware it will not unilaterally dictate the future of the country and that its plans to reinstall the Taliban back in Kabul are hopeless. With American patience with Pakistan wearing thin, there is already more acceptance in Washington that India is a reliable alternative to Pakistan in discussing future scenarios for Afghanistan. If the prospect of an Indian military presence in Afghanistan is well played and that changes Pakistan's ambiguous policy, then after 2014 no foreign forces in Afghanistan would be needed at all.

### **“Af-Pak-In” approach**

It has become widely recognized in the last few years that any meaningful regional approach to Afghanistan that does not bring India on board is bound to fail. This was exposed by the number of regional meetings (i.e., Istanbul in January 2010 and Sochi in August 2010) that were held without India, due to Pakistani concerns, and didn't bring about substantial progress. In fact, the core regional problem and a major destabilizing factor in Afghanistan is historic enmity and competition between Pakistan and India over influence in Kabul. Without addressing this fundamental challenge, any durable peace in the region is hard to imagine. Indo-Pakistani cooperation on Afghanistan is thus crucial, not only for bringing stability to Afghanistan but also for providing conditions for its sustainable economic growth. Thus, the “Af-Pak” strategy should be reformulated, in practice, into an “Af-Pak-In” approach.

It is worth remembering that this kind of thinking was initially close to that of President Obama while he was running for the U.S. presidency in 2007 and 2008. He has even considered briefly including Kashmir and India in the portfolio of his Special Representative for Afghanistan. Eventually the idea was dropped in response to stark objections from New Delhi and after the Mumbai attacks in November 2008. Understandably, India didn't want to be portrayed as part of the same Afghan problem and

be treated on par with fragile states such as Pakistan and Afghanistan. More important, Indians were rightly concerned that linking Kashmir with Afghanistan would play into the hands of the Pakistani army, which could try to trade its full cooperation with the U.S. on Afghanistan for extortion-like concessions from India on the disputed Himalayan region. Such a deal was utterly unacceptable to New Delhi, and any attempt to put it into practice surely would stall the whole process of regional reconciliation and the stabilization of Afghanistan for years to come.

Given these circumstances, the only way forward on a regional approach to Afghanistan is to encourage dialogue between India and Pakistan “de-hyphenated” from any other bilateral problems not related directly to the Afghan issue. Problems such as Kashmir, a border dispute over the Siachen glacier or a water dispute arising from the Wullar Barrage project should be dealt with separately and in bilateral negotiations between both states. Any kind of “great bargain” in South Asia based on territorial concessions of any side for respective cooperation on Afghanistan will bear no fruit and is useless, both from the practical and moral perspectives. The opening premise is that even the most reasonable and legitimate concerns about Kashmir cannot serve in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a justification for destabilizing other countries or using terrorism as a tool of foreign policy. Similarly, no credible stakeholder in the West would accept Iran’s support to Hezbollah or Hamas on the grounds that Iran has some concerns about Israel. The same rule has to be applied in South Asia.

Hence, the reasonable “Af-Pak-In” approach has to concentrate solely on Afghanistan and its effective integration into the region, which will empower it to prosper with benefits for all other players. The international community has to assist India and Pakistan in their efforts to cooperate rather than compete on Afghanistan and it must help set up an environment in which both countries will find the best acceptable agreement on their legitimate presence in the country. The old zero-sum game over Afghanistan has to be replaced by a new “win-win” strategy. Instead of being a bone of contention and an additional source of friction, Afghanistan could turn out to be a positive example of cooperation between India and Pakistan. The recent resumption of India–Pakistan talks in July 2011, after a composite dialogue was stalled in 2008, allows for modest optimism.

In the first step, India and Pakistan ought to open channels of communication regarding Afghanistan and make their presence and interests there transparent. The Pakistani Army has to be made aware by its foreign partners that thinking in terms of “strategic depth” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is out of date and that any country’s exclusive influence in Afghanistan will not be accepted. While India already has agreed on a condition-based reconciliation and reintegration process with the Taliban, it will have to accept any result the Afghan peace negotiations will bring. In the next step, an official trilateral dialogue (Afghanistan–Pakistan–India) on Afghanistan with supportive roles for the U.S., EU or UN should follow. This can be further expanded to include other neighbours of Afghanistan

(Iran, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) and pivotal players in the region (U.S., EU or Russia) that can provide technical, financial and political support for the implementation of the agreed solutions. Last, in order to produce tangible benefits under the new approach, the operationalization of transnational projects to boost trade, energy and transport should begin.

Doing this would entail the adjustment of the Afghanistan–Pakistan Transport Agreement, on which the MoU was signed last July to allow for two-way transit between Afghanistan and India through Pakistani territory, and the enforcement of the TAPI framework agreement signed last December to construct a gas “peace pipeline” from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India. The reinvigoration of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)—the only regional organization that includes all three countries (Afghanistan since 2007)—should be prioritized and should get substantial technical and financial assistance from the West. If the trust deficit is reduced, India and Pakistan could even join the efforts to train Afghan security forces and cooperate on development projects in Afghanistan. All these examples show that if the Afghan conflict is to be resolved by political means, then reconciliation and cooperation between India and Pakistan is a must. The other option is protracted chaos in Afghanistan and the continuation of a proxy war between Pakistan and India.

## **Conclusion**

India is a major regional player in South Asia that shares Western aims in the region and is well-equipped to help Afghanistan in its development and stability at three distinct levels: civilian, military and regional. It is not only a close political ally of the Afghan government and a strategic partner of both the U.S. and the EU, but it enjoys the goodwill of a majority of the Afghan population and has close relations with all the neighbours of Afghanistan but one.

Apart from the substantial development aid it already has delivered to Afghanistan, India has an even broader, unrealized potential that can be of great value in further reconstruction efforts. If the security situation worsens in Afghanistan, India might be one of a few countries capable of contributing troops to prevent the country from descending into chaos. Moreover, India is an indispensable part of any regional solution that can end the conflict in Afghanistan and bring durable peace to the whole of South Asia.

Naturally, India faces some important shortcomings and weaknesses in Afghanistan, be it neglected relations with the Pashtun majority in the south of the country, the ambiguous attitude of China towards growing Indian influences in Afghanistan or the still-hampering lack of cooperation and “trust deficit” between India and its Western partners. For the last 10 years, the West has been reluctant to engage India on cooperation in Afghanistan. It is high time for the U.S. and the EU to go beyond symbolic declarations and



general praise for Indian efforts in development and open a debate about broader Indian engagement in Afghanistan.

The problem at the moment, however, may be that at this stage India is disappointed with the U.S. war on terrorism and in particular with U.S. mismanagement of the Afghan conflict and the mistakes it has made in its policy on Pakistan. India wouldn't be willing to face the problems in Afghanistan now since it considers them to be partly created by the West itself. Nevertheless, it is in its joint interest to make the best effort it can to stabilize Afghanistan, and all interested parties should engage in serious dialogue about their responsibilities and roles in ending the conflict.

In order to make the best use of the huge amount of Indian assets for the betterment of the Afghan people, the international community has to pursue a twofold strategy. First, it has to continue cooperation with India on Afghanistan in areas of mutual concern and expand it. Second, it should encourage India and Pakistan to engage in a meaningful dialogue on Afghanistan within a new AF-Pak-In approach.

The two parts of this strategy should be pursued both simultaneously and independently, which means that cooperation in one area cannot be conditional on progress in another. India is simply too crucial a partner in Afghanistan to be held hostage to Pakistan's fears and strategic interests. It is important also for the U.S. to take this opportunity to send a clear signal to the Pakistani Army that it has a solid alternative and that Pakistan cannot dictate the future of Afghanistan on its terms. Expanding India's role in Afghanistan would be, in fact, in the interest of Afghans, the West and the Pakistani people, even if not necessarily the Pakistani Army. It is time to acknowledge that India cannot save Afghanistan but is indispensable in its long-term stability and development.