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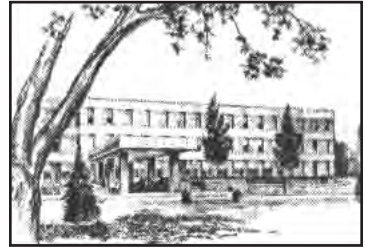
INDIA'S CHANGING AFGHANISTAN POLICY: REGIONAL AND GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

Harsh V. Pant

U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE



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INDIA'S CHANGING AFGHANISTAN POLICY: REGIONAL AND GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

Harsh V. Pant

December 2012

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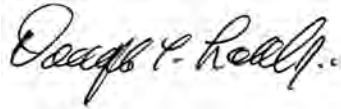
FOREWORD

As public pressure intensifies in Western nations, important changes have been taking place in the Western strategy toward Afghanistan. In this rapidly evolving geostrategic context, other regional powers, including India, are having to reassess their policies vis-à-vis Afghanistan. This monograph examines the changing trajectory of Indian policy toward Afghanistan since 2001 and argues that New Delhi has been responding to a strategic environment shaped by other actors in the region. As the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces prepare to leave Afghanistan in 2014, India stands at a crossroads as it remains keen to preserve its interests in Afghanistan. This monograph underlines the ever-evolving Indian policy in Afghanistan by examining it in three phases, before drawing out the implications of this change for the region and the West.

New Delhi expects anarchy to intensify in the northwestern subcontinent, as insurgents in Afghanistan have been repeatedly successful in undermining local and international confidence in the viability of extant political structures in Kabul amidst the withdrawal of Western forces. Insulating India from the widening disorder will remain the main strategic objective of New Delhi's policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan. India is trying to ensure that it does not lose out, as has happened in the past, as new realities emerge in the region in the coming years.

This monograph comes at a time when Indian foreign policy has become more ambitious than ever before in identifying its priorities. Afghanistan is also seen by many in India as a test case of India's role as a security provider in its own neighborhood. Accord-

ingly, the author of this monograph, Dr. Harsh V. Pant, examines the trajectory of Indian policy toward Afghanistan over the past decade and underscores the implications for the region and the United States in particular at a time when U.S.-India ties are strong and vibrant. The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to offer this monograph as part of its continuing effort to inform the debate on Afghanistan's future, and to help strategic leaders better understand the realities of the contemporary South Asian strategic landscape.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr." in a cursive script.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.
Director
Strategic Studies Institute

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

HARSH V. PANT is Reader in International Relations in the Defence Studies Department at King's College London, United Kingdom. He is also an Associate at the Centre for Science and Security Studies and the India Institute at King's College London. He has been a Visiting Professor at the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore; a Visiting Fellow at the Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania; a Visiting Scholar at the Center for International Peace and Security Studies, McGill University, Montreal, Canada; and an Emerging Leaders Fellow at the Australia-India Institute, University of Melbourne, Australia. His current research is focused on Asian security issues. Dr. Pant's most recent books include *The US-India Nuclear Pact: Policy, Process and Great Power Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2011), *The Rise of China: Implications for India* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), and *The Rise of the Indian Navy: Internal Vulnerabilities: External Challenges* (Ashgate, 2012). Dr. Pant is a graduate of Delhi University. He holds an M.A. and an M.Phil. from Jawaharlal Nehru University and a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Notre Dame.

SUMMARY

Since 2001, Afghanistan has allowed New Delhi an opportunity to underscore its role as a regional power. India has growing stakes in peace and stability in Afghanistan, and the 2011 India-Afghan strategic partnership agreement underlines India's commitment to ensure that a positive momentum in Delhi-Kabul ties is maintained. This monograph examines the changing trajectory of Indian policy toward Afghanistan since 2001 and argues that New Delhi has been responding to a strategic environment shaped by other actors in the region. As the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces prepare to leave Afghanistan in 2014, India stands at a crossroads as it remains keen to preserve its interests in Afghanistan. This monograph underlines the ever-evolving Indian policy in Afghanistan by examining it in three phases before drawing out the implications of this change for the region and the United States. There has been a broader maturing of the U.S.-India defense ties, and Afghanistan is likely to be a beneficiary of this trend. Managing Pakistan and unravelling Islamabad's encirclement complex should be the biggest priority for both Washington and New Delhi in the coming years if there is to be any hope of keeping Afghanistan a stable entity post-2014.

INDIA'S CHANGING AFGHANISTAN POLICY: REGIONAL AND GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

New Delhi has long viewed South Asia as India's exclusive sphere of influence and has sought to prevent the intervention of external powers in the affairs of the region. The notion of a "Monroe Doctrine" similar to the one proclaimed for the Western Hemisphere by the United States in the 19th century was explored by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister. Henceforth, the security of its neighboring states was considered to be intricately linked with India's own security and was deemed essential if India were to attain the status of a major global power.¹

With India's rise in the global interstate hierarchy in recent years, tensions have emerged between its purported role on the world stage and the demands of the challenges it faces in its own neighbourhood. South Asia is a difficult neighborhood, and India's strategic periphery continues to witness turmoil and uncertainty. The instability in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar is a major inhibiting factor for India to realize its dream of becoming a major global player. India's attempts to emerge as a global economic power are marred by the uncertainty in the region, which has even stalled its attempts at building interdependencies and enhancing connectivity. India is surrounded by several weak states that view New Delhi's hegemonic status in the region with suspicion. The conundrum India faces is that, while on the one hand it is often seen as unresponsive to the concerns of its neighbors, on the other, any diplomatic aggressiveness on its part is viewed with suspicion and often resentment. The structural position of India in the region makes it high-

ly likely that Indian predominance will continue to be resented by its smaller neighbors, even as instability nearby continues to have the potential of upsetting its own delicate political balance. However, a policy of “splendid isolation” is not an option, and India’s desire to emerge as a major global player will remain just that—a desire—unless it engages its immediate neighborhood more meaningfully and emerges as a net provider of regional peace and stability. Even as India continues to struggle with its foreign policy with respect to other neighboring states, since 2001 Afghanistan has allowed New Delhi an opportunity to underscore its role as a regional power.

For the United States, the ground realities in Afghanistan have been turning from bad to worse, and there seems to be no easy resolution in sight. A series of events in recent months—an American soldier killing Afghan civilians in March 2012, the Koran burnings, and the emergence in January 2012 of an Internet video showing three Marines urinating on the corpses of Taliban fighters—have inflamed Afghans to an unprecedented degree, forcing the United States to re-evaluate its entire strategy toward Afghanistan.²

British Prime Minister David Cameron visited Washington in May 2012 to underline with the U.S. President that Afghan forces should take over a lead combat role in the country by mid-2013, earlier than planned. British and U.S. combat troops are expected to leave Afghanistan completely by the end of 2014. The two leaders acknowledged that Afghanistan would not have a “perfect democracy” by 2014. But they envisaged “leaving Afghanistan looking after its own security, not being a haven for terror, without the involvement of foreign troops.”³ Cameron has made it clear that he thinks that the public wants an

“endgame” to the war in Afghanistan. The U.S. President has repeatedly suggested that the United States, Britain, and their North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies are committed to shifting to a support role in Afghanistan in 2013, and that the next phase in the transition will be an important step toward turning security control over to the Afghans by the end of 2014.

As public pressure intensifies in the Western nations, important changes have been taking place in the Western strategy toward Afghanistan.⁴ The most significant is that the time when Afghan troops are expected to take what is called the “lead combat role” is being gradually accelerated, with the expectation that this will lead to a speedier return home of Western troops. After long insisting that all of Afghanistan will begin the process of transition by the end of 2014, in February 2012, U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta suggested that he was hoping that the process would be complete by mid- to late-2013, bringing forward the moment that Afghan troops would take the lead combat role.⁵ What this means is that from the very beginning of 2013, there will have to be a steady withdrawal of Western troops. In May 2012, Washington and Kabul signed a strategic partnership agreement, which will lead to the Afghan security forces taking the lead in combat operations by the end of 2012; all American combat troops will be leaving by the end of 2014. (This will not include trainers, who will assist Afghan forces and a small contingent of troops with a specific mission to combat al-Qaeda through counterterrorism operations).⁶

It is in this rapidly evolving geostrategic context that other regional powers, including India, have to reassess their policies vis-à-vis Afghanistan. This

monograph examines the changing trajectory of Indian policy toward Afghanistan since 2001 and argues that New Delhi has been responding to a strategic environment shaped by other actors in the region. As the U.S.-led NATO forces prepare to leave Afghanistan in 2014, India stands at a crossroads as it remains keen to preserve its interests in Afghanistan. This monograph underlines the ever-evolving Indian policy in Afghanistan by examining it in three phases before drawing out the implications of this change for the region and the West.

INDIA AND AFGHANISTAN: AN EVER-SHIFTING LANDSCAPE

Bilateral ties between India and Afghanistan span centuries, given Afghanistan's close links to the South Asian civilization historically. India has traditionally maintained strong cultural ties with Afghanistan, resulting in stable relations between the two states. Of course, imperial powers such as Great Britain and Russia used Afghanistan as a pawn in their "great game" of colonization, and given the contested boundary between British India and Afghanistan, the ties between the two remained frayed.⁷ But after independence, as the problem of the Durand Line got transferred to Pakistan, India had no reason not to enjoy good ties with Afghanistan, especially given the adversarial nature of India-Pakistan relations.

The Cold War also forced the two states to assume roughly similar foreign policy postures. While India was one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement, Afghanistan also tried to follow an independent foreign policy and, for some time at least, was able to effectively play one superpower against the other—thereby garnering economic assistance

from both sides. But given America's close ties with Pakistan and the Soviet Union's generosity in providing extensive military and economic aid, Afghanistan gradually fell into the Soviet orbit of influence, resulting in the Soviet invasion in 1979. The Non-Aligned Movement was divided on this issue, and India was one of the few nations to support the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, thereby damaging severely its prestige and credibility in the international community.⁸ Given its antagonistic relations with Pakistan, India decided to support Pakistan's adversaries and ended up supporting whoever was in power in Soviet-supported Kabul. This came to an abrupt end with the victory of Pakistan-based mujahideen in 1992.⁹

The chaos that resulted in Afghanistan following Soviet occupation and its ultimate withdrawal in 1989 had far-reaching implications for global politics as well as for Indian foreign policy. As the Cold War ended in the early-1990s, India faced a plethora of challenges on economic and foreign policy fronts. It had little time or inclination to assess what was happening in Afghanistan, so when the Taliban, spawned by the chaos and corruption that dominated post-Soviet Afghanistan, came to power in 1996, India was at a loss to evolve a coherent foreign policy response. India's ties with Afghanistan hit their nadir through the Taliban's 7-year rule when India continued to support the Northern Alliance by providing money and materiel.¹⁰

Ever since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, India has tried to pursue a proactive Afghanistan policy, and a broad-based interaction is taking place between the two states.¹¹ This is also a time when Indian capabilities—political, economic, and military—have grown

markedly, and India has become increasingly ambitious in defining its foreign-policy agenda.¹² Rising powers seek to enhance their security by increasing their capabilities and their control over the external environment.¹³ As a rising power, India has also sought to make its presence felt by adopting a more proactive role in its extended neighborhood and forging economic, military, and institutional links. In many ways, Afghanistan has become emblematic of India's new and ambitious policy for the region. India's role in Afghanistan can be divided into three distinct phases as it evolved in response to the changing ground realities in the country.

Phase I: A "Soft" Engagement.

India's engagement with Afghanistan readily became multidimensional after the defeat of the Taliban and the installation of an Interim Authority in 2001. This was reflected in an immediate upgrade of Indian representation in Afghanistan from a Liaison Office to a full-fledged Embassy in 2002. India actively participated in the Bonn Conference and was instrumental in the emergence of post-Taliban governing and political authority in Afghanistan. Since then, India's main focus has been to support the Afghan government and the political process in the country as mandated under the Bonn agreement of 2001.¹⁴ India has continued to pursue a policy of high-level engagement with Afghanistan through extensive and wide-ranging humanitarian, financial, and project assistance, as well as participation in international efforts aimed at political reconciliation and economic rebuilding of the country.

India's relations with Afghanistan have steadily improved for a number of reasons. Unlike the relationship with Pakistan, ties between India and Af-

ghanistan are not hampered by the existence of a contiguous, and contested, border. India's support for the Northern Alliance against the Pakistan-backed Taliban in the 1990s strengthened its position in Kabul after 2001. Many members of the Alliance are members of the government or hold influential provincial posts. India has tried to restore the balance in its engagement with a range of different ethnic groups and political affiliations in Afghanistan. The balance was tilted toward the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance during the 1990s as a counter to Pakistan-controlled hard-line Pashtun factions, led by the Taliban. India has used its vocal support for Afghan President Karzai, an ethnic Pashtun educated in India, to demonstrate its keenness to revive its close ties with Pashtuns.

During each of the visits to India by President Karzai, several important bilateral initiatives have been announced by the two sides. This includes a \$70 million financial commitment by India for the construction of the Zaranj-Delaram road; a Preferential Trade agreement between the two states; memoranda of understanding for cooperation in the fields of civil aviation, media and information, rural development, standardization, and education; and the establishment of a Joint Committee at the level of Commerce Ministers to conclude an Export-Import (Ex-Im) Bank Line of Credit of \$50 million to promote business-to-business relations. Afghanistan has also sought Indian aid in agri-technology, which would halt desertification, deforestation, and water wastage in Afghanistan.¹⁵ Afghanistan was self-sufficient in food until the 1970s, but since then the vagaries of war, drought, the growth of the drug trade, and mismanagement have wreaked havoc with the nation's agricultural system.

The Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, visited Afghanistan in 2005, the first by an Indian head of

government in 29 years. (Indira Ghandi visited Kabul in 1976, the last Indian Prime Minister to do so before Singh.) In an act of significant symbolism, Singh's visit was also the first by a foreign head of state or government to last for more than a day since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001, as Singh brushed aside concerns for his security and demonstrated India's special commitment to Afghanistan. This visit was aimed at reaffirming the commitment of both sides to reinvigorate their past ties and develop a new partnership, as well as to mark the consolidation of traditional bonds between the two that were severed during the rule of the Taliban.

In consonance with the priorities laid down by Afghanistan's government, Indian assistance has focused on building human capital and physical infrastructure, improving security, and helping the agricultural and other important sectors of the country's economy. In the realm of defense, India's support has been limited to supplying Afghanistan with defensive military equipment, such as armored checkpoints and watchtowers.

India and Afghanistan have a long-standing record of technical and economic cooperation in various fields, since prior to 1979 Afghanistan was the largest partner in India's technical and economic cooperation program.¹⁶ India launched an extensive assistance program in Afghanistan immediately after the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 and pledged \$750 million toward reconstruction efforts, most of which was unconditional. From this amount, approximately \$270 million has already been utilized, and the projects range from humanitarian and infrastructure to health and rural development, as well as training of diplomats and bureaucrats. New Delhi has emerged as

one of Afghanistan's top six donors, having extended a \$500 million aid package in 2001 and gradually increasing it ever since.

Among the most-high-profile of infrastructure projects undertaken by India was the reconstruction of the 220-kilometer-long Zaranj-Delaram Road, which will enable Afghanistan to have access to the sea via Iran and will provide a shorter route for Indian goods to reach Afghanistan. This project was completed in 2008 by India's Border Roads Organization despite stiff resistance from the Taliban. The security of the Indian workers on this project was provided by a 300-man-strong paramilitary force furnished by India, which caused the project to exceed time and monetary deadlines.

India is also investing in the rebuilding of institutional capacity in Afghanistan by providing training to more than 700 Afghans in various professions, including diplomats, lawyers, judges, doctors, paramedics, women entrepreneurs, teachers, officials in various departments of Afghanistan's government, public officials, and cartographers. Afghanistan's budding public transport system relies on Indian support, as India is not only providing buses but also training traffic operators and other personnel related to transport.

India's commitment of one million tons of wheat aid to Afghanistan has been operationalized by converting part of it in the form of high-protein biscuits for a school-feeding program through the channels of the World Food Programme. India is also funding and executing the Salma Dam Power Project in Heart Province involving a commitment of around \$80 million as well as the double-circuit transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul.¹⁷ Afghanistan's new parliament building is also being constructed by India.

India has agreed to adopt 100 villages in Afghanistan to promote rural development by introducing solar electrification and rain water-harvesting technologies.

India has a fundamental interest in ensuring that Afghanistan emerges as a stable and economically integrated state in the region. Though Afghanistan's economy has recovered significantly since the fall of the Taliban, with the real gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate exceeding 7 percent in 2011, it remains highly dependent on foreign aid and trade with neighboring countries.¹⁸ The only way in which the flailing Karzai government can retain and enhance its legitimacy is by bringing the Afghan economy back on track. For this, it largely depends on other states, and India is playing an important role by laying the foundation for sustainable economic development of its neighbor. The preferential trade agreement signed by India and Afghanistan gives substantial duty concessions to certain categories of Afghan dry fruits when entering India, with Afghanistan allowing reciprocal concessions to Indian products such as sugar, tea, and pharmaceuticals. Kabul wants Indian businesses to take advantage of its low-tax regime to help develop a manufacturing hub in areas such as cement, oil and gas, and electricity, and in services including hotels, banks, and communications.

India also piloted the move to make Afghanistan a member of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), with the hope that with the entry of Afghanistan into the SAARC, issues relating to the transit and free flow of goods across borders in the region can be addressed, thereby leading to the greater economic development of Afghanistan and the region as a whole. Moreover, South Asia will be able to reach out to Central and West Asia more meaning-

fully with Afghanistan as a member of the SAARC. It has been estimated that given Afghanistan's low trade linkages with other states in the region, its participation in the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) agreement would result in trade gains of \$2 billion to the region with as much as \$606 million accruing to Afghanistan.¹⁹

Ordinary Afghans, on the other hand, appear to have welcomed Indian involvement in development projects in their country. It has been India's deliberate policy to refrain from giving its support to a military dimension and to stick to civilian matters. Western observers, though, tended to view Indian involvement in Afghanistan as problematic, as it has worked to undercut Pakistan's influence in the country. The result was that India's attempt to leverage its "soft power" in Afghanistan became increasingly risky.

Phase II: New Delhi Marginalized.

As India's profile grew in Afghanistan, its adversaries, intent on ridding Afghanistan of Indian involvement, also upped the ante in an attempt to rupture burgeoning India-Afghanistan relations. This happened as the West got distracted by its war in Iraq, allowing the Taliban, with support from Pakistan, to bounce back and reclaim the strategic space from which it had been ousted. As the balance of power shifted in favor of Pakistan and its proxies, Indian interests, including personnel and projects, emerged as viable targets. In July 2008, the Indian Embassy in Kabul was struck by a bomb blast, leaving 60 dead – including an Indian foreign service officer and an embassy defense attaché. In October 2009, a suicide car bombing outside the Indian Embassy left at least 17

dead, and scores of others wounded.²⁰ Investigators soon concluded that the attack was perpetrated by the Pakistani-based Haqqani group, and suggested that Pakistani intelligence had also played a role. After the second attack on the Embassy in 2009, the Afghan envoy to the United States once again underscored the involvement of Pakistani intelligence. This was the first time that a top Afghan official was openly blaming the Pakistani Intelligence Agency (ISI) for a terrorist attack in Afghan territory.²¹ India faced a tough road ahead, as a perception gained ground that the Taliban were on the rebound with a heightened sense of political uncertainty in Washington about the future of the American military presence in Afghanistan.

India had much to consider. The return of the Taliban to Afghanistan would pose a major threat to its borders. In the end, the brunt of escalating terrorism will be borne by India, which already has been described as “the sponge that protects” the West.²² Indian strategists were warning that a hurried U.S. withdrawal with the Taliban still posing a threat to Afghanistan will have serious implications for India, not the least of which would be to see Pakistan, its eternal rival, step in more aggressively. To be fair, India’s role in Afghanistan should not have been viewed through the eyes of Western observers, who dubbed it provocative, or in the eyes of Pakistan, which resented its own waning influence. Rather, India’s involvement should have been considered through the eyes of the Afghan people who, arguably, were benefiting from the use of their neighbor’s “soft power,” whatever its end motivations.

There was a general consensus in India that it should not send troops to Afghanistan. Yet beyond this, there was little agreement about what policy op-

tions it has if greater turbulence in the Af-Pak region spills over into India. The traditional Indian stance had been that while India was happy to help the Afghan government in its reconstruction efforts, it would not be directly engaged in security operations—but this increasingly became harder to sustain. The inability of the Indian government to provide for the security of its private sector operating in Afghanistan was leading to a paradoxical situation in which the Indian government's largest contractors in Afghanistan seemed to have participated in projects that might have ended up paying off the Haqqani network, one of Afghanistan's deadliest and most anti-Indian insurgent groups.²³

A debate therefore has been emerging as to whether India should start supporting its humanitarian endeavors in Afghanistan with a stronger military presence. If Afghanistan was the most important frontier in combating terrorism targeted against India, the critics asked, then how long could India continue with its present policy trajectory whereby its civilians were getting killed in pursuit of its developmental objectives? This also started to have an impact on the U.S.-India relations. For too long, the Indian government seemed to have largely left the management of its neighbors to the United States. A case in point was India's decision not to take any serious action against Pakistan in the aftermath of the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, which killed 166 people and shattered Indian self-confidence as a rising power. Instead, New Delhi continued to put pressure on Islamabad, using American leverage to bring the masterminds of those terror strikes to justice and stop the use of Pakistani territory for terrorist violence directed at India, even as there was a feeling in New Delhi that this strategy was not really very effective.

It was the 60-nation London conference on Afghanistan in January 2010, which advocated talks with the Taliban, that jolted India, as New Delhi viewed with alarm its rapidly shrinking strategic space for diplomatic maneuvering. When Indian External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna underscored the folly of making a distinction “between a good Taliban and a bad Taliban,” he was completely out of sync with the larger mood at the conference.²⁴ The U.S.-led Western alliance had made up its mind that it was not a question of if, but of when and how, to exit from Afghanistan, which the leaders in Washington and London felt was rapidly becoming a quagmire. So when London decided that the time had come to woo the “moderate” section of the Taliban back to share power in Kabul, it was a signal to India that Pakistan seemed to have convinced the West that it could play the role of mediator in negotiations with the Taliban — thereby underlining its centrality in the unfolding strategic dynamic in the region. It would be catastrophic for Indian security if remnants of the Taliban were to come to power with the backing of the ISI and Pakistan’s military.

These changing ground realities forced India to start reconsidering the terms of its involvement in Afghanistan. Pakistan’s paranoia about the Indian presence in Afghanistan had led the West to underplay India’s largely beneficial role in the country, even as Pakistan’s every claim about Indian intentions was being taken at face value. The Taliban militants who blew up the Indian embassy in Kabul in 2008 and tried again in 2009 have sent a strong signal that India is part of the evolving security dynamic in Afghanistan despite the country’s reluctance to take on a more active role in the military operations. After targeting personnel involved in developmental projects and em-

boldened by India's nonresponse, these terrorists have trained their guns directly at the Indian State. Moreover, as India's isolation at the London conference on Afghanistan underlined, India's role in Afghanistan was not being fully appreciated, even by the West.

Islamabad and Kabul also managed to formalize a pact that would allow the Pakistani army a role in negotiating the reconciliation between Kabul and the Taliban, which was supported by the United States.²⁵ The United States publicly endorsed the idea of negotiations with the Taliban on a political settlement with Washington, holding several preliminary meetings with representatives of Mullah Omar, though so far without much progress. As Pakistan succeeded in convincing the West that the best way out of the present mess is to reach out to the "good Taliban," India's marginalization seemed only to increase. Though the U.S. and Afghan governments have insisted that any settlement process should result in an end to Taliban violence and a willingness to conform to the Afghan Constitution, the possibility of a Pakistan-sponsored settlement between hard line elements of the Taliban and the Afghan government remains a serious concern for India. As the diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks underscore, India has been concerned about U.S. plans to exit from Afghanistan and its possible repercussions on India's security. The Indian Prime Minister had expressed his hope to the Barack Obama administration that all those engaged in the process of moving toward stability in Afghanistan would "stay on course."²⁶ As Indian hopes have been belied, New Delhi has to rapidly alter its approach toward Af-Pak.

The United States has been actively discouraging India from assuming a higher profile in Afghanistan for fear of offending Pakistan.²⁷ At the same time, it has failed in getting Pakistan to take Indian concerns more seriously. This has led to rapid deterioration in the Indian security environment, with New Delhi having little or no strategic space to maneuver. Not surprisingly, therefore, India was forced to reassess its priorities vis-à-vis Af-Pak, given the huge stakes that New Delhi has developed in Afghanistan over the past decade.

Phase III: India Fights Back.

To preserve its interests in a rapidly evolving strategic milieu, India has been taking a number of policy measures that will have a significant impact on the regional dynamic. These measures include a decision to step up its role in the training of Afghan forces, achieving greater policy coordination with states like Russia and Iran, and reaching out to all sections of Afghan society.²⁸

A Strategic Partnership with Kabul.

As the strategic realities in South Asia radically altered in the aftermath of Osama bin Laden's death on May 2, 2011, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh lost no time in reaching out to Afghanistan with his 2-day visit to Kabul, where he announced a fresh commitment of \$500 million for Afghanistan's development, over and above India's existing aid assistance of around \$1.5 billion.²⁹ New Delhi and Kabul agreed that the "strategic partnership" between the two neighbors, to be implemented under the frame-

work of a partnership council headed by the foreign ministers of the two nations, will entail cooperation in areas of security, law enforcement and justice, including an enhanced focus on cooperation in the fight against international terrorism, organized crime, illegal trafficking in narcotics, and money laundering. The Indian Prime Minister, in a rare honor, addressed a joint session of the Afghan Parliament, underscoring Indo-Afghan unity in fighting extremism. Most significant of all was Singh's expression of India's support for the Afghan government's plan of national reconciliation involving Taliban insurgents, thereby signaling an end to India's public opposition to a deal with the Taliban and bridging a strategic gap with the United States.³⁰ Also, shedding its reticence on Afghan security issues, India became more outspoken about its commitment to build the capabilities of the Afghan security forces.³¹ New Delhi's review of its regional foreign-policy priorities couldn't have come at a more urgent time.

The Indian Prime Minister's visit was followed by the signing of a landmark strategic partnership agreement between New Delhi and Kabul during Hamid Karzai's visit to New Delhi in October 2011, which commits India to "training, equipping, and capacity building" of the Afghan security forces. India has pledged to train and equip Afghan's army and police force, expanding on limited training it conducted for the army in India a few years back in 2007. India acceded to Afghanistan's request for 150 army officers to receive training at Indian defense and military academies and also agreed to begin hosting training sessions for Afghan police officers.³² This was Afghanistan's first strategic pact with any country, though Karzai is seeking strategic pacts with the United States, and

NATO as well, to ward off the challenge from Pakistan. As part of the new pact, bilateral dialogue at the level of the National Security Advisor has been institutionalized to focus on enhancing cooperation on security issues. New Delhi is hoping that Kabul will take the lead in defining the exact terms of this engagement, even as India made it clear that it would “stand by Afghanistan” when foreign troops withdraw from the country in 2014.³³

Along with the strategic pact, two other agreements on India-Afghan cooperation in developing hydrocarbons and mineral resources were signed, further underlining India’s role in the evolution of Afghanistan as a viable economic unit. The two nations agreed to enhance political cooperation and institutionalize regular bilateral political and foreign office consultations. Underscoring its role as Afghanistan’s main economic partner, India hosted the “Delhi Investment Summit on Afghanistan” in June 2012, where it called upon the private sector in the regional states to invest in Afghanistan “to create a virtuous cycle of healthy economic competition in Afghanistan.”³⁴ The strategic pact with India is Afghanistan’s way of trying to deal with an increasingly more menacing Pakistan. During his visit to New Delhi, Karzai was categorical in stating that South Asia faced “dangers from terrorism and extremism used as an instrument of policy against innocent civilians.”³⁵

Afghanistan’s relationship with Pakistan deteriorated after Karzai decided to call off nascent peace talks with Taliban militants. After calling the Taliban “brothers” and encouraging the insurgents to reconcile with the Afghan government, Karzai became more hard-nosed in his appraisal of the Taliban and its sponsors in Pakistan. The Afghan President sug-

gested that peace talks with the Taliban are futile unless they involve the Pakistani authorities, who are the real masters behind the operations of the insurgent groups.³⁶ Karzai's attitude was particularly affected by the killing in September 2011 of former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani, the Afghan government's chief peace envoy, by the Taliban. Kabul was categorical that this assassination was plotted in the Pakistani city of Quetta with active support from the ISI.

Though many in Washington viewed the killing of Osama bin Laden as an opening that could be used to accelerate a negotiated settlement with the Taliban and hasten the end of the Afghan war, U.S.-Pakistan ties went into a nosedive soon thereafter. The security establishment in Pakistan wants to retain Pakistan's central role in negotiations with the Taliban and to prevent the United States from having any long-term military presence in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Washington has been signaling that it will not tolerate continuing use of terrorist groups, aided and abetted by the ISI, to kill Americans and their allies in Afghanistan. In a radical departure from the long-standing U.S. policy of publicly playing down Pakistan's official support for insurgents operating from havens within Pakistan, Admiral Mike Mullen, then Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, described the Haqqani network as a "veritable arm" of Pakistan's ISI.³⁷ Pakistan's sponsorship of the Haqqani network had been an open secret for quite some time as was the fact that the Haqqanis have been responsible for some of the most murderous assaults on the Indian and Western presence in Afghanistan. The United States was reluctant to take on Pakistan on this issue until such time as American interests did not come under direct attack. When they did, Washington had little choice but to

confront Islamabad and Rawalpindi (headquarters of the Pakistani Army).

As the West outlined its plans for a pull-out from Afghanistan, New Delhi recognized the immediacy of strengthening its partnership with Kabul. Strengthening the security dimension of India-Afghanistan ties is extremely important for India, as it is in New Delhi's interest to help Kabul preserve its strategic autonomy at a time when Pakistan has made it clear that it would like the Haqqani network and the Taliban to be at the center of the post-American political dispensation in Kabul. It is true that given the logic of geography and demography, Pakistan cannot be ignored in the future viability of Afghanistan. Karzai was assuaging Pakistani anxieties when he suggested that "Pakistan is a twin brother" while "India is a great friend." But India and Afghanistan can certainly change the conditions on the ground, forcing Pakistan to acknowledge that its policy toward its neighbors has not only brought instability in the region but has also pushed the very existence of Pakistan into question.

Forging New Alignments.

Even as New Delhi reached out to Kabul for a strengthened security partnership, it also recognized the need to coordinate more closely with states such as Russia and Iran with which it shared convergent interests vis-à-vis Afghanistan and Pakistan. None of these states would accept a fundamentalist Sunni-dominated regime in Kabul or the reemergence of Afghanistan as a base for jihadist terrorism directed at neighboring states. The Indian government reached out to Moscow at the highest political levels, reiterating the two nations' shared positions on Afghanistan and

institutionalizing cooperation on this issue.³⁸ Whereas India recognizes that a victory by pro-Pakistan Pash-tun groups, Taliban or otherwise, in Afghanistan would be a defeat for its outreach to Afghans, Russia hopes to leverage the Afghan crisis into an acceptance of Moscow's security leadership by the Central Asian nations vulnerable to Taliban-inspired Islamist militancy.

Moscow, for its part, having kept itself aloof from Afghanistan and Pakistan for years after the Taliban's ouster, is refocusing on Afghanistan, because Islamist extremism and drug trafficking emanating from Central Asia have reemerged as major threats to Russia's national security. Russia hosted the presidents of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan in August 2010, promised to invest heavily in developing Afghan infrastructure and natural resources, and repeatedly laid down certain "red lines" for the Taliban's integration into the political process – notably renunciation of violence, cessation of the armed struggle, acceptance of the Afghan Constitution, and a complete breakup with al-Qaeda.³⁹

During Putin's visit to India in December 2002, even as Russia secured India's agreement to intensify the strategic partnership, India was able to receive Russian support for its position on Pakistan, with Russia calling on Pakistan to end its support for cross-border terrorism.⁴⁰ The Russian endorsement of the Indian position on terrorism and Pakistan reflected Russia's desire to maintain the traditional goodwill in relations by politically genuflecting to India's deepest security concerns. Russia has repeatedly called upon Pakistan to do more on terrorism directed at India and in 2010, the joint statement signed during President Dmitry Medvedev's visit to New Delhi named Paki-

stan categorically for the first time.⁴¹ The two states remain concerned about the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and agree that successful stabilization will be possible only after the elimination of safe havens and infrastructure for the terrorism and violent extremism present in Pakistan and Afghanistan. As Russia seeks to find a role in the aftermath of the withdrawal of NATO forces, it is also making clear that, much like India, it too does not favor a quick withdrawal of foreign troops and has even facilitated the transit of military supplies for NATO forces in Afghanistan through its territory.⁴²

Indian and Russian geopolitical and security interests in the Central Asian region are also compatible insofar as religious extremism, terrorism, drug trafficking, smuggling in small arms, and organized crime, emanating largely from Central Asia, threaten both equally. As a consequence, Russia has pushed for a full membership of India in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), where India currently holds an observer status. The SCO was established in 1996 as a regional strategy grouping aimed mainly at combating separatist unrest. The group's members, including Russia, China, and most Central Asian states, share intelligence and conduct joint military exercises, even if they fail to coordinate larger policy because of competing interests. The SCO plans to focus more on Afghanistan and Pakistan in the coming years, given a rising anxiety among neighboring states that extremist and terrorist forces will find a fresh opportunity to gain traction once the United States and allied forces leave Afghanistan. The SCO membership will allow India greater leverage in shaping the ground realities in Afghanistan following the departure of the United States and NATO. The SCO could provide the regional framework for the stabilization of Afghanistan, as all

neighbors of Afghanistan, except Turkmenistan, are members of the SCO in one form or another.

The United States has started a dialogue process with the SCO. With the United States now set to make its own military retreat from Afghanistan, Russia and India will have to work together to avert a destabilizing power vacuum there if terrorism blowback from the Af-Pak region is to be avoided.⁴³ Both New Delhi and Moscow agree that the key to resolving Afghanistan is a regional solution in which all neighbors ensure that Afghanistan is in control of its own future and no one intervenes in its internal politics.

Iran is the third part of this triangle, and New Delhi's outreach to Tehran became more serious after signals from the Iranians that the relationship was drifting. The two countries had worked closely when the Taliban was in power in Kabul and continued to cooperate on several infrastructure projects allowing transit facilities for Indian goods, but the Indian decision to vote against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency on the nuclear issue led to a chilling of the bilateral relationship.⁴⁴ New Delhi has made an effort to revive its partnership with Tehran in Afghanistan, with the two sides deciding to hold "structured and regular consultations" on the issue of Afghanistan.⁴⁵ For its part, Tehran is worried about the potential major role for leaders of the almost exclusively Sunni Taliban in the emerging political order in Afghanistan. It has even encouraged New Delhi to send more assistance to provinces in northern and western Afghanistan that are under the control of those provinces associated with the Northern Alliance. At the Iranians' initiative, India is now part of a trilateral Afghan-Iranian-Indian effort to counter Pakistan's attempts to freeze India out of various regional initia-

tives.⁴⁶ In defiance of the international sanctions, the Indian government even started encouraging Indian companies to invest in the Iranian energy sector so that economic interests can underpin the bilateral political realignment.⁴⁷

India would certainly like to increase its presence in the Iranian energy sector because of its rapidly rising energy needs, and it is rightfully feeling restless about its own marginalization in Iran. Not only has Pakistan signed a pipeline deal with Tehran, but China also is starting to make its presence felt there. China is now Iran's largest trading partner and is undertaking massive investments in the country, rapidly occupying the space vacated by Western firms. While Beijing's economic engagement with Iran is growing, India's presence is shrinking, as firms such as Reliance Industries have withdrawn from Iran, partially under Western pressure. Others have shelved their plans to make investments. Indian oil companies are finding it hard to get vessels to lift the Iranian cargo because of Western sanctions.

At the same time, there is little evidence that Iran would be a reliable partner in India's search for energy security. Iran has either rejected or not yet finalized plans due to last-minute changes in the terms and conditions for a number of important projects with Indian businesses and the Indian government. Moreover, both major energy deals recently signed with great fanfare, which also raised concerns in the West, are now in limbo. India's 25-year, \$22 billion agreement with Iran for the export of liquefied natural gas (LNG) has not produced anything since it was signed in 2005. The agreement requires India to build an LNG plant in Iran and would need American components, which might violate the U.S. Iran and Libya Sanctions Act.

The other project involves the construction of a 1,700-mile, \$7 billion pipeline to carry natural gas from Iran to India via Pakistan, and it is also currently stalled.

India's foreign policy toward Iran is multifaceted and is a function of a number of variables, including India's energy requirements, its outreach to the Muslim world, its large Shia population, and its policy on Afghanistan. There has been a lot of hyperbole about India-Iran ties in recent years, which some Western analysts have described as an "axis," a "strategic partnership," or even an "alliance." The Indian Left has also developed a parallel obsession. It has made Iran an issue emblematic of India's "strategic autonomy" and used the bogey of toeing an American line on Iran to coerce New Delhi into following an ideological and anti-American foreign policy. A close examination of the Indian-Iranian relationship, however, reveals that it is underdeveloped, despite all the spin attached to it. Whereas India's stakes are growing rapidly in the Arab Gulf, India's ties with Iran remain circumscribed by the internal power struggle and economic decay in Iran, growing tensions between Iran and its Arab neighbors, and Iran's continued defiance of the global nuclear order.⁴⁸ But the future of Afghanistan took center stage in India-Iranian ties as the security situation started deteriorating and plans for Western withdrawal firmed up.

It is not often appreciated how important the Af-Pak issue is to India's future security, its strategic planning, and its relationship with Iran. The uncertainty surrounding the future of Afghanistan is forcing India to keep its ties with Iran on an even keel and to coordinate more closely with Iran as a contingency plan. If the United States does decide to leave Afghanistan with Pakistan retaining its pre-2001 lever-

age, New Delhi and Tehran will likely be drawn closer together to counteract Islamabad's influence in Kabul, which has been largely detrimental to their interests in the past.

New Delhi is, therefore, seeking reassurances from Moscow and Tehran that the three states are in unanimity on Afghanistan and Pakistan. It remains to be seen, however, if India's gravitation toward Russia and Iran would be enough to arrest the slide of the situation in Afghanistan-Pakistan to India's detriment.

Managing Pakistan.

Finally, India also realized that there is no alternative to direct talks with Pakistan if a regional solution to the Afghanistan conundrum is to be found. New Delhi restarted talks with Pakistan, which had been suspended in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008; these included back-channel negotiations with the Pakistani military. While these attempts may fail to produce anything concrete in the near future, the hope in New Delhi is that they will at least stave off pressure from the United States to engage Islamabad. Therefore, even though negotiations with Pakistan remain hugely unpopular at home, the Indian government has decided to move ahead with them. India hopes that by doing so, it will be viewed as a more productive player in the West's efforts at stabilizing Afghanistan.

There remain several impediments to long-term India-Pakistan peace, but the Pakistani civilian leadership has signaled its desire for a rapprochement with India. The Asif Ali Zardari government has made some positive moves, which New Delhi has shown a willingness to reciprocate. Most significant of Pakistani initiatives has been to finally grant Most Favored

Nation (MFN) status to India after years of failing to reciprocate India's decision to do the same in 1996.⁴⁹ This is not a radical decision, because under the terms and conditions of the World Trade Organization, member states are supposed to bestow MFN status on each other so that there is no discrimination and all states can benefit equally from the lowest possible tariffs. Yet, the move by Pakistan is politically significant, since the Pakistani government seems to be signaling that it is indeed serious about the dialogue process with India.

Both New Delhi and Islamabad have realized that a lack of dialogue between the two neighbors is becoming counterproductive. For the past 15 years, Pakistan has linked the MFN issue with the contentious issue of Kashmir; in the absence of MFN status for India, approximately 20,000 Indian export items to Pakistan have to be routed through a third nation. With the granting of MFN status to India, it has been estimated that bilateral trade between the two countries could jump to \$8 billion over the next 5 years, from a paltry \$2.6 billion at present.⁵⁰ This makes the MFN move an important confidence-building measure that will allow the two sides to take their dialogue forward on other more contentious issues. Islamabad announced its decision, suggesting that "all stakeholders, including our [Pakistan's] military and defence institutions, were on board." India, not surprisingly, welcomed the decision, arguing that "economic engagements, trade, removing barriers to trade and facilitating land transportation would help the region."⁵¹

For some time now, there has been growing support in Pakistan for normalizing trade ties with India. When Asif Ali Zardari became the President of Pakistan in 2008, he articulated the need for greater economic cooperation with India but was rebuffed

by the all-powerful military. Pakistan soon came under tremendous pressure to prove its credentials as a responsible regional player in light of the crisis in Afghanistan and the rapidly deteriorating internal security situation. Pakistan's economy is in a parlous condition, with growth down to 2.4 percent in 2011. After Islamabad declined to pursue the advice of the IMF to expand its tax base in March 2010, the fund decided to suspend disbursement of its \$11 billion facility.

Pakistan's ties with the United States have deteriorated sharply since May 2011 when the U.S. Navy Seals killed Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad. The Obama administration's decision to suspend a portion of the U.S. aid to the Pakistani military has led many in Islamabad to become even more forceful in underlining Beijing's importance for Pakistan. Reacting to the U.S. move of cutting aid, Islamabad's Ambassador to Beijing, Masood Khan, was quick to suggest that "China will stand by us in difficult times as it has been doing for the past years."⁵² But Chinese involvement in Pakistan is unlikely to match the U.S. profile in the country in the short to medium term, and it is not readily evident that China even wants to match the United States in this regard.⁵³

This has led Pakistan to explore new foreign policy options, and a more pragmatic approach toward India has been one of the outcomes. Normalizing trade relations with India allows Pakistan to not only garner economic benefits from one of the world's fastest growing economies, but also to alter the impression of being the perpetual troublemaker. These latest Pakistani moves are unlikely to resolve the fundamental conflict between the two rivals, but it is a start that the two sides hope to build upon.

The peace process, however, primarily hinges on the ability of Pakistan's political establishment to control terrorist groups from wreaking havoc in India. There is little evidence of any significant Pakistani effort to dismantle the infrastructure of terrorism, such as communications, launching pads, and training camps on its eastern border with India. Even if it wants to, it is doubtful how much control the civilian government in Islamabad can exert, given that various terrorist outfits have vowed to continue their jihad in Kashmir.

Meanwhile, in India, the Congress Party-led government will find it difficult to make any significant concessions on Kashmir, as it faces pressure from the right of the political establishment. This is especially difficult after the Mumbai attacks, since no party wants to be viewed as responsible if there is another attack—a perception that could spring from concluding a deal with Pakistan before another incident. As a result, while there is general consensus on smaller steps such as opening bus routes or trade with Pakistan, this does not translate into willingness to sign a broader settlement.

For many in the policy establishment in New Delhi, however, Islamabad does not seem ready for peace, and the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment is not at all favorably inclined to accept any role for India in Afghanistan.⁵⁴ The Pakistani military hopes to dominate Afghanistan through its proxies, but there are groups that have even targeted the Pakistani military. The gap between the Pakistani government's strategic aspiration to control its internal politics and its patent inability to pacify some of the groups like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has grown in recent years.

REGIONAL AND GLOBAL REALITIES: AS COMPLICATED AS EVER

As the NATO-led Western military forces prepare to withdraw from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, all major regional players and global powers are struggling to come to terms with the aftermath. Regional cooperation, time and again, has been declared as the only viable alternative to the festering tensions that have plagued Afghanistan for decades. Various South and Central Asian governments, for example, have underscored that they recognize that Afghanistan's problems of terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and corruption have affected them all and have to be addressed through cooperative efforts. They adopted the Istanbul Protocol in November 2011, which commits countries as diverse as China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and Russia to cooperate in countering terrorism, drug trafficking, and insurgency in Afghanistan and in the neighboring areas.⁵⁵

In this context, Afghanistan's traditionally divisive neighbors have pledged to support its efforts to reconcile with insurgent groups and to work together on joint security and economic initiatives to build long-term Afghan stability. The New Silk Road Strategy was embraced by the participants at the Istanbul Conference; the strategy envisages a dynamic Afghanistan at the heart of South and Central Asian trade and economic relationships.

The Istanbul effort has been touted as a regional endeavour to solve a major regional issue, and the very fact that so many regional states came together to at least articulate a policy response is indeed a step in the right direction. But the practical difficulties in implementing the vision of regional cooperation remain

as stark as ever. The United States has reached out to regional powers in order to bring them into Afghanistan more substantively. Special U.S. Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Marc Grossman has been engaging governments in the region to assess the role these countries can play in bringing long-term peace to the country.

However, the regional power struggle remains as potent as ever. Turkey has made a public effort to try to mediate differences between Pakistan and Afghanistan. As a result, Hamid Karzai and Asif Ali Zardari agreed to a joint inquiry into the assassination of Burhanuddin Rabbani, who was in charge of negotiations with the Taliban as head of Afghanistan's High Peace Council. But these efforts have not led to a significant normalization of ties between Islamabad and Kabul.

Other regional players have their own interests in the future of Afghanistan. Iran opposes any long-term American presence there, while Russia wants to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a source of Islamist instability that can be transported to its territories via other Central Asian states. China wants to preserve its growing economic profile in Afghanistan but is not interested in making significant political investment at the moment. China hopes it can rely on its "all-weather" friend in Pakistan to meet its interests in Af-Pak.

Conflicting interests over Afghanistan have tended to play a pivotal role in the formation of the foreign policies of regional powers vis-à-vis each other, and this continues to be the case today. Afghanistan's predicament is a difficult one. It would like to enhance its links with its neighboring states so as to gain economic advantages and tackle common threats to regional

security. Yet, such interactions also leave Afghanistan open to becoming a theater where these neighboring states can play out their regional rivalries. Peace and stability will continue to elude Afghanistan so long as its neighbors continue to view it through the lens of their regional rivalries and as a chessboard for enhancing their regional power and influence. These regional rivalries will only intensify if the perception gains ground that the security situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating.

THE AMERICAN DILEMMA

India has growing stakes in peace and stability in Afghanistan, and the recent India-Afghan strategic partnership agreement underlines India's commitment to ensure that a positive momentum in Delhi-Kabul ties is maintained. The Obama administration's reliance on the ISI to help organize and kick-start reconciliation talks aimed at ending the war in Afghanistan despite accusing the disgraced spy agency of secretly supporting the Haqqani terrorist network—which has mounted sustained attacks on Western and Indian targets—has been a source of worry for New Delhi. The ISI has little interest in bringing the Haqqanis to the negotiating table, since it continues to view the insurgents as its best bet for maintaining influence in Afghanistan as the United States reduces its presence there.

New Delhi expects anarchy to intensify in the northwestern subcontinent, as insurgents in Afghanistan have been repeatedly successful in undermining local and international confidence in the viability of extant political structures in Kabul amidst the withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan. Insulat-

ing India from the widening disorder will remain the main strategic objective of New Delhi's policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan. India is trying to ensure that it does not lose out as it has in the past, as new realities emerge in the region in the coming years.

Since 2001, India has relied primarily on its "soft power" in wooing Kabul. It is one of the largest aid donors to Afghanistan and is delivering humanitarian assistance as well as helping in nation-building projects in myriad ways. India is building roads, providing medical facilities, and helping with educational programs in an effort to develop and enhance long-term local Afghan capabilities. India would be loath to see the political and economic capital it has invested in Afghanistan go to waste. Because India was not consulted prior to the announcement of plans for the withdrawal of American forces by the Obama administration and there has been little attempt to make it part of the larger process of ensuring a stable Afghanistan post-2014, a perception has grown in New Delhi that it is on its own in securing its vital interests in Afghanistan.

It has rightly been observed that though India may not be a primary player in Afghanistan, it is an important secondary one with an ability to influence the calculus of the United States.⁵⁶ While the debate over how to approach Afghanistan is not close to a resolution in Indian political corridors, any change in strategy will have serious implications for the future of India's rise as a global power and guarantor of regional security in South Asia. More often than not, India is forgotten in the Western media analysis of the situation in Afghanistan, which largely focuses on the West and Pakistan. Should India relinquish its "soft-power" strategy and replace it with something more

forceful, that may change. Though the United States may have no vital interest in determining who actually governs in Kabul so long as Afghan territory is not being used to launch attacks on U.S. soil, the issue is important to India. If Washington were to abandon the goals of establishing a functioning Afghan state and seeing a moderate Pakistan emerge, that would put greater pressure on Indian security.

The India-Pakistan divide remains the most potent fault line in Afghanistan. Even though there has been a relative easing in bilateral tensions, India and Pakistan continue to have divergent strategic goals in pursuing a peace process. India's premise largely has been that the process will persuade Pakistan to cease supporting and sending extremists into India and start building good neighborly ties. Pakistan, in contrast, has viewed the process as a means to nudge India to make concessions on Kashmir, such as the easing of travel restrictions across the India and Pakistan sides of the territory. Yet, it is obvious that India would not give up its control over the Kashmir valley. Just as India has had difficulty thinking of what it would offer, Pakistan also has had a hard time articulating what it would be satisfied with short of Kashmir.

Given the current predicament, it is difficult to be optimistic that the peace process will move much beyond initial pleasantries. However, the two sides can aim to maintain the current thaw in their relations. Outsiders, and especially the United States, can help. Washington should push toward greater internal political and institutional reforms in Pakistan to help the country's leaders better visualize a future of peaceful co-existence with India. The United States meanwhile should reassure India that it will deal strongly with terrorism emanating from Pakistan, whether directed

at Afghanistan or at India. There is a fundamental convergence between American and Indian interests in making sure that a stable, secure Afghanistan, able and willing to live peacefully with its neighbors, emerges in the future. Greater Indian involvement in shaping Afghanistan's future will help Washington in managing the transition to the post-2014 environment much more effectively.

India's centrality to Afghanistan's future was underscored by the Taliban's statement after U.S. Secretary of Defense Panetta's visit to India in June 2012, which sought to drive a wedge between New Delhi and Washington by suggesting that India had given a "negative" answer to Panetta's wish for greater Indian involvement in Afghanistan.⁵⁷ This was immediately refuted by the U.S. Department of State, which underscored India's important role in regional security, including the transition in Afghanistan.⁵⁸ The United States is now backing a more robust Indian involvement in Afghanistan, signaling a long-term commitment to Afghanistan's future. As part of the third U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue in June 2012, India and the United States announced regular trilateral consultations with Afghanistan.⁵⁹

There has been a broader maturing of the U.S.-India defense ties, and Afghanistan will clearly be a beneficiary of this trend. Deeper military relations with India are important for the United States to address a range of strategic interests that is common to both and includes the security of the sea-lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean, countering terrorism, and tackling humanitarian and natural disasters. With India holding more military exercises with the United States than with any other country, this convergence is already manifest, but the challenge remains in making this defense engagement more operationally robust.

The United States has asked India to place liaison officers in the U.S. Pacific and Central Commands; this bodes well not only for the future of U.S.-India ties, but for the larger regional security priorities of the two states. But the two sides clearly need to think more cogently about how this U.S.-India convergence on Afghanistan can be harnessed for mutual ends. America's "hard power" and India's "soft power" can be potent forces in the transformation of Afghanistan. The fact that India is part of the U.S. Pacific Command, whereas Pakistan and Afghanistan lie in the Central Command, will hinder the policy priorities of Washington and New Delhi in the coming years. This division of responsibilities will continue to compartmentalize South Asia in ways that are not very helpful; a realignment is needed if the U.S. withdrawal proceeds as desired by the Obama administration. The U.S. defense bureaucracy will have to be organized in a way that allows Washington to view the India-Pakistan-Afghanistan issue in a holistic manner if U.S. regional security priorities are to be achieved.

The United States and India should work toward placing an Indian Army Liaison Officer in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Headquarters at Kabul. The two can also consider having Indian military trainers as part of ISAF to train Afghan security forces. There have been suggestions that some of the U.S. hardware that will become surplus when the U.S. withdrawal begins could be offered to India at concessional prices. These could include some of the items that may be especially useful in dealing with cross-border incursions, such as thermal imaging, night vision equipment, some artillery items, Improvised Explosive Device (IED) locators, and IED-hardened vehicles. Once India is familiar with U.S. equipment,

it could also be a base for training Afghan security forces in the use of this equipment.⁶⁰

Given the political dysfunction in Pakistan, which remains deeply divided between an ineffective civilian political elite and a geopolitically overly ambitious military establishment, Washington and New Delhi will have to work together to contain Pakistan's regional ambitions. With a limited presence on the Afghan side of the Durand Line and drone strikes on Pakistani soil, Washington intends to keep the pressure on Islamabad to prevent it from unleashing its military-jihadi complex on its regional adversaries once the United States withdraws in 2014. Much like New Delhi, Washington views the Pakistani military's continuing support for violent extremism as the greatest obstacle to stability in Afghanistan and to larger regional security. Despite the reopening of the supply route for NATO by Pakistan in exchange for an apology from U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the relationship between Washington and Islamabad remains tense, and the trust deficit remains high. Managing Pakistan will be the biggest priority for both Washington and New Delhi in the coming years if there is any hope of keeping Afghanistan a stable entity post-2014. As the U.S.-India defense engagement gains momentum, greater consultation on Pakistan should remain a priority. If Islamabad agrees, the United States can think of initiating a U.S.-India-Pakistan dialogue on Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

In May 2012, with U.S. President Obama's surprise visit to Kabul to mark Osama bin Laden's death in 2011, Washington and Kabul signed the much-awaited

strategic partnership agreement, which stipulates that the Afghan security forces would take the lead in combat operations by the end of next year and all American combat troops would leave by the end of 2014.⁶¹ But the pact underscores America's commitment to Afghanistan for a decade after its formal troop withdrawal in 2014, as this withdrawal will not include trainers who will continue to assist Afghan forces and a contingent of troops tasked with combating al-Qaeda through counterterrorism operations. Washington hopes that this pact will provide some much-needed clarity about America's intended footprint in Afghanistan over the next decade, though specific details are yet to be finalized.

As Washington and Kabul turn a new page in the Afghanistan saga, New Delhi would be eager to take this opportunity to make itself a more credible actor in its neighborhood. The Washington-Kabul strategic partnership agreement provides India with crucial space for diplomatic maneuvering so as to regain lost ground and expand its footprint in a neighboring state where it remains hugely popular despite the lack of seriousness in its policy approach. An attempt to beef up intelligence sharing between India and Afghanistan is the first step in the operationalization of the India-Afghan strategic partnership, but much-more-concrete steps are needed to ensure that New Delhi maintains a substantial presence in Afghanistan. There has been a persistent complaint in the corridors of power in New Delhi that the Obama administration sacrificed Indian interests at the altar of pleasing Pakistan, which further allowed Pakistan's proxies to destabilize Afghanistan. Now that Washington is making it clear that it views Pakistan as part of the problem and India as part of the solution, New

Delhi and Washington have a historic opportunity to work together in bringing stability and security in Afghanistan.

ENDNOTES

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