



View Point

India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership

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The strategic partnership agreement signed between India and Afghanistan on October 4, 2011 during the two-day official visit of the Afghan President Hamid Karzai to New Delhi assumes great significance in the war-wracked and nuclear-armed region. This being Afghanistan's first strategic agreement with any country reveals the amount of goodwill and trust India enjoys among Afghans despite its risk-averse foreign policy approach in the area. While the historical and cultural ties provide a sound basis for sustaining friendly relationship between the two countries, it is their shared concerns and interest in stabilising the violence-torn country that has propelled the two sides to develop cooperative strategy. The strategic partnership agreement covers broad range of issues, including political, economic and social, but it is the security dimension, notably Indian commitment to train, equip and support the Afghan National Security Forces that has drawn regional and international attention.

Indian move to strengthen and develop the Afghan security forces and its police come after a long gap of 15 years. The last partnership was during the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime (1989-1992) when India had pledged to raise the Afghan military as a trained force and even developed an effective intelligence –sharing mechanism. During the Pakistan- backed Taliban rule, India had formed an unofficial coalition along with Russia and the Central Asian state of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in support of the anti-Taliban resistance movement led by the Northern Alliance. The

end of the Taliban rule offered India a new opportunity to regain its strategic foothold in Afghanistan. As one of the largest donors of the reconstruction projects, India's influence is now spread across the spectrum in Afghanistan. Till date India has pledged \$2 billion in assistance to Afghanistan for projects, which include the Salma Dam project with installed capacity of 42 MW in Herat province, construction of road in the remote southwestern Afghan province of Nimroz and building of the Afghan parliament. Apart from training more than 700 Afghans in various professions to develop institutional capacity, India has also deployed between 3,000 and 4,000 Indian technical experts to Afghanistan to assist in various infrastructure projects. In all, India has been in the forefront of the Afghan reconstruction effort since the 2001 U.S. intervention in Afghanistan.

A decade later with the United States set to end its combat role in Afghanistan by 2014 and the reconciliation talks making no headway, India and Afghanistan declared their intent to push for more security and political cooperation to the level of a strategic partnership. The two sides reached an understanding on a wide range of issues during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Kabul in May this year, which paved the way for formal signing of the partnership agreement last week. What is, however, important to note here is that Karzai's visit took place at a crucial juncture to endorse India's pro-active role in Afghanistan affairs. Amidst the increasing incidence of suicide terror attacks in Afghanistan by the Pakistani-backed Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Haqqani network and a sharp deterioration in ties between Pakistan and Washington in the wake of the killing of the former president and peace envoy Burhanuddin Rabbani, President Karzai has turned to India for a sustainable role in post-2014 Afghanistan.

The war-ravaged and terrorised Afghanistan is currently in dire need of a credible security force and raising the Afghan National Army as a professional and committed force will be a major step forward in maintaining peace and stability in the country. The Afghan government's willingness to accept Indian initiative to train its troops is meant to convey the message that its meddlesome neighbor, Pakistan can be ignored. Likewise, the MOUs signed as part of the Strategic Partnership Agreement during President Karzai's visit have enhanced the prospects for deepening economic, cultural and institutional relationship between the two countries. The Indian steel and

mining companies will, for instance, bid for the estimated 1.8 billion metric tons of ore at Hajigak, nearly 60 miles west of Kabul. India on its part has reiterated its commitment to help Afghanistan preserve its independence while assisting the Afghan government in areas of governance, education and overall capacity building. Broadly, the agreement will have political, economic and people-to-people components, and will be piloted by a partnership council headed by the foreign ministers of the two countries, while several joint working groups will be set up in due course. Besides, the agreement will also institutionalize regular consultations on forging common positions at the UN and other international bodies.

The consolidation of the India-Afghanistan strategic partnership is certain to trigger Pakistani concerns given its geographic proximity, ethnic and linguistic ties and more importantly, its fear of “encirclement” by India’s presence in the area it considers as its backyard. Even though Pakistani officials have played down the development by saying that it is the sovereign right of any country to promote bilateral relations with any other country, Islamabad is unlikely to reconcile to the loss of its influence in Afghanistan. It may rather go on an overdrive to find devious ways of undermining the Afghan-Indian partnership at great cost to Afghanistan. In fact, General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan once warned India to “lay off” the region when India offered to help train the new Afghan National Army and contribute to the maintenance of its Russian built military equipment. Despite the latest US pressure on Pakistan to act against the Haqqani network that has been at the forefront of Kabul’s destabilization, the Pakistan military establishment quietly nurtures the neo-Taliban option in the hope of installing the Haqqani network and the Taliban to positions of power in the post-American political dispensation in Kabul. Emboldened by Beijing’s backing, the Pakistan army seeks to carve out a role for itself by projecting itself as the lone broker in the negotiations between the Taliban, the US and Kabul. Thus, while the strategic partnership between India and Afghanistan may help neutralize Pakistan’s political and diplomatic leverage, they also need to accommodate the Pakistani interests so as to prevent Afghanistan from turning into a battleground for the competing regional powers. By describing Pakistan as “our twin brother”, the visiting Afghan President Karzai sought to allay Islamabad’s fear and speculation of a shift in regional alignments.

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