



BULLETIN

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India's Involvement and Role in Afghanistan

by Patryk Kugiel

One of the important elements of the Obama administration's strategy for Afghanistan is its regional approach. However, the failure of this approach to take the role of India into account makes it incomplete. India is one of Kabul's closest political partners and one of the principal donors of developmental aid for Afghanistan. On the other hand, the regional rivalry between India and Pakistan contributes to the destabilization of Afghanistan and makes its economic development difficult. The normalization of Indian-Pakistani relations is thus one of the most important preconditions for lasting stability in Afghanistan.

Background. India has always had close and friendly relations with Afghanistan. The exception was in 1996–2001, a period when the Taliban, with help from Pakistan, held power in Afghanistan and when India supported the Afghan opposition forces of the Northern Alliance. Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, India wholeheartedly advocated the American intervention, which enabled it to rebuild its influence in Afghanistan. India backed the Bonn process, established good relations with the new government of Hamid Karzai (a graduate of an Indian university) and actively joined in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

India's strong involvement in Afghanistan stems from that country's strategic significance for the entire region. Firstly, a friendly government in Kabul gives India an advantage in its regional rivalry with Pakistan. Secondly, Afghanistan, situated on traditional trade routes, is seen as a bridge between Southern and Central Asia, facilitating access to sources of energy and to new foreign markets for the dynamically growing Indian economy. Lastly, Afghanistan is important for Indian security as a potential source of threats such as terrorism (in the 1990s, Afghanistan hosted training camps for groups fighting India in Kashmir) or the narcotics trade. Ensuring stability in South Asia is seen in India as a precondition for the maintenance of its dynamic economic growth. In addition, India wishes to demonstrate that, as a rising power, it can play a stabilizing role in the region.

Involvement in Afghanistan. The principal form of India's involvement in Afghanistan is its participation in the reconstruction and development of that country. India is the sixth largest donor of bilateral aid to Afghanistan (after the USA, Japan, Germany, Great Britain and Canada). The total value of declared aid since 2001 amounts to US\$1.2 billion. Nearly 4,000 Indians are working on development projects that affect the majority of Afghanistan's provinces. Indian funds are destined for four principal areas: humanitarian assistance (such as the program of providing meals for nearly 2 million school-going children and the reconstruction of children's hospital in Kabul), investments in infrastructure (e. g. the construction of the Salma Dam hydroelectric power plant in the province of Herat and the building of the Afghan parliament), a small and community based development program (nearly 100 projects of a maximum value of up to US\$1 million implemented by local communities) and education and capacity development (e.g. 500 annual long-term university scholarships and 500 short-term professional training programs every year for Afghan public servants). In 2009, the implementation of the first two important projects was completed: the 218 km road from Zaranj to Delaram in the province of Nimroz (opening a new connection with Iran bypassing Pakistani territory) and an electrical power network from the north of Afghanistan to Kabul (reducing the problem of power shortage in the capital). Indian developmental aid, the popularity of its culture (such as Bolly-

wood) and the absence of military engagement are the reason why Afghan society views the role of India in Afghanistan favorably.

Regional Context. India's growing involvement in Afghanistan has serious regional implications on account of the objections raised by Pakistan. This country fears that an Indian-Afghan rapprochement will deprive it of the so-called strategic depth in Afghanistan (i.e. a second line of defense in case of an Indian attack) and lead to Pakistan's encirclement by hostile powers. This sense of uncertainty is made the stronger by the fact that neither the Pakistani-Afghan border on the so-called Durand Line nor the Pakistani-Indian one along the so-called Line of Control in Kashmir are officially recognized international boundaries. India is accused of supporting separatist groups in the Pakistani province of Balochistan and the Taliban who attack targets within the country, as well as of using its consulates on the Afghan-Pakistani border for intelligence work. On the other hand, India suspects the Pakistani intelligence agency (ISI) of having participated in the preparation of two bomb attacks on the Indian Embassy in Kabul—in July 2008 (when 58 persons were killed, including 5 Indians) and in October 2009 (when 18 Afghans died)—as well as attacks on Indian investments throughout Afghanistan.

The replacement in 2001 of the pro-Pakistan government of the Taliban by the Hamid Karzai government more favorably inclined towards India was received in Pakistan as a threat to the regional equilibrium. For this reason, part of the influential Pakistani elites (in the army and the ISI, for example) continue to view the Afghan Taliban as a convenient tool in their rivalry with India, one that could be used to rebuild Pakistan's own influence in Afghanistan after the expected withdrawal of Western forces from the region. Fears of India were thus the principal source of President Pervez Musharraf's ambivalent policy with regard to terrorist groups. Despite the initiation in October 2008 of Pakistan's much awaited army offensive against the extremists in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along the border, it is not at all certain whether this offensive will also be directed against the Afghan Taliban hiding there. It is more probable that significant Pakistani forces will continue to support these groups as long as serious doubts about India's aims in Afghanistan remain.

Tensions between India and Pakistan have a negative impact not only on the Afghan security situation, but also on the country's economic development. Mutual distrust means that trans-national infrastructure projects that would also create development opportunities for the weak Afghan economy (such as the gas pipeline project from Turkmenistan to India, energy distribution networks and transportation routes to Central Asia) stand no chance of being realized. Pakistan also refuses to let Indian merchandise bound for Afghanistan through its territory, thus hampering the growth of trade.

Conclusions. The effects of India's involvement in Afghanistan are two-fold. On the one hand, India provides valuable developmental assistance and contributes to the rebuilding of the country. On the other hand, its activities reinforce fears in Pakistan. The normalization of Indian-Pakistani relations will thus be crucial for the situation in Afghanistan. This would enable the growth of regional cooperation in the economic, energy and political spheres, making it possible to use Afghanistan's significant potential as a land connection with Central Asia. Without an improvement in these relations, the international community's efforts in Afghanistan could come to naught.

Given its great potential and a number of cultural, social and developmental similarities with Afghanistan, India could play a greater role in the building efficient Afghan state institutions (for example, the reform of the local administration, the organization of democratic elections or army and police training). As the only established democracy in this part of Asia and a strategic partner of the EU and the USA, a partner that shares their aim of setting up a democratic, stable and efficiently-governed Afghan state, India could successfully replace the countries that will decide to withdraw from Afghanistan. However, given the present tensions with Pakistan, an increase of India's involvement is not desirable at the moment. Both countries, irrespective of other contentious issues, should initiate a dialogue devoted solely to the question of Afghanistan. Increased transparency in their actions and greater trust would constitute a prelude to finding lasting solutions to the fundamental problems connected with their view of Afghanistan and of its role in the region.

The American strategy for Afghanistan from March 2009, one that stresses the regional dimension and recognizes the fundamental importance of Pakistan for victory in Afghanistan, passes over India, which exerts a considerable influence on Pakistan's policy. One of the reasons was an increase of tensions in the region and the interruption of Indian-Pakistani peace dialogue following the terrorist attacks on Mumbai in late 2008. At present, the USA and the EU should take advantage of the favorable circumstances (such as a new stronger government in India, the Pakistani offensive against the Taliban, willingness for the resumption of Indian-Pakistani dialogue) to propose, as soon as possible, concrete initiatives bringing India, Pakistan and Afghanistan closer together.