

ISAS Briefs

No. 218 – 18 October 2011

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



India-Afghanistan Strategic Agreement: Opportunity for Peace and for Pakistan

Sajjad Ashraf¹

Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai's statement in New Delhi that 'Pakistan is a twin brother, India is a great friend' is unlikely to assuage Pakistan's concerns over the real nature and implications of the Indo-Afghanistan Strategic Agreement for Pakistan. The deal was signed on 4 October. He added, 'With our friend will not affect our brother'.

In a brief low-key response, Pakistan Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gillani said, 'Both are sovereign countries and they have the right to do whatever they want to'. The Foreign Office spokesperson, though maintaining the same theme, suggested avoiding 'steps that may affect regional stability'. Pakistan was still studying the details of the agreement, the spokesperson added.

This new all-embracing strategic partnership agreement is intended to develop ties across a range of areas and seeks to 'create an institutional framework for our future cooperation', said Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at a joint press conference with President Karzai, after signing the agreement.

¹ Sajjad Ashraf was Pakistan's High Commissioner to Singapore 2004-2008. He now serves as Adjunct Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and as a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. He can be contacted at sppsa@nus.edu.sg. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the institute.

The agreement read carefully suggests a regional approach by developing Afghanistan as a hub linking Central and South Asia, (Afghanistan qualifies to be in both sub-regions) through ‘strengthen(ing) regional cooperation under SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation)’.

In the backdrop of Pakistan’s troubled relations with Kabul and New Delhi attempts aimed at developing closer relations between them, especially training of security personnel, a bane for Pakistan, will be viewed with suspicion by Islamabad.

The troubled Pak-Afghan relations are the consequence of Pakistan’s undeclared policy to seek strategic depth in Afghanistan only in the military sense, rather than economic. The Afghans, resistant to outside veto wielders, are mindful of this desire reaching its nadir with former army Chief Mirza Aslam Baig, at one time, suggesting placing Pakistan’s military and other assets in Afghanistan – meaning acquiring military bases there.

Pervez Musharaff’s (Former Pakistan President) lament in Washington that India wants to ‘create an anti-Pakistan Afghanistan’ adding that ‘not one man has come to Pakistan for training’ when he offered should be a reason for introspection for Pakistan instead of rage against others. Pakistan needs to find out as to why the ‘twin brother’ refuses the embrace? In fact, Pakistan’s own reaction against India’s ‘big brother’ attitude is an appropriate illustration of why within months of coming into power successive Afghan governments turn belligerent towards Pakistan.

Unable to contain resistance, the United States (US) and Afghan government are concerned at the inadequacy of security apparatus when the US forces withdraw from active combat role in Afghanistan in 2014. India is concerned, which everyone should be, at the return of a medieval Taliban-like regime in Kabul that could become a staging ground for cross border extremism into India.

It is not in India’s longer-term interest to keep Pakistan’s borders on the boil. India’s involvement in Pakistan’s unstable western borders could land India, with no contagious borders with Afghanistan, into an expensive and unwinnable war. If not handled deftly, India too will find to its own chagrin, the limits of its involvement in Afghanistan.

India is conscious that peace in Afghanistan is the key to exploiting the vast economic potential of Central Asia. As India’s economic stakes grow in the region, this may be Pakistan’s chance to demonstrate some subtlety in pursuit of its longer-term aims and obtain peace on its western borders.

Pakistan should feel confident that it is in landlocked Afghanistan’s interest to maintain friendly, working relations with Pakistan. ‘There can be no lasting peace in Afghanistan

without a measure of Pakistan's support,' admits Raja Mohan, the respected Indian analyst, writing in The Indian Express.

With reassurances coming both from Kabul and Delhi, it is also for Pakistan to perceive this evolving relationship. Maintaining the current approach, Pakistan will continue to follow policies that have failed to bring in peace and thwarted Pakistan's own internal structures. Pakistan's attempts to import electricity from Tajikistan and develop economic relations with the region will falter. After all India cannot be blamed for the follies of Pakistan's weak kneed military rulers for twice joining the US wars in Afghanistan. Letting India develop Afghan capacity in the present environment can be a double-edged sword. If the three countries can reach an understanding and let India develop Afghan capacity leading to regional economic integration, Pakistan too becomes a winner. In the age of globalisation, following any other course will result in Pakistan lagging behind.

Commenting upon the Agreement, Express Tribune in Pakistan said in its editorial on 8 October 2011 'the region would have benefitted as a whole had the three members of the SAARC come together and made the India-Afghanistan agreement a tripartite accord...'

As Pakistan seeks security through a friendly government in Afghanistan, the onus lies on the three countries. India and Afghanistan should demonstrate that the deal is benign and not against the 'twin brother'. Pakistan needs to respect Afghan choices, recover some lost decades and understand that security encompasses a much wider spectrum than military space. There is no other way except to work together for peace in Afghanistan leading to wider regional engagement.

.....