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President Karzai's Visit to India: Setting Policy Markers for post-2014 Afghanistan

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Abstract

President Karzai's three-day official visit in May 2013 to India with a wish list of military equipment has reignited speculation regarding an increased Indian military presence in post-2014 Afghanistan. Amid frayed Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, difficulty in the negotiations of a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between Afghanistan and the United States, waning international interest in the Afghan war and dwindling financial assistance to the conflict-ravaged country, uncertainties loom large on the prospects of peace and stability in Afghanistan. President Karzai who, prior to the 2014 drawdown of international forces and the presidential elections in Afghanistan, is continuing his effort to bring a negotiated end to the war and reclaim the sovereign status of his country and thereby mark his legacy, is seeking help from a trusted ally and friend. While much of what happens in the coming months will test the intent and capacity of New Delhi to come to Karzai's aid, it will also define how India perceives its role in post-2014 Afghanistan and how prepared it is to confront the future of Afghanistan in pursuance of its national interests and strategic objectives.

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Introduction

President Karzai's three-day visit from 20 May to 22 May 2013 to New Delhi was his twelfth visit to India in official capacity. While his earlier visits had generated a lot of media attention, this time around the 'wish list'² Karzai carried with him evoked maximum interest. The list apparently contained requests for supply of military hardware and arms from India, thereby constituting yet another invitation to New Delhi to be involved in the Afghan security sector at a time when the western powers are showing relative disinterest in heeding to such requests. With Karzai's visit coming under the shadow of the Chinese premier's visit at about the same time and the prospects of improving ties with Pakistan as promised by the new political leadership, the Afghan leader's request did not receive adequate policy attention in New Delhi. While New Delhi aspires for a major power role as a net security provider in the sub-continent, and its neighbours look towards India in fulfilling that role, it appears that it has yet again fallen short of capitalising and building on such available opportunities.

India-Afghan Relations

Indo-Afghan ties have expanded and deepened during the last decade. Having pledged more than US\$ 2 billion in various aid and developmental programmes, India is Afghanistan's fifth largest bilateral donor. As the West signalled its egress from Afghanistan, India demonstrated its long-term commitment and staying power by signing the Agreement on Strategic Partnership (ASP) in October 2011 and organising an Afghan investment summit in Delhi in June 2012. Most of its efforts have been directed at stabilising Afghanistan by attempting to change the narrative from a narrow security-dominated approach to one that emphasises on potentials for economic opportunities and investment prospects aimed at generating employment, revenue and establishing regional connectivity through greater trade and economic integration.

India's aid and assistance has been crucial in the rebuilding of various critical sectors of the Afghan economy, security and society. However, several questions remain. As international financial assistance dwindles and may eventually dry up in the coming years, will India be able to match the expectations of the Afghans and fulfil the requests of increased aid and assistance? Despite transforming itself from an aid-recipient to an economic donor in recent times, should India focus on countries in the neighbourhood or

² According to Indian media reports, the wish list included requests for 105-mm howitzer artillery, medium-lift aircraft, bridge-laying equipment, and trucks. This is not the first time that such a request has been made by the Afghans. Ahead of the signing of the Agreement on Strategic Partnership (ASP), there were such 'wish lists' provided but New Delhi did not heed to the requests. Author's discussions with senior officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kabul and Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, March 2011, May –June 2011 and October 2011.

diversify aid to other developing countries?³ More importantly, can the pattern of aid include high-value military aid at the cost of development and humanitarian assistance, especially when Indian growth story has met some unexpected barriers?⁴

Karzai's Pressure Tactics

President Karzai is currently navigating the difficult contours of domestic and regional power politics. This makes his visit to India more than an act of symbolism. By presenting the wish list for military supplies and thereby, raising the ante for Pakistan, Karzai could be using the Indian card to achieve twin purposes of reducing the border tensions with Pakistan and gaining tangible results from the negotiation process with the Taliban. The mounting domestic criticisms and anti-Pakistan demonstrations inside Afghanistan as a result of continuous firing from Pakistan into border provinces of Afghanistan have complicated President Karzai's outreach towards peacemaking with the Taliban and Pakistan. With such widening differences, this visit to India could well be a tactical ploy to achieve a larger strategic objective.

Thus, the timing of the visit and the request for arms supplies is likely to be seen as more of a signalling to the other regional and global actors by the beleaguered Afghan leader. Coming at the heels of increased tensions in the Af-Pak relations, an increased Indian presence in Afghanistan may lead to a heightened India–Pakistan competition, further complicating the Afghan end-game.⁵ This could complicate the exit plans of the western powers from Afghanistan and might result in some concessions for Karzai which he has struggled to receive from the West before the drawdown. Would those benefits include giving Karzai an upper hand in the negotiated end to the Taliban-led insurgency or improve his bargaining position vis-a-vis the US and Pakistan remains to be seen. In any event, for a country that needs to manoeuvre the difficult contours of regional and global power politics in its quest to regain its sovereign status, and for Karzai to mark his legacy such pressure tactics and bargaining position might yield greater dividends.

³ Afghanistan is the second largest beneficiary of India's aid policy. There is a debate in New Delhi if aid should be diversified from unstable conflict-ridden countries in the neighbourhood to other developing countries, particularly Africa- in the spirit of South-South Cooperation . Author's discussions with senior government officials, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, February 2013.

⁴ During author's discussions with officials in the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, in New Delhi, May 2013 and February 2013, the inability to fund new projects in Afghanistan due to financial constraints emerged as an area of concern. Also see Lorenzo Piccio, "India's foreign aid program catches up with its global ambitions", *Devex* (13 May 2013), <https://m.devex.com/news/india-s-foreign-aid-program-catches-up-with-its-global-ambitions/80919>

⁵ "Afghanistan: Stirring Indo-Pak tensions?", *Al Jazeera* (21 May 2013), <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2013/05/2013520154858517875.html>

US-Afghan Relations

In the first week of May 2013, US deputy Secretary of State William Burns and Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmay Rasoul met in Kabul for the second round of negotiations over the implementation of the US-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) signed in May 2012 by President Barack Obama and Hamid Karzai. Both countries continue to have disagreements over the amount of funds the US would provide to Afghan security forces, on the actual number of US forces to be stationed after the final withdrawal, and the legal immunity these forces would enjoy in Afghanistan. Moreover, Karzai's repeated requests of supply of arms and artillery guns for the Afghan forces too have not been fulfilled by the US. The Afghan Ministry of Defence (MoD) has repeatedly expressed the need for fighter planes, transport planes and drones within a few years. Weary of generating a negative response from Pakistan, the US has stopped short of providing what Karzai and his military commanders think are 'must have' instruments to tackle insurgency and Pakistani misadventure.⁶

It is in this complexity of negotiations that Karzai's desperation to improve his bargaining position can be contextualised. In a spate of public salvos, to assuage domestic ire over civilian casualties, issues of sovereignty and the Taliban's caricature of him as an American stooge, Karzai has demanded that US special operations forces leave conflict-ridden provinces, accusing both the American-led coalition and the Taliban of working to destabilise his government. Although he has signalled his willingness to consider a proposal to maintain the nine American bases in post-2014 Afghanistan,⁷ difficulties in the negotiations over the BSA persist. While Pentagon could be assessing the Afghan appetite for larger troop presence, Karzai too could be testing the appetite for continued Western presence among Afghan society and the regional powers like Iran and Pakistan. Thus, an improvement in his bargaining position leaves considerable wiggle room for a potentially amenable middle ground.⁸ In order to elicit a long-term commitment, Karzai has also insisted that any agreement must be tied to US resolve to support Afghanistan's political and economic transitions. Negotiations should deal with partnership and

⁶ Author's discussions with senior Afghan Army officials in Kabul, June-July 2012.

⁷ Matthew Rosenberg, "Karzai Says U.S. Bases Can Stay, Raising Some Eyebrows in West", *New York Times* (9 May 2013), http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/10/world/asia/karzai-says-us-can-keep-afghan-bases-after-2014.html?ref=world&_r=0

⁸ Adam Cohen, "Far Apart on Bilateral Strategic Agreement, Congress Should Make Politics, Economy Center of Afghanistan Partnership", *Huffington Post* (13 May 2013), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/adam-cohen/afghanistan-bilateral-strategic-agreement_b_3265924.html; "Afghanistan to allow US bases to remain", *Al Jazeera* (9 May 2013), <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2013/05/201359111938488590.html>

cooperation on improving governance and access to services, strengthening the internal economy and promoting regional stability and trade.⁹

Afghan-Pak Relations

Afghanistan's relations with neighbouring Pakistan have deteriorated. In spite of the occasional warm words of affection Karzai used to shower on the country's eastern neighbour, on-ground tensions on the Durand Line¹⁰ have increased subsequent to Pakistan taking steps to build border posts and making moves to solidify the border. On 2 May, border fighting erupted in the rugged Goshta area of eastern Afghanistan's Nangarhar province, following growing complaints over construction of the outposts.¹¹ Both Kabul and Islamabad have accused each other of harbouring militants who launch cross-border raids. A fence that prevents such trespassing should have been acceptable to both. However, for any Afghan leadership to recognise the Durand Line sounds a death knell. Dividing the Pushtuns, the largest and most influential ethnic group in Afghanistan, by a physical fence that has the approval of Kabul, is not a viable option for the Afghan political elite. A silent acceptance of Pakistani tactic goes further against Kabul's fond project of stoking Pushtun irredentism to contain Pakistan's 'interventionist' designs. Any military assistance, or at least a promise, from India could play a deterring effect on Pakistan's unilateral move.

President Karzai has made repeated requests to the Taliban to abjure violence and join the peace process in Afghanistan. Reports from the field indicate that Karzai has even offered the Taliban leadership based in Quetta (also known as *Quetta Shura* Taliban) senior positions in the Afghan government and has even asked Taliban supremo Mullah Omar to contest elections. His efforts of getting the Afghan Taliban 'inside the tent' have been frustrated by the Pakistani security establishment which makes any meaningful

⁹ Adam Cohen, *A New Framework for U.S.-Afghan Relations After 2014: The Need for a Smooth Transition*, Friends Committee On National Legislation, (7 March 2013), http://fcn.org/issues/afghanistan/transition_one-pager.1_7_MAR_2013.pdf

¹⁰ Historically, Afghanistan has refused to recognise the Durand Line, drawn by the British in the 19th century to delineate British India from Afghanistan as it divides the lands inhabited by Pushtun tribes, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. Since its creation in 1947, Pakistan has recognised the Durand Line as the de-facto border between the two nations. In stark contrast to Afghanistan's position, Pakistan considers the Durand Line a settled international boundary and has consistently refused to discuss its legitimacy. Of late, it has pushed forward proposals on fencing the border to curb the cross-border insurgent movements which is not acceptable to Afghanistan.

¹¹ In recent weeks, the Afghan government has loudly denounced a slew of new Pakistani border posts, which officials in Kabul claim are being built in their territory. Pratyush, *Afghan-Pakistani Border Row: A Double-Edged Sword for India*, *The Diplomat*, 16 May 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/the-pulse/2013/05/16/afghan-pakistani-border-row-a-double-edged-sword-for-india/>; Thomas Ruttig, *Trouble at the Goshta Gate: New tensions and old wounds along the Durand Line*, *Afghan Analysts Network*, Kabul, (14 May 2013), <http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=3392>

reconciliation an impossible task. While Karzai hopes to have direct access to these Afghan Taliban leaders, the Pakistani military establishment's obsession with using them as strategic assets to regain the strategic depth has not come to an end. To make things difficult, reports from the field indicate that with the increased infighting and fracturing of the insurgency, the more lethal *Peshawar Shura Taliban (PST)* is being strengthened as a counterforce. With the reported willingness of the likely new Pakistan Prime Minister to negotiate with the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) and his silence on the presence of the Afghan Taliban in his country, Karzai's military gamble with India could be a tactic to pressure Pakistan to open the channels of communication with the extremists.

The Afghan Wish List and India's Policy Responses

Contrary to the media narratives, military aid, both lethal and non-lethal, has been on the wish lists Afghanistan has been submitting to New Delhi over the past years. Of late, Afghan officials have explicitly linked the appeal for military assistance to a continuing series of recent clashes between Pakistani and Afghan border guards.¹² Prior to President Karzai's arrival in New Delhi, Shaida M Abdali, Afghan Ambassador to India, stated that the ASP was ambiguous on lethal and non-lethal military equipment and Afghanistan was looking for India's help to get "equipment and weapons to fight".¹³

During his meeting with India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Karzai stated his desire for an arms deal, which included purchase of military weaponry such as aircraft, missiles and field guns. The list, running into 18 pages, not only contains Afghanistan's demands for arms and ammunition, communication and electronics equipment but also technology for construction of barracks and electricity projects.¹⁴

However, there is little hope that much of these requests would actually be fulfilled. Indian officials have indicated willingness to supply transport helicopters, trucks and non-lethal equipment to Afghanistan. They further point out that while their capacity to train Afghan soldiers and officers is limited, they are willing to "train the trainers". Other offers include training in logistics, repair and maintenance works.¹⁵ Indian military

¹² Jason Burke, "Afghan president Hamid Karzai to seek military aid as he arrives in India", *The Guardian* (20 May 2013), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/20/hamid-karzai-military-aid-india>

¹³ Nayanima Basu, "Hamid Karzai leaves India empty-handed", *Business Standard* (23 May 2012), http://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/hamid-karzai-leaves-india-empty-handed-113052200912_1.html

¹⁴ "India may strengthen Afghan military to promote stability", *Deccan Herald*, (22 May 2013), <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/334088/india-may-strengthen-afghan-military.html>

¹⁵ Indian Army is set to double the number of ANSF personnel who receive training in India. Currently, more than 100 officers of Afghanistan Army and 300-odd personnel from other wings of ANSF receive training on counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations, signals, engineering and medical. The

thinkers have advocated options of putting boots on ground to help the Afghan forces to deal with the contingencies of post-2014 Afghanistan as a demonstration of commitment. However, "Indian foreign policy establishment has been content in suggesting that India's developmental role makes India an important player in Afghanistan".¹⁶ New Delhi's dithering and preference to "impale itself to the fence"¹⁷ at times when hard decisions need to be made is far too common to be repeated.

Not just the military requests, New Delhi appears to be dithering on its aid- policy as well, both in terms of its commitment and spending. An additional military aid commitment could add to the complexities of overstretch and persistent inability to fulfil the commitment to the civilian reconstruction projects. Not surprisingly, New Delhi has stalled such outward proposition of arms and equipment supplies to the Afghans. The issue of supplying military hardware to Afghanistan would figure in the first meeting of the Joint Working Group on Political and Security Cooperation – one of the four bilateral forums set up under the Strategic Partnership Council – within the next three months.¹⁸

While one line of thinking in New Delhi seems to contend that Pakistan security establishment be kept preoccupied on its western border by keeping the Durand Line issue alive, this strategy does not envision supplying arms or militarily equipment to the Afghans. The low levels of terrorist-related violence in Jammu & Kashmir, due to the perceived preoccupation of the Pakistani handlers of the terrorists on the Pak-Afghan border, underline the need to pursue such an approach. Yet, India, anticipating an outbreak of peace with Pakistan, especially after Nawaz Sharif's election, has found another tight rope to walk. Maintaining a low level of tension without escalation and an ambivalent position on the Durand Line appear to be the preferred policy for New Delhi to keep the pressure on Pakistan, rather than provoking a direct confrontation or a border flare-up between Pakistan and Afghanistan. For India, the Afghan-Pakistan border row could be a double-edged sword.¹⁹ Supplies of arms and cross-border misadventure could

number is set to double from July 2013 as the Army will train close to 800 ANSF personnel. The new courses on offer for Afghan soldiers include English language, information technology, military policing, and stores and vehicle management. "India may strengthen Afghan military to promote stability", *Deccan Herald*, (22 May 2013), <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/334088/india-may-strengthen-afghan-military.html>; "Karzai says peace in Afghanistan depends on Pakistan", *Business Standard* (23 May 2013), http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/karzai-says-peace-in-afghanistan-depends-on-pakistan-113052300051_1.html

¹⁶ Harsh V Pant, "No short-cuts for India in Afghanistan", *Daily News & Analyses* (21 May 2013), <http://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/1837427/column-no-short-cuts-for-india-in-afghanistan>

¹⁷ Praveen Swami, "Why India is concerned about supplying arms to Afghanistan", *First Post* (22 May 2013), <http://www.firstpost.com/world/why-india-is-concerned-about-supplying-arms-to-afghanistan-800711.html>

¹⁸ "India may strengthen Afghan military to promote stability", *Deccan Herald* (23 May 2013), <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/334088/india-may-strengthen-afghan-military.html>

¹⁹ Pratyush, Afghan-Pakistani Border Row: A Double-Edged Sword for India, *The Diplomat*, 16 May 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/the-pulse/2013/05/16/afghan-pakistani-border-row-a-double-edged-sword-for-india/>

be counterproductive in the long-term. More importantly, the use of such pressure tactics to elicit cooperation would require more imaginative and forward-looking approach in the foreign policy making circles.

India's Policy Options

As uncertainty looms large over the future of post-2014 Afghanistan, New Delhi would be confronted with various scenarios in the coming months as Afghanistan heads for transition in the security and political sectors. Political transition, which includes the presidential elections in April 2014 and negotiations with the Taliban, could become murkier and challenging, and at the same time would remain critical to long-term stability. Any delay in holding elections, either a deliberate decision or one circumstantial, or elections being marred by fraud or other electoral malpractices, could drag Afghanistan to a civil war situation. Likewise, any power-sharing arrangement or secretive deal with the Taliban would invite stiff resistance by the opposition and civil society groups. A nomination process rather than an election choosing a president would also invite chaos and turbulence. The opposition groups would use it as a staging post to call for a regime change which could lead to fracturing of the Afghan society on ethnic lines or fragmentation of the Afghan state into spheres of influence with regional powers supporting their proxies. In short, Afghanistan faces the real prospect of further instability, created not just by the insurgency and their untamed potential, but also by the aspirations of power blocs both within and outside the country.

However, India's post-2014 Afghanistan policy appears to be glued to the best-case scenarios of a successful democratic transition with the conduct of a free and fair election process . Other elements of the scenarios include- Afghan national security forces (ANSF) would be able to thwart the Taliban-led insurgency; violence may continue, but would not escalate enough to destabilise the government. New Delhi hopes that it would remain 'business as usual' and would not necessitate a drastic revisiting of its continuing strategy.

This, in short, is a strategy of convenience. Even to ensure the best case scenarios, New Delhi would need to work towards ensuring free and fair elections and at the same time broad-base its level of engagement with other political groups to help build an inclusive political order. In a rapidly closing 'window of opportunity' between now and 2014, New Delhi will have to use its military, diplomatic and economic leverages to set clear policy markers for protecting its primary national interests and achieving larger strategic objectives, if it intends to play the role of a major power in the region. Heeding to regional sensitivities, India appears to have yet again missed an opportunity of deepening its engagement with Afghanistan. Playing second fiddle to the great powers, or hoping to

achieve peace with difficult neighbours at the cost of its larger strategic interests, might bind New Delhi eternally to a highly unfulfilling mirage for stability in the backyard. At the same time, a decade of investment and goodwill accrued in Afghanistan could be lost simply because New Delhi failed to give shape to a coherent long-sighted policy of engagement with a traditional ally in need.

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