



Can India stay the course in post 2014 Afghanistan?

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Abstract

The inking of a bilateral strategic partnership agreement in October 2011, organizing an investment summit in New Delhi in June 2012, and being part of a trilateral agreements and adopting a regional strategy: at face value, these policy markers resemble a determined effort by India to stay the course in war-torn Afghanistan beyond 2014, a watershed year marked by the transfer of authority to the Afghans by the international community. Such measures, coming at a time when the international military footprint is rapidly receding, could be a part of a well-recalibrated strategy of a continued multi-layered engagement in a country where prophecies of doom are growing louder and more frequent than the occasional assertions of hope. Whether this strategy will succeed, however, remains to be tested.

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ANALYSIS

India's policy of providing aid and development assistance in rebuilding war ravaged Afghanistan, since it reopened its embassy and four consulates after the routing of Taliban in 2001, has been on a steady ascendancy. Today, India is the fifth-largest donor in Afghanistan, having pledged US\$2 billion for wide-ranging infrastructure development and capacity-building initiatives. While India's aid-only policy has been frequently described as opportunistic, its development policy being hinged on the international military presence, the fact remains that New Delhi's 'soft power' approach has been largely successful in carving out a huge favourable constituency. This not only includes the direct beneficiary Afghans and the Afghan government, through which the aid has been delivered, but also the United States and its allies, who have come around to acknowledge that India's developmental assistance has complemented the international counter insurgency (COIN) campaign in the crucial and missing "build and transfer" component. Therefore, the discourse has increasingly shifted to expanding and even deepening India's engagement with Afghanistan. However, whether India has the intent and capability to pursue that role under a shrinking international military presence and dwindling international financial assistance remains to be seen.

Afghanistan is strategically important to New Delhi for a range of issues which includes security, strategic, economic and regional concerns. India's primary interests in post 9/11 Afghanistan need to be viewed in the context of its concerns over extremist takeover, terrorism and violence emanating from the extremely volatile Pakistan-Afghanistan border and the consequent conflict spill over into India. A strong, stable, and democratic Afghanistan would reduce the probability of such dangers impinging on India's security and destabilising the region. New Delhi's worries are intrinsically linked to its view that Pakistan's objective in Afghanistan is to regain 'strategic depth' by reinstalling a pliant Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Hence, New Delhi's determination to stay put in the face of adverse conditions on the ground is not surprising.

India's growing presence and broad-based engagement in Afghanistan has been seen by its neighbour Pakistan as checkmating the latter's policy of regaining its 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan. Much of this narrative has also been picked up by analysts in the West to loosely refer to Afghanistan as a battleground of a zero-sum game between India and Pakistan. Such assertions have fed into the insurgent propaganda and strengthened the hand of their sponsors as witnessed in the increased targeting and attacks on Indian interests and nationals in the country.

For the past decade, New Delhi reaffirmed its commitment to rebuilding Afghanistan. It has battled both external threats as well as some criticism at home for having pursued a toothless 'aid only' policy, that is insufficient to protect Indian interests should the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorate. While the prospects for long term stabilization of Afghanistan appear bleak, amid the waning international attention and uncertainties associated with the security and political *inteqal* (transition), other voices are joining the chorus. New Delhi might thus have to confront a stark reality of downsizing and even winding down its own operations (worse case scenario) in post 2014.

Three developments are indicators of India's response to the evolving scenario, and are a demonstration of both determination and trepidation to prevent the reversal of gains beyond 2014.



First, in October 2011 India and Afghanistan signed the Agreement on Strategic Partnership (ASP). The document was an affirmation of the positive role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan and New Delhi's future commitment to a host of requirements intrinsic to the development of survival and self-sufficiency of the war torn country. India not only committed to train Afghan security forces especially the Afghan National Police, but set up an institutional framework to deepen and diversify cooperation in sectors such as agriculture, rural development, mining, industry, energy, information technology, communications, transport, including civil aviation. The overall attempt was to free Indo-Afghan engagement from the personal choices, orientations, whims and fancies of future leaders and regimes or vagaries of the changing regional security environment.

The ASP was an attempt to consolidate the past gains and in a way was as an expansion of India's role to secure its primary national security interests. A year since the agreement was inked, the actual levels of proposed cooperation remains unknown. Heeding to the sensitivities of Pakistan and refraining from being a party to the internal conflict in Afghanistan, New Delhi has repeatedly ignored the Afghan requests including President Karzai's 'wish lists' for military hardware and arms. The ASP contains provisions for assistance and training for Afghan forces; however, with time running out, these provisions could be inadequate.

Second, in June 2012, New Delhi hosted an investment summit seeking to build on the narrative of economic opportunity and resource utilization-led solution to counter the 'anxiety' of international withdrawal. The New Delhi investment summit was an attempt to be a part of the approach that seeks regional confidence building, development, governance, and most lately, trade and investment, aiming to use the country's resource potential to build its economic viability, sustainability and independence. The third in the series and the first in South Asia, the summit aimed at attracting investments for Afghanistan and ensure that the country's economic and transit potential becomes its inherent strength to accrue the much needed economic dividends for itself and the region. Even by inviting countries like China and Pakistan to participate and benefit from a reconstruction agenda, New Delhi's attempt to present the turmoil ridden Afghanistan as an attractive destination remains to be seen.

Third, at the sidelines of the 6th annual session of the UN General Assembly in October 2012, India, Afghanistan and the United States held a trilateral summit. The three countries' representatives exchanged views on the situation in Afghanistan and a wide range of regional issues of mutual interests, including combating terrorism and violent extremism, reviewing cultural exchanges, efforts to increase regional trade, investment and economic integration. With its scheduled drawdown of forces continuing, the United States is consolidating its position by a two-pronged approach; first, a bilateral strategic partnership agreement with Afghanistan (unfortunately a progress on the BSA front would have to wait till Afghanistan elects a new President), and secondly, through regional alliances. Washington has been exhorting India to play a more active role in post-2014 Afghanistan.

The trilateral summit, part of Washington's unfolding regional gamble, provided New Delhi the opportunity to showcase its criticality for Afghanistan's future, and little else. That is interpreted as a tactic to put pressure on Pakistan to fall in line as part of the Afghan solution. At the same time, New Delhi is wary of becoming a 'junior partner' or torchbearer of American policy in Afghanistan. Additionally, with the self-imposed restriction of avoiding a direct military role in the conflict, New Delhi's contribution to Afghanistan's security efforts will remain limited.



Apart from these policy initiatives, New Delhi has attempted to shore up support for an inclusive regional solution and has sought alliances and bilateral dialogue mechanisms with Russia, Iran and China to bring in stability to Afghanistan. It also tried long and hard to pursue a regional economic cooperation strategy on trade and transit issues, including energy pipelines by agreeing to plans for the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline that will generate revenue and employment opportunities for Pakistan and build long-term stakes in the stability of Afghanistan. Each of these efforts has been stonewalled by diverse perceptions of the countries involved.

The strategic churning and policy realignment before 2014, however, is not unique to India. Almost every country involved in Afghanistan has been forced to constantly revisit their strategies. However, for a country which shares no border with Afghanistan, which has invested tremendously in the rebuilding the nascent democratic country, India's attempt at protecting its gains is proving to be a litmus test. The critical policy markers of the last decade need to be strengthened as Afghanistan traverses the painful course of *inteqal* and democratic transition in the face of rapidly shifting regional alignments and waning global interests in stabilizing Afghanistan.

Remarks: *Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article is an updated version of the article that appeared in Asia Times Online [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South Asia/NK30Df02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/NK30Df02.html)*



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