



# Afghanistan: the view from India

by Eva Gross

Afghan President Hamid Karzai's visit to India from 12-15 December 2013 – during which he requested greater defence and security cooperation in the years to come – underscored the close bilateral ties between the two countries. President Karzai's attempt to enlist regional allies in support of a stable post-2014, post-transition Afghanistan also raises questions about the extent to which Afghanistan's neighbours are prepared to modify their engagement in the near future.

The bilateral relationship between India and Afghanistan has deep historical and geographical roots. Yet, until now, India's engagement in Afghanistan has mainly centred on civilian contributions and economic development. This is partly due to Pakistani resistance and fears over India's growing regional influence. Possible developments in the relationship with Islamabad will therefore have a bearing on India's future Afghanistan policy – and vice versa.

## Waiting mode

Between the upcoming Afghan presidential election in April 2014 and continued uncertainty over the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between Afghanistan and the United States, the international community as a whole faces a waiting game in Afghanistan.

The outcome of the elections will test the stability and legitimacy of the next Afghan government and the capacity of the elected leader to effectively engage

with Afghanistan's international interlocutors and address the ongoing insurgency. The BSA, on the other hand, will determine the scope and strength of future US military presence in the country and the continued level of support granted to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) by NATO. Given India's geopolitical and normative interests (and constraints), Delhi has an interest in a continued US and NATO presence in Afghanistan – particularly during the current phase of political transition. But given that India does not assume that foreign troops will stay in the country forever, the question of recalibrating Delhi's commitments to Afghanistan is, therefore, bound to surface sooner or later.

Bilateral relations were formalised through a Strategic Partnership Agreement signed in October 2011. India is now the 5th largest development donor in Afghanistan, having provided aid worth \$2 billion to date. Given the developmental challenges still facing India, this level of assistance pays tribute to the importance India attaches to Afghanistan's future. Activities funded by the government in Delhi cover four broad areas: infrastructure projects, including roads; humanitarian assistance; small and community-based development projects; and education and capacity building. As part of the latter, India has assisted in training Afghan police and civil administration as well as – albeit in more limited numbers – military personnel in Indian facilities.

A peaceful and stable Afghanistan is of strategic importance to India. Serving as a land bridge, Afghanistan



would alter India's continental trade by opening routes to Central Asia and Iran – going beyond Russia and China, and circumventing Pakistan. It would also permit an increase and diversification of energy sources, including from Iran. Last year, India committed \$100 million to upgrade its facilities at the Chabahar port in south-eastern Iran – and Delhi has also assisted Kabul in building roads to the Iranian border.

There is also a regional element to Indian engagement. Such an approach not only supports the vision of an Afghanistan at the heart of Asia, but can also serve as a means to anchor India – as the largest regional power – more firmly in its neighbourhood. The Istanbul 'Heart of Asia' process – a regional dialogue that was launched in November 2011 to increase security, political, and economic cooperation among Afghanistan and its neighbours – represents one element of such an approach. Of the six confidence building measures (CBM) endorsed at the Kabul ministerial meeting of the Istanbul process in June 2012, India leads the one on Trade, Commerce and Investment opportunities. Both India and Afghanistan are members of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC), which supports economic and social development through intra-regional cooperation. In both fora, India focuses on economic and civilian aspects, not on security-related issues.

India's difficult relationship with Pakistan has so far impeded a stronger strategic and political role for India in Afghanistan. Islamabad's pursuit of a policy of 'strategic depth' – that is, control over Afghanistan's government to hedge against India's growing influence and strength – has led Delhi to try to assuage Pakistani suspicions over the nature of Indian engagement in Afghanistan, in part by focusing on economic initiatives.

Still, Indian engagement in Afghanistan has not been without risks. Recurring attacks on installations – such as the bombings of the Indian embassy in Kabul in July 2008 and October 2009, or the assault on a residence housing Indian aid workers in 2010 – that were alleged to have been instigated or supported by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) impact on Indian involvement and expose the long shadow cast by the fractious relationship with Islamabad.

## Terms of engagement

Against this background, President Karzai's recent requests to Delhi re-open the question of how to tackle the constraints affecting India in Afghanistan. It also highlights the problem of how to fill the security vacuum that threatens to develop in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of Western forces – and

who should fill it. Karzai's wish list included various weapons and equipment, including tanks, artillery, mortars, transport aircraft and medium-lift helicopters – in addition to requests for Afghan troops and air force personnel to be trained at Indian defence facilities. If granted, this would significantly step up India's military role in Afghanistan.

Security and stability are crucial for the realisation of India's interests in Afghanistan. Still, deploying troops on the ground and supplying heavy equipment have so far been red lines for India's Afghanistan policy – and are unlikely to be crossed. When it comes to post-2014 Afghanistan, India is aiming to maintain its influence in the country in order to prevent Afghanistan from falling under near-exclusive Pakistani influence.

Modes of engagement with India on Afghanistan could be conceived of in several ways. To begin with, India's approach towards Afghanistan's reconstruction has been similar to that of the EU. Given the affinity in approach – both rely on 'soft power' and favour the use of civilian over military instruments – the EU could explore future operational coordination on these activities. The broader strategic challenges linked to a looming post-transition Afghanistan and to India-Pakistan relations are admittedly of a much taller order. In addition, when it comes to other regional players in Afghanistan, what decisions China, for instance, may consider taking at a regional level in order to fill the looming vacuum and tackle security problems on its own border with Afghanistan remain unclear.

Domestic developments in India, in particular the elections in May 2014 – Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has recently announced he will be stepping down after the elections and Narendra Modi, prime ministerial candidate for the Bharatiya Janata Party, is thought to have serious chances of winning – additionally raise the question of a possible future shift in India's foreign policy, in substance as well as style.

Notwithstanding these uncertainties, EU support for the efforts made lately by both Indian and Pakistani prime ministers to alleviate tensions between Islamabad and Delhi at the highest political level illustrates the sort of constructive role the Union might play in Central and South Asia – and perhaps beyond.

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