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"Our Good Friend and Cousin": India in Afghanistan

India is a major source of aid and economic development for Afghanistan. And New Delhi's commitment to the war-torn country is not just about gaining leverage over Pakistan.

By Olof Blomqvist for ISN

In the shadow of the bombed out Darulaman Palace in central Kabul, Afghanistan's new parliament building is being constructed by an Indian firm. The US\$83 million project is set to be completed by the end of this year, and is India's most visible investment in the Afghan capital – but Delhi's engagement with Afghanistan since 2001 runs deep and broad across the country.

As the international 2014 troop withdrawal from Afghanistan approaches, focus is increasingly shifting to countries in the South and Central Asian neighbourhood and the role they will play once the US and its NATO allies have left. Despite the attention given to Pakistan, or even to China's investments in the Afghan mineral sector, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of India.

Relations between Afghanistan and India were, until the Taliban seized power in 1996, traditionally friendly. India signed a "friendship treaty" with Kabul in 1950, strengthening trade and diplomatic relations. When Soviet troops entered Afghanistan in 1979, the then-Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi refused to condemn the invasion and maintained good terms with the Soviet-backed government. Although the descent into civil war between Soviet troops and the US-supported mujahideen left Delhi less maneuvering space in the country, Indian levels of investment remained relatively high throughout the 1980s.

The arrival of the Taliban government in 1996, however, prompted India to shut down its Kabul embassy and cut all ties with the new fundamentalist regime. The years of Taliban rule allowed Pakistan to gain significant influence in Afghanistan, to the chagrin of Delhi. The 2001 US-led invasion and the fall of the Taliban regime was seen as an opportunity by Indian policy makers to rebuild relations with Kabul and play an influential part in the country.

Indian motives for its post-2001 involvement in Afghanistan are multi-layered. India wants a strong and democratic Afghan state that does not slide into extremism again, potentially destabilising the region. Delhi is also cautious about Pakistan gaining too much influence in the country. As pointed out in a recent report by the International Crisis Group, there is a growing concern about links between Pakistan-sponsored militant groups operating in Afghanistan (Haqqani network) and anti-Indian terrorist groups (Lashkar-e-Tayyba, Jaish-e-Mohammad).

The South Asia scholar Christine Fair has argued that Indian involvement in Afghanistan is not just Pakistan-centric, but equally focused on projecting India as a rising global power and an important player in its immediate neighbourhood. There are also economic reasons, with India keen to use Afghanistan for facilitating access to Central Asian energy supplies.

With more than US\$2 billion pledged since 2001, India is today the by far largest regional donor in Afghanistan and the fifth largest in the world. India has refused to contribute troops in Afghanistan, and has instead taken a “soft” approach focusing on aid and development.

Delhi has funded four major infrastructure projects in Afghanistan: already completed are the Delaram-Zaranj highway, which links Iran to the Garland “ring road” highway that connects most major Afghan cities; and a 442 km power line connecting Kabul to Uzbekistan, which has given the capital 24-hour electricity supply for the first time in years. Still pending are the Kabul parliament building, and the rebuilding of the Salma Dam in Herat province, which will provide electricity and irrigation in western Afghanistan.

Beyond the large infrastructure projects, India’s investment in Afghanistan also extends to food aid, rural development projects and healthcare. Thousands of Afghan students have been given scholarships to study in India. India is also one of Afghanistan’s major trading partners, and the flow of goods has been strengthened by a “Preferential Trade Agreement” signed in 2003. In April this year, the two governments announced a framework agreement on Indian investment in Afghanistan’s ore industry, and Indian companies have been given the mining rights to the Hajigak iron ore deposits, estimated to hold 1.8 billion tonnes of ore. Afghanistan’s largely untapped mineral wealth is thought to be worth some US\$3 trillion, and is often talked of as key to ensuring the country’s economy. On a recent visit to Delhi, Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmai Rassoul expressed hope that the ore agreements showed that Indian involvement in Afghanistan was “shifting from aid to investment”.

From talking to ordinary Afghans around the country, it becomes clear that Delhi’s soft power approach has generated much goodwill. India consistently ranks highest in opinion polls of countries Afghans have the best perception of, while Pakistan usually takes the bottom place. It is also difficult to miss the influence of Indian culture in the country - Bollywood movies are popular in cinema halls and on the black market, while the TVs in the Kabul Airport lounge show Indian soap operas on repeat.

This is not to say that the Indo-Afghan relationship has been without friction. Indian workers and sites have been the target of several high-profile attacks since 2001, most notably the 2008 Taliban bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul in which 58 people were killed. After an Indian construction worker was shot by the Taliban in 2005, India dispatched some 200 paramilitary troops to provide security for Indian workers across the country. The presence of armed Indian forces along Pakistan’s western border prompted protests in Islamabad, questioning India’s real motives for its Afghanistan engagement.

Some analysts have also warned that Indian engagement in Afghanistan could be detrimental for the country in the long-term. With international troops withdrawing, competition between India and Pakistan could precipitate a new “great game” between the two countries that could have a negative impact on Afghanistan’s stability.

The inevitable question is if India can expand, or even maintain, its presence in Afghanistan after 2014. Delhi is at least publicly committing to doing so, as evidenced by the Afghan-India strategic partnership signed in October 2011. The deal commits India to expand its training of Afghan security forces, includes provisions on strengthening bilateral trade, and reassured many Afghans about India’s long-term intentions. Despite this, there are signs that India is now reevaluating its Afghan policy with the major development projects completed - but what the outcome might be is still

unclear.

It is, however, obvious that India's future constructive engagement with Afghanistan will be of immense importance to the country as the international presence ebbs after 2014. India has proved a reliable and capable partner for Afghanistan, whose aid and development efforts have been of direct benefit to many ordinary Afghans.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership: Beyond 2014?](#)

[India and Afghanistan](#)

[India's Engagement with Afghanistan: Developing a 'Durable Policy Architecture'](#)

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