

India's 'Af-Pak' Conundrum: South Asia in Flux

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Abstract: The risks to global security from a failure in Afghanistan are great. Abandoning the goal of establishing both a functioning Afghan state and a moderate Pakistan places greater pressure on Indian security. Pakistani intelligence would be emboldened to escalate terrorist attacks against India once it is satisfied that the Taliban would provide it strategic depth in Afghanistan. This would surely force retaliation from India.

As the strategic realities in South Asia radically altered after Osama bin Laden's death on May 2, 2011, the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, lost no time in reaching out to Afghanistan with his two day visit to Kabul. There he announced a fresh commitment of \$500 million for Afghanistan's development, over and above India's existing aid assistance of around \$1.5 billion.¹ New Delhi and Kabul agreed that the "strategic partnership" between the two neighbors, to be implemented under the framework of a partnership council headed by the foreign ministers of the two nations, will entail cooperation in areas of security, law enforcement and justice, including an enhanced focus on cooperation in the fight against international terrorism, organized crime, illegal trafficking in narcotics, and money-laundering. The Indian Prime Minister was presented with a rare honor, addressing a joint session of the Afghan Parliament to underscore Indo-Afghan unity in fighting extremism. Most significant was Singh's expression of his country's support for the Afghan government's plan of national reconciliation involving Taliban insurgents, thereby signally an end to India's public opposition to a deal with the Taliban, and bridging a strategic gap with the United States.²

¹ "Strategic ties with Kabul... India not like US, says PM," *Indian Express*, May 13, 2011.

² Teresita and Howard Schaffer, "India and the US moving closer on Afghanistan?" *The Hindu*, June 1, 2011.

Though initially Singh was to visit Kabul earlier, the United States persuaded the Indian government to postpone the visit. The reasons for this request became clear later, but it allowed New Delhi to express its urgent regional foreign policy priorities to the international community at a time when the Obama Administration has made categorical its intention to end the combat role of American forces in Afghanistan by 2014.

India's Marginalization

For a long time the Indian government seemed to have left the management of its neighbors largely to the United States. A case in point was India's decision not to take any serious action against Pakistan in the aftermath of 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, which killed 166 people and shattered Indian self-confidence as a rising power. Instead, New Delhi continued to put pressure on Islamabad using American leverage to bring the masterminds of those terror strikes to justice and stop the use of Pakistani territory for terrorist violence directed at India. For some time now, it has been clear that this strategy has not been working well.

The 60-nation London conference on Afghanistan in January 2010 advocating talks with the Taliban jolted India, as New Delhi viewed with alarm its rapidly shrinking strategic space for diplomatic maneuvering. India responded by restarting talks with Pakistan, including back channel negotiations with the Pakistani military. While these attempts failed to produce anything substantive, the hope was that they would stave off pressure from the United States to engage Islamabad. Therefore, even though negotiations with Pakistan remain hugely unpopular at home, the Indian government has continued with the policy of engagement with Pakistan. India hopes that by doing so it will be viewed as a more productive player in the West's efforts at stabilizing Afghanistan.

Equally important, India is reconsidering the terms of its involvement in Afghanistan. Until now, India has relied on its "soft power" in wooing Kabul. It is one of the largest aid donors to Afghanistan and is delivering humanitarian assistance as well as helping in nation building projects in myriad ways, including: building roads, providing medical facilities, and helping with educational programs in an effort to develop and enhance long-term local Afghan capabilities. Pakistan's paranoia about an Indian presence in Afghanistan has led the West to underplay India's largely beneficial role in the country even as every Pakistani claim about Indian intentions is taken at face value. The Taliban militants, who blew up the Indian embassy in Kabul in 2008 and tried again in 2009, have sent a strong signal that India is part of the evolving security dynamic in Afghanistan despite its reluctance to take on a more active role in the military operations. After targeting personnel involved in developmental projects and emboldened by India's non-response,

these terrorists have trained their guns directly at the Indian State. Moreover, as India's isolation at the London conference underscored, the country's role in Afghanistan has not even been fully appreciated by the West.

When the Indian External Affairs Minister, S.M. Krishna, underscored the folly of making a distinction "between a good Taliban and a bad Taliban" at the London Conference, he was completely out of sync with the larger mood at the conference.³ The West has determined that it is not a question of *if*, but *when* and *how*, to exit from Afghanistan which leaders view as rapidly becoming a quagmire. So when it was decided in London that the time had come to woo the "moderate" section of the Taliban back to share power in Kabul, it was a signal to India that Pakistan seemed to have convinced the West that it could play the role of mediator in negotiations with the Taliban, thereby cementing its centrality in the unfolding strategic dynamic in the region.

It would be catastrophic for Indian security if remnants of Taliban were to come to power in Afghanistan with the backing of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) and Pakistan's military. To preserve its interests in such a strategic milieu, India is stepping up its role in the training of Afghan forces, coordinating with states like Russia and Iran, and reaching out to all sections of Afghan society. More problematic for the West, there are growing calls in India for taking a more militaristic role in Afghanistan, if only to support its developmental activities.⁴

The United States has discouraged India from assuming a higher profile in Afghanistan for fear of offending Pakistan. At the same time, it has failed to convince Pakistan to take Indian concerns more seriously. This has led to rapid deterioration in the Indian security environment, with New Delhi having little or no strategic space to maneuver. Therefore, India is being forced to reassess its priorities vis-à-vis Af-Pak, given the huge stakes that New Delhi has developed in Afghanistan over the last decade.

Changing Trajectory of India-Afghanistan Relations

In 2001, India's engagement with Afghanistan became multi-dimensional after the Taliban's defeat and the installation of an Interim Authority. One immediate result was the upgrade of Indian representation in Afghanistan from Liaison Office to a full-fledged Embassy in 2002. India actively participated in the Bonn Conference and was instrumental in the emergence of post-Taliban governing and political authority in Afghanistan. Since then, India's main focus has been to support the Afghan government and the political

³ Ashis Ray, "World Rejects India's Taliban Stand," *Times of India* (New Delhi), January 29, 2010.

⁴ For details on the changing trajectory of Indian policy in Afghanistan, see Harsh V. Pant, "India's Changing Role in Afghanistan," *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2011, pp. 31–9.

process in the country as mandated under the Bonn agreement of 2001.⁵ It has continued to pursue a policy of high-level engagement with Afghanistan through extensive and wide-ranging humanitarian, financial and project assistance, as well as participation in international efforts aimed at political reconciliation and economic rebuilding of Afghanistan.

India's relations with Afghanistan have steadily improved for several reasons. Unlike Pakistan, ties between India and Afghanistan are not hampered by a contested contiguous border. India's support for the Northern Alliance against the Pakistan-backed Taliban in the 1990s strengthened its position in Kabul after 2001. Many members of the Alliance are members of the government or hold influential provincial posts. India has done its best to restore the balance in its engagement with a range of different ethnic groups and political affiliations in Afghanistan. The balance was tilted towards the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance during the 1990s as a counter to Pakistan-controlled hard-line Pashtun factions, led by the Taliban. India's vocal support for Afghan President Hamid Karzai (an ethnic Pashtun educated in India), demonstrates its keenness to revive its close ties with Pashtuns.

India and Afghanistan have a long-standing record of technical and economic cooperation in various fields. In fact, prior to 1979, Afghanistan was the largest partner in India's technical and economic cooperation program.⁶ India has launched an extensive assistance program in Afghanistan since 2001 where it has pledged \$750 million toward reconstruction efforts most of which is unconditional.⁷ Out of this around \$270 million has already been used on projects ranging from health and rural development to training of diplomats and bureaucrats. Delhi has emerged as one of Afghanistan's top six donors, having extended a \$500 million aid package in 2001 and gradually increasing it ever since.

During each of Karzai's visits to India, several important bilateral initiatives have been announced by the two sides. This includes India's \$70 million financial commitment for the construction of Zaranj-Delaram road in Afghanistan; a Preferential Trade agreement between the two states; memoranda of understanding of cooperation in the fields of civil aviation, media and information, rural development, standardization, and education; and the establishment of a Joint Committee at the level of Commerce Ministers to conclude an Export-Import (EXIM) Bank Line of Credit of \$50 million to promote business-to-business relations.

The Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, visited Afghanistan in 2005, the first visit by an Indian head of government since Indira Gandhi in 1976.

⁵ Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, Bonn Agreement, United Nations, Bonn, Ger., Dec. 5, 2001, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3f48f4754.html>.

⁶ A. Baruah, Karzai Keen on Indian Expertise. *The Hindu*, January 22, 2002.

⁷ Nirupam Sen, (2007). Statement on the Situation in Afghanistan at the Security Council. March 20. Available at <http://www.un.int/india/2007/ind1319.pdf>.

In an act of significant symbolism, Singh's visit was also the first by a foreign head of state or government to last for more than a day since the Taliban's ouster in 2001. Singh brushed aside concerns for his security to demonstrate India's special commitment to Afghanistan. This visit's aims included the commitment of both sides to reconnect past ties severed during the Taliban's rule and to develop a new partnership. In consonance with the priorities laid down by the Afghan government, Indian assistance has focused on building human capital and physical infrastructure, improving security and helping the agricultural and other important sectors of Afghanistan's economy. India's support in the military realm has been limited to supplying Afghanistan with defensive military equipment, such as armored check posts and watch-towers.

Among the most high-profile of infrastructure projects undertaken by India was the reconstruction of the 220 kilometres long Zaranj-Delaram road, which enables Afghanistan to have access to the sea via Iran. It will also provide a shorter route for Indian goods to reach Afghanistan. This project was completed in 2008 by India's Border Roads Organization despite stiff resistance from the Taliban. India is also investing in the rebuilding of institutional capacity in Afghanistan by providing training to more than 700 Afghans in various professions, including diplomats, lawyers, judges, doctors, paramedics, women entrepreneurs, teachers, officials in various departments of Afghanistan's government, public officials, and cartographers. Afghanistan's budding public transport system relies on Indian support as India is not only providing buses, but also training to traffic operators and other personnel related to transport. The new Parliament building in Kabul is perhaps the most visible sign of India's outreach to Afghanistan as a fellow democracy.

India has committed one million tons of wheat aid to Afghanistan via the World Food Program. It is also funding and executing the Salma Dam Power Project in Herat province involving a commitment of around \$80 million, as well as a double circuit transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul.⁸ In addition, India is constructing Afghanistan's new parliament building. Finally, India has adopted about 100 villages in Afghanistan to promote rural development by introducing solar electrification and rain water harvesting technologies.

India has a fundamental interest in ensuring that Afghanistan emerges as a stable and economically integrated state in the region. Though Afghanistan's economy has recovered significantly since the fall of the Taliban, with the real GDP growth rate exceeding 8 percent in 2010, it remains highly dependent on foreign aid and trade with neighboring countries.⁹ The only way in which the Karzai government can retain and enhance its legitimacy is by bringing the Afghan economy back on track. To do so largely depends on

⁸ V.K. Nambiar, (2004). Statement on the Situation in Afghanistan at the Security Council. April 6. Available at <http://www.un.int/india/2004/ind910.pdf>.

⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, Afghanistan. *The World Factbook*. Available at <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/af.html>.

other states and India is playing an important role. The preferential trade agreement signed by India and Afghanistan gives substantial duty concessions to certain categories of Afghan dry fruits when entering India, with Afghanistan allowing reciprocal concessions to Indian products such as sugar, tea, and pharmaceuticals. A consortium of Indian steel companies, led by National Mineral Development Corporation (NMDC), India's largest iron ore mining company, is bidding to acquire all or some of Afghanistan's 1.8 billion ton Hajigak iron ore mines.¹⁰ This bid is a rare instance of public and private sector companies joining forces to bid for an overseas raw material asset. Indian companies are worried about the safety of their investment because of the Taliban threat and so are afraid to venture solo.

India also piloted the move to make Afghanistan a member of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The hope is that with the Afghanistan's entry into the SAARC, issues relating to the transit and free flow of goods across borders in the region can be addressed, leading to greater economic development of Afghanistan and the entire region. Moreover, with Afghanistan as a member of the SAARC, South Asia will be able to reach out to Central and West Asia more effectively. It is estimated that given Afghanistan's low trade linkages with other states in the region, its participation in the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) would result in trade gains of \$2 billion to the region with as much as \$606 million accruing to Afghanistan.¹¹

India Faces a Backlash

Those who would like to rid Afghanistan of Indian involvement have also been upping the ante in an attempt to rupture these burgeoning Indo-Afghanistan relations. In October 2009, a suicide car-bombing outside the Indian Embassy in the Afghan capital Kabul left at least 17 dead, and scores of others wounded.¹² The attack was similar to a July 2008 blast that struck the embassy, leaving 60 dead including an Indian foreign service officer and an embassy defense attaché. Investigators at the time believed the strike was perpetrated by the Pakistan-based Haqqani group, and suggested that Pakistani intelligence had also played a role. The same story resurfaced the following year, with the Afghan envoy to the United States suggesting Pakistani intelligence involvement. This was the first time that a top Afghan official was openly blaming the ISI for a terrorist attack in his country.¹³

¹⁰ Priyadarshini Siddhanta, "After Tata exit, JSW and Monnet Ispat join Hajigak consortium," *Indian Express*, September 1, 2011.

¹¹ G. Srinivasan, "Afghanistan's entry to SAARC will lead to \$2-bn gain for sub-continent," *The Hindu Business Line*, March 29, 2007.

¹² "India hints at Pak link to Kabul Embassy attack," *Indian Express*, October 10, 2009.

¹³ "ISI behind attack on Indian embassy: Afghan envoy to US," *Indian Express*, October 10, 2009.

Ordinary Afghans, on the other hand, appear to have welcomed Indian involvement in development projects in their country. India has deliberately refrained from giving its support a military dimension, sticking to civilian matters. But Western observers tend to view Indian involvement in Afghanistan as problematic, since it has worked to undercut Pakistan's own influence in the country. The result is that India's attempt to leverage its "soft power" in Afghanistan is becoming increasingly risky. India will have a tough road ahead as the perception grows that the Taliban are on the rebound. This heightened sense of political uncertainty is also fostered by the Obama administration's decision to reduce American military presence in Afghanistan.

So far, there is a general consensus in India that it should not send troops to Afghanistan. Yet beyond this there is little agreement about what policy options it has if the turbulence in the Af-Pak region spills over into India. The traditional Indian stance is that while it is happy to help the Afghan government in its reconstruction efforts, it will not directly engage in security operations. However, this is becoming increasingly harder to sustain. The inability of the Indian government to provide for the security of its private sector operating in Afghanistan has led to a paradoxical situation in which the Indian government's largest contractors in Afghanistan seem to have participated in projects that may well have ended up paying off the Haqqani network, one of Afghanistan's deadliest and most anti-Indian insurgent groups.¹⁴ A debate, therefore, is emerging as to whether India should start surrounding its humanitarian endeavors in Afghanistan with a stronger military presence. If Afghanistan is the most important frontier in combating terrorism targeted against India, the critics ask, then how long can India continue with its present policy? The return of the Taliban to Afghanistan would pose a major threat to its borders. In the end, the brunt of escalating terrorism will be borne by India, which already has been described as "the sponge that protects" the West.¹⁵ Indian strategists warn that a hurried U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan will have serious implications for India, not the least of which would be to see Pakistan, rush to fill the vacuum. As a result, shedding its reticence on Afghan security issues, India has been more outspoken about its commitment to build the capabilities of the Afghan security forces.¹⁶ This has led to the signing of a strategic partnership agreement between New Delhi and Kabul in October 2011 that commits India to "training, equipping and capacity building" of the Afghan security forces. To be fair, India's role in Afghanistan should not be viewed through the eyes of western observers who have dubbed it provo-

¹⁴ Matthieu Aikins, "Following the Money," *The Caravan Magazine*, September 1, 2011, available at <http://www.caravanmagazine.in/Story/1051/Following-the-Money.html>.

¹⁵ Ashley J. Tellis, "Lessons from Mumbai," Testimony to the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, US Senate, January 28, 2009, available at http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/_files/012809Tellis.pdf.

¹⁶ "India committed to building the capabilities of Afghan security forces," *The Hindu*, June 2, 2011.

cative, or by Pakistan, which resents its own waning influence. Rather, India's involvement should be seen through the eyes of the Afghan people who are benefitting from the use of its neighbor's soft power, whatever its motivations.

While the debate over how to approach Afghanistan is far from resolved in Indian political corridors, any change in strategy will have serious implications for the future of India's rise as global power and for regional security in South Asia. And, more often than not, India is forgotten in western media analysis of the situation in Afghanistan, which largely focuses on the West and Pakistan. Should India relinquish its soft power strategy and replace it with something more forceful, that may change.

India-Pakistan-Afghanistan Triangle

To a great extent, India's approach towards Afghanistan is a function of its Pakistan policy. It is important for India that Pakistan does not get a foothold in Afghanistan. India would like to minimize Pakistan's involvement in the affairs of Afghanistan and to ensure that a fundamentalist regime of the Taliban variety does not re-root. Pakistan, on the other hand, has viewed Afghanistan as a way of countering India's rise in South Asia.¹⁷ Given its location between India and Afghanistan, Pakistan sees good Indo-Afghan relations as a threat, fearing the strategic dilemma of a powerful India in the east and an irredentist Afghanistan (with claims on the Pashtun dominated areas) in the west.¹⁸ Given its Pashtun-ethnic linkage with Afghanistan, Pakistan considers its role to be a privileged one in the affairs of Afghanistan. Considering these conflicting imperatives, both India and Pakistan have tried to neutralize each other's influence in the affairs of Afghanistan.

Pakistan, along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, was the main supporter of the Taliban; India, along with Russia and Iran, threw its weight behind the Northern Alliance. As a consequence, Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan peaked with the coming to power of the Taliban in 1996. It viewed the Taliban as a means of controlling Afghanistan and undercutting India's influence. Pakistan has long believed that it can gain "strategic depth" vis-à-vis India by influencing the domestic politics of Afghanistan, something Islamabad felt it achieved during the 1980s and the 1990s. It is now keen to prevent the "strategic encirclement" resulting from closer Delhi-Kabul ties.

Since the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, the perceived gains of the last two decades have been threatened. After the terrorist attacks in the United States, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf had to choose between support for

¹⁷ Marvin G. Weinbaum, "Pakistan and Afghanistan: The Strategic Relationship," *Asian Survey*, 31(6) June, 1991, pp. 498-99.

¹⁸ Rifaat Hussain, "Pakistan's Relations With Afghanistan: Continuity and Change," *Strategic Studies*, 22(4) 2002. Available at http://www.issi.org.pk/journal/2002_files/no_4/article/3a.htm.

the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan and its “war on terrorism” or isolation as a backer of radical Islamist extremism. Musharraf promptly signed Pakistan up as an ally of Washington. This committed Pakistan to supporting efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and to strengthen the administration of President Hamid Karzai. Kabul remains deeply suspicious of Pakistan, on whom its security is largely dependent. Pakistan’s ISI agency is linked to the resurgence of the Taliban, whose leadership is thought to be operating from tribal border regions. The rejuvenation of the Taliban allows the Pakistani military to underline their nation’s role as a frontline state in the war on terrorism, thereby securing U.S. support. Musharraf and his successor Zardari have been unable to dismantle the infrastructure that has provided funding, training and arms for the Taliban though the ISI has been brought under more direct control since 2001.

Afghanistan’s security problems can be linked to the continuing position of the military as the predominant force in Pakistan, an institution that has, since the 1990s, viewed the Taliban as a means of controlling Afghanistan and undercutting Indian influence.¹⁹ Pakistan’s frustration at the loss of political influence in Afghanistan after the ouster of the Taliban has been compounded by the welcoming attitude of the Karzai government towards India. Karzai may not be deliberately crafting a Delhi-Kabul alliance against Islamabad, but he is certainly hoping to push Pakistan into taking his concerns seriously. In a sign of its growing influence in Afghanistan, India has opened consulates in Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kandahar and Jalalabad, in addition to its embassy in Kabul. Pakistan has accused India’s Kabul embassy of spreading anti-Pakistani propaganda and views the establishment of the consulates as a way for Delhi to improve intelligence-gathering against it. Islamabad is also wary of Afghanistan or India exerting influence on restive populations in its border regions such as Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Pakistan claims that much of the funding and arms for the Baluch tribal leaders, grouped under the umbrella of the Baluchistan Liberation Army, are funneled through the Indian consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar.

Pakistan has worked hard to limit India’s involvement in Afghanistan. It made transit rights to Afghanistan conditional upon a resolution of the Kashmir issue. By not allowing India transit rights to Afghanistan through its territory, Pakistan has sought to leverage Afghanistan’s reliance on the Karachi port as its only gateway to the world. But Kabul has pushed back and has used Iran and India to find alternative routes, reducing its historic dependence on Pakistan for transit. Although it has failed to achieve its objectives in the economic realm, it has been successful in limiting India’s military involvement in Afghanistan. Despite Pakistan’s objections, however, Afghanistan has

¹⁹ Husain Haqqani, *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), pp. 238–60.

sought Indian assistance in the defense sector. The Afghan Air Force's fleet of MiG 21 fighters and other defense equipment, mostly of Russian and Soviet origin, has been serviced by Indian technicians. India also played an important role in the reorganization of the Afghan National Army and hopes that it will help in the long-term evolution of Indo-Afghan military ties.²⁰ India has stationed the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) commandos in Afghanistan for the protection of its personnel employed by the Border Roads Organization (BRO). This is the first time since its independence that India has its military personnel deployed in Afghanistan, something that has obviously not gone down well with Pakistan.²¹ Faced with a resurgent and resilient Taliban aided by Pakistan, India and Afghanistan are also cooperating extensively on intelligence gathering. The Afghan authorities have also hinted at the role of the ISI in the bombing of the Indian Embassy in Kabul which the Pakistan government was quick to deny. The message of the bombing seemed clear to India: it should get out of Afghanistan.

While some have suggested that increasing trade and transit between India and Pakistan can reduce their sense of political rivalry in Afghanistan,²² it is not clear if the two sides would be willing to give up their power struggle so easily. After all, as far back as 1979, India had proposed that the country and Pakistan should cooperate on Afghanistan to stabilize the South Asian security environment. However, global political realities soon surfaced with Pakistan emerging as a frontline state in the U.S.-led struggle against Soviet expansionism and India gravitating towards the USSR. Pakistan, which has long viewed itself as the ultimate arbiter of power in Afghanistan, is finding it difficult to reconcile itself to a situation where the balance of power seems to have shifted in favor of India. The Cold War may have ended in 1991 but the Indo-Pakistani "security dilemma" continues to shape the attitudes of both India and Pakistan towards Afghanistan.

Pakistan sees a friendly Afghanistan, in which religious extremism continues to flourish, as essential to keep the pressure on India in Kashmir. While India would like to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a springboard for terrorism, the recent resurgence of the Taliban and Pakistan's ambivalent approach towards this growing menace remains a major headache for India. Despite his status as a western ally in the "war on terror," Musharraf refused to unequivocally renounce the terrorist option as far as Kashmir and Afghanistan were concerned, and his successor has given no indication that he intends to change that policy. The terror strikes in Mumbai in November 2008 further confirmed Indian suspicions that sections of Pakistani political and military establishment have no interest in renouncing terrorism as an instrument of their foreign policy.

²⁰ Rahul Bedi, "Strategic Realignment," *Frontline*, April 17, 2003.

²¹ John Cherian, "Killed in Cold Blood," *Frontline*, May 19, 2006.

²² C. Raja Mohan, "Trade-off on Transit," *The Hindu*, August 12, 2004.

The Taliban's resurgence is being supported by Pakistan's intelligence agencies, not only because they are under the spell of the forces of radical Islam, but also because of their entrenched opinion that the jihadist movement allows them to assert greater influence on Pakistan's vulnerable western flank. The Pakistani army has been quick to act against Tehrik-i-Taliban (the so called Pakistan Taliban) in South Waziristan, but remains reluctant to take on the Haqqani network which the Pakistani security establishment views as an asset for levering Kabul after the drawdown of U.S. forces. From the beginning of the U.S.-led war on al-Qaeda and the Taliban, it has been clear that Islamabad would not be able to compartmentalize the jihadi groups. The strategy of keeping the Kashmir terrorist groups active while clamping down on outfits operating in Afghanistan was never going to work, for the simple reason that those who believe they are fighting a holy war will never accept a diktat limiting term to crossing only one national border or fighting only one enemy.²³ India will be forced to respond more aggressively if the Islamist forces continue to gain momentum in and around Afghanistan because the last time similar developments took place, India had to pay a heavy price.

However, there is an increasing convergence of views between India and the United States identifying Pakistan as the source of Afghanistan's insecurity. In recognizing that the borderlands between Pakistan and Afghanistan constitute the single most important threat to global peace and security, that Islamabad's security establishment is part of the problem rather than the solution, and that India should join an international effort in managing the "Af-Pak" region, the United States departed from its South Asia policy first crafted in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. India remains concerned that the Obama administration has given the Pakistan army the perfect alibi for not complying with American demands for credible co-operation in the war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The Pakistan army now has very little incentive to reduce tensions with India in the hope of bargaining more from the United States.

There is a temptation in Washington to view the killing of Osama bin Laden as an opening for accelerating a negotiated settlement with the Taliban and hastening the end of the Afghan war. Islamabad and Kabul have also managed to formalize a pact that would allow the Pakistani army a role in negotiating a reconciliation between Kabul and the Taliban, which has been supported by the United States.²⁴ The United States has publicly endorsed the idea of negotiations with the Taliban on a political settlement with Washington, holding several preliminary meetings with representatives of Mullah Omar, though so far without much progress. And as Pakistan succeeds in convincing the West that the best way out of the present mess is to reach out to the "good

²³ Husain Haqqani, *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military*. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005) pp. 301-9.

²⁴ Anita Joshua, "Bid to Placate Pakistan on Afghanistan," *The Hindu*, August 4, 2011.

Taliban,” India’s marginalization seems only to increase. Though the United States and Afghan governments have insisted that any settlement process should result in an end to Taliban violence and a willingness to conform to the Afghan constitution, the possibility of a Pakistan-sponsored settlement between hard-line elements of the Taliban and the Afghan government remains a serious concern for India. As the diplomatic cables revealed by WikiLeaks made clear, India has been concerned about U.S. plans to exit from Afghanistan and the possible consequences for India’s security. The Indian Prime Minister had expressed his hope that all those engaged in the process of moving towards stability in Afghanistan, including the United States, would “stay on course.”²⁵ And as Indian hopes have been frustrated, New Delhi has to rapidly alter its approach towards “Af-Pak.”

Conclusion

Given the high stakes involved, India will be forced to take a far more aggressive and leading role in foreign policy in its neighborhood, especially when it comes to “Af-Pak.” Instead of ignoring Delhi, the West would be better served were it to cease pandering to Pakistan for short-term gains. The failure to support the only secular liberal democracy in the region will only embolden the radical Islamists at the expense of regional security. There is a real danger that the withdrawal of American troops will be seen by regional powers as an invitation for a revival of the 19th century’s “Great Game.”

For India, Afghanistan is a strategic priority. It enjoys immense goodwill among ordinary Afghans that it has earned by its decade-long investment in Afghanistan. The Indian Prime Minister’s visit to Kabul in May 2011 was a signal to the world that India remains a major player in the evolving ground realities in “Af-Pak” even as the West tries to find a *modus vivendi* with the Taliban. As the western forces prepare for a pull-out, New Delhi has been trying to strengthen its partnership with Kabul. Strengthening the security dimension of India-Afghanistan ties is extremely important for India as it is in New Delhi’s interest to help Kabul preserve its strategic autonomy at a time when Pakistan has made it clear that it would like the Haqqani network and the Taliban to be at the centre of the post-American political dispensation in Kabul.

The risks to global security from a failure in Afghanistan are great. Abandoning the goal of establishing a functioning Afghan state and a moderate Pakistan places greater pressure on Indian security. Pakistani intelligence would be emboldened to escalate terrorist attacks against India once it is satisfied that the Taliban would provide it strategic depth in Afghanistan. This would surely force retaliation from India. A peace deal that gives Pakistan and its Taliban friends a dominating role in Afghanistan would be an unwelcome

²⁵ B. Muralidhar Reddy, “Don’t leave Afghanistan, India told US,” *The Hindu*, May 24, 2011.

development for New Delhi. India fears rewarding bad behavior would only engender more hostility, a reasonable conclusion based on its past experience, making New Delhi even more reluctant to pursue a “peace process” with Islamabad.

While the West ponders the prospects of bringing peace to Afghanistan, it needs to examine its policy in light of the sub-continental conflict rooted in Pakistan-India rivalry. Buying the loyalty of the Taliban or accepting a Pakistani-brokered deal in Kabul will only pave the way to another, perhaps even more dangerous, conflict involving terrorist groups and nuclear-armed neighbors. By pursuing a strategy that might end up giving Pakistan the leading role in the state structures in Afghanistan, the West might just be sowing the seeds for future regional turmoil.

