



Executive Summary



Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College

INDIA'S CHANGING AFGHANISTAN POLICY: REGIONAL AND GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

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Ever since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, India has tried to pursue a proactive Afghanistan policy, and a broad-based interaction is taking place between the two states. This is also a time when Indian capabilities—political, economic, and military—have increased markedly, and India has become increasingly ambitious in defining its foreign policy agenda. Rising powers seek to enhance their security by increasing their capabilities and their control over the external environment. As a rising power, India has also sought to make its presence felt by adopting a more proactive role in its extended neighborhood and by forging economic, military, and institutional linkages. In many ways, Afghanistan has become emblematic of the ambitious course that India seems to be charting in its foreign policy.

India has a range of interests in Afghanistan that it would like to preserve and enhance. Apart from countering Pakistan, these include containing Islamist extremism, using Afghanistan as a gateway to the energy-rich and strategically important Central Asian region, and asserting its regional predominance. Yet, the most important goal for New Delhi remains one of ensuring that Pakistan does not regain its central role in Afghan state structures. The last time Pakistan dictated terms in Afghanistan was in the 1990s, and Indian security interests suffered to an unprecedented degree. But then India was a weaker state, marginal in the strategic equations of major global powers, and so could be easily ignored. Today, India is widely viewed as a rising global power with many more cards to play in

Afghanistan than ever before. Yet, India remains marginal to the emerging ground realities in Afghanistan. India's perpetually reactive foreign policy ensured that for the last decade it has been reacting to the actions of others in Afghanistan without developing an autonomous posture. This will have serious consequences for Indian security once Western forces depart from Afghanistan in 2014.

India has growing stakes in peace and stability in Afghanistan, and the recent India-Afghan strategic partnership agreement underlines India's commitment to ensure that positive momentum in Delhi-Kabul ties is maintained. The Obama administration's reliance on the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate to help organize and kick-start reconciliation talks aimed at ending the war in Afghanistan—despite the administration's accusing the disgraced spy agency of secretly supporting the Haqqani terrorist network, which has mounted sustained attacks on Western and Indian targets—has been a source of worry for New Delhi. The ISI has little interest in bringing the Haqqanis to the negotiating table, since it continues to view the insurgents as its best hope for maintaining influence in Afghanistan as the United States reduces its presence there.

Since 2001, India has primarily 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. India is building roads, providing medical facilities,

and helping with educational programs in an effort to develop and enhance long-term local Afghan capabilities. India would be loath to see the political and economic capital it has invested in Afghanistan go to waste. Because India was not consulted prior to the announcement of plans for the withdrawal of American forces by the Obama administration, and there has been little attempt to make India part of the larger process of ensuring a stable Afghanistan post-2014, the perception has grown in New Delhi that it is on its own if it wishes to secure its vital interests in Afghanistan.

India's centrality to Afghanistan's future was underscored by the Taliban's statement after U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta's visit to India in June 2012: The Taliban sought to drive a wedge between New Delhi and Washington by suggesting that India had given a "negative" answer to Panetta's wish for greater Indian involvement in Afghanistan. This was immediately refuted by the U.S. Department of State, which underscored India's important role in regional security, including the transition in Afghanistan. The United States is now backing a more robust Indian involvement in Afghanistan, signaling a long-term commitment to Afghanistan's future. As part of the third U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue in June 2012, India and the United States announced regular trilateral consultations with Afghanistan.

In recent years, there has been a broad maturing of the U.S.-India defense ties, and Afghanistan will clearly be a beneficiary of this trend. Deeper military relations with India are important for the United States in order to address a range of strategic interests that are common to both, including the security of the sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean, countering terrorism, and tackling humanitarian and natural disasters. With India holding more military exercises with the United States than with any other country, this convergence is already manifest, but the challenge remains to make this defense engagement more operationally robust.

As Washington and Kabul turn a new page in the Afghanistan saga, New Delhi would be eager to take this opportunity to make it a more credible actor in its own neighborhood. The Washington-Kabul strategic partnership agreement provides India with crucial space for diplomatic maneuvering so as to regain lost ground and expand its footprint in a neighboring state where it remains hugely popular despite the lack of seriousness in its policy approach. An attempt to beef up intelligence sharing between India and Afghanistan is the first step in the operationalization of the India-Afghan strategic partnership, but much-more-concrete steps are needed to ensure that New Delhi maintains a substantial presence in Afghanistan. There has been a persistent complaint in the corridors of power in New Delhi that the Obama administration sacrificed Indian interests at the altar of pleasing Pakistan, which further allowed Pakistan's proxies to destabilize Afghanistan. Now that Washington is making it clear that it views Pakistan as part of the problem and India as part of the solution, New Delhi and Washington have a historic opportunity to work together in bringing stability and security to Afghanistan.

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