

India in Afghanistan, part II: Indo-U.S. relations in the lengthening AfPak shadow

By Christine Fair, October 27, 2010

Despite deepening security threats from both the Taliban and other Pakistan-based proxies operating against Indian personnel and institutions in Afghanistan, thus far India has remained committed to staying in Afghanistan. India has its own concerns about the ultimate settlement in Afghanistan given that such a political settlement will likely come about through some sort of atwinned process of reconciliation and reintegration of former Taliban fighters back into Afghanistan's political landscape.



Surely this will be a prominent matter of discussion when U.S. President Barack Obama undertakes a state **visit** to India next month. As one **Indian commentator** recently wrote:

The real criterion for measuring success [of the Obama visit] would lie in assessing whether or not the two leaders have reached consensus on defining the dangers that their, and other, countries face from the Af-Pak area and how they intend to tackle it. They must agree on a mechanism for arriving at such assessment and there is only one way of doing it. What is needed is a trilateral forum of consultations consisting of the U.S., India, and Afghanistan.

In some measure, India should be assured that the Obama administration's assessment of the "Pakistan challenge" more closely mirrors that of India than that of the Bush administration, which remained doggedly committed to its Panglossian assessments of Pakistani President Parvez Musharraf's various promises to contend with the terrorism menaces based in and from Pakistan. However, as Bob Woodward lays bare in *Obama's Wars*, while the Obama White House has a better appreciation of the challenges with Pakistan it lacks any significant strategy to contend with them.

Moreover, Obama has much to prove to the Indians following a shaky start. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton went to **China** first -- not India. Both Obama and Clinton made various statements attesting to **the primacy of China** in the U.S.'s Asia strategy. India was piqued by the Obama administration's lack of attention, having become habituated to the incessant wooing of the Bush administration, which urged the United States to alter its entire nonproliferation regime to accommodate the controversial Indo-U.S. civilian nuclear deal. The deal was important to Washington ostensibly to constrain China. Ashley Tellis, the architect of the deal, **explained** the importance of such a move in 2005:

If the United States is serious about advancing its geopolitical objectives in Asia, it would almost by definition help New Delhi develop its strategic capabilities such that India's nuclear weaponry and associated delivery systems could deter against the growing and utterly more capable nuclear forces Beijing is likely to possess by 2025.

Any U.S. retrenchment from this position on China would leave India exposed.

India continues to watch with **concern** as Washington continues to ply military assistance to Pakistan while remaining unable or unwilling to compel Pakistan to abandon militancy as a tool of foreign policy and to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure that has inflicted such harm upon India and other countries the region. Worse, India fears that Washington will provide funds and access to weapon systems that are more appropriate to target India than Pakistani insurgents. In the wake of the recently concluded **U.S.-Pakistan strategic dialogue**, more defense wares will be on their way to Pakistan. India's **Defense Minister A.K. Antony** summarized India's concerns during a September 2010 trip to Washington: "We feel that even though the U.S. is giving arms to Pakistan to fight terrorism, our practical experience is (that) it is always being misused. They are diverting a portion against India," Antony had said during his visit here.

Will India stay the course in Afghanistan? Planning for the "day after"

Obama's (largely misconstrued) announcement that U.S. troops will begin **drawing down** military forces from Afghanistan in a conditions-based fashion in July 2011 has been widely read as "sever and saunter," or perhaps even "cut and run" among Afghanistan's neighbors. The Obama administration's assurances that the United States will **remain committed** to Afghanistan's development and transition have had little palliative impacts upon these calculations. India is no exception. Obama's commitment to ending the military commitment to Afghanistan has triggered a vigorous domestic debate within India about its future role in Afghanistan.

Indians are right to worry about how they will continue their programs and initiatives in Afghanistan as the United States and other international military forces reconfigure their posture away from active military operations in the future. Indian personnel have been under steady attack in Afghanistan.

After the 2008 attack on India's Embassy in Kabul, the Indian Express ran a poignant editorial that captured this dilemma. The author **wrote**:

After the Kabul bombing, India must come to terms with an important question that it has avoided debating so far. New Delhi cannot continue to expand its economic and diplomatic activity in Afghanistan, while avoiding a commensurate increase in its military presence there. For too long, New Delhi has deferred to Pakistani and American sensitivities about raising India's strategic profile in Afghanistan.

Some Indian analysts have articulated an explicitly military option for India in Afghanistan. Dr. **Subhash Kapila**, writing in December 2009, explains, "India has wrongly shied away from a military commitment in Afghanistan for two major reasons. The first was the American reluctance to permit Indian military involvement in Afghanistan out of deference to Pakistan Army sensitivities. The second reason was the political and strategic

timidity of India's political leadership who have yet to recognize that being a big power would involve shouldering military responsibilities to reorder in India's favor the security environment in South Asia." He argues that since the U.S. exit is a question of when not if, India must begin preparing extensive contingency planning for the "day after" of the U.S. exit from Afghanistan.

In August of 2008, *Pragati* (an online, independent Indian defense publication) dedicated an entire **issue** to debating whether or not India should send troops to Afghanistan. One author argued that India should expand its civilian effort as well as forge a military option. Shushant T. Singh, one of the contributors to that issue, **explains**, "A significant Indian military presence in Afghanistan will alter the geo-strategic landscape in the extended neighborhood, by expanding India's power projection in Central Asia."

Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, in the same issue of *Pragati*, urges India to stay the course and push to train Afghan National Security Forces over the objections of the United States, NATO, and Pakistan. At the other extreme are those who worry that the benefits of any Indian presence in Afghanistan are outweighed by the cost. (India has already been forced to expand its security forces' presence in Afghanistan to secure the civilian efforts underway.) Proponents of scaling back argue that India should do so when the United States and other coalition partners reduce their kinetic operations and retract their military footprints beginning in July 2011.

The stakes for India are higher than some may appreciate. India's efforts to shape the outcome in Afghanistan with its own security interests will be important evidence that India has what it takes to be a power of any consequence outside of South Asia -- much less globally. If India cannot effectively shape the course of events in its own "immediate neighborhood," how can it credibly lay claim to its great power aspirations at home or abroad?

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