

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

POLICY INNOVATION MEMORANDUM NO. #53

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From: Alyssa Ayres
Re: Why the United States Should Work With India to Stabilize Afghanistan

The international military presence in Afghanistan has shrunk dramatically, and even with a slower pace of troop withdrawal, the country's security situation has already worsened. Iraq's chaos provides a chilling precedent. After fifteen years of involvement in Afghanistan, the United States has a strong interest in a stable future for the fragile democracy. Whether or not it further alters its planned troop withdrawal, the United States should encourage Indian efforts to assist Afghanistan in areas of Indian expertise: democracy, economics, and civilian security. India has been an important economic assistance partner for Afghanistan, and can help in other fields to prevent destabilization. Although Pakistan may object, Washington should make it clear to Islamabad that Indian support for Afghanistan's stability—especially without “boots on the ground”—poses no threat to Pakistani interests and should not be disrupted.

A WARY EYE TO INDIA'S NORTHWEST

International combat operations in Afghanistan ended in December 2014. From a 2012 peak of 140,000 troops, the international presence now numbers around 12,000 to support and advise Afghan forces. By the end of 2016 that presence will draw down to several hundred U.S. soldiers staying mainly to protect U.S. facilities. President Obama has decided to slow the pace of troop withdrawal this year, but this change does not restore higher troop levels. Nor will there be a return to anything close to half their peak strength. Afghan forces now have responsibility for security.

While a resurgent Taliban has increased attacks within Afghanistan in 2015, in a new development, terrorists from several splinter groups have pledged loyalty to the self-declared Islamic State. The UN special representative in Afghanistan expressed concern to the UN Security Council that the Islamic State has the potential to unite disparate groups under one radical banner. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda, which still has a support base in Afghanistan, has proclaimed a new subsidiary targeting South Asia; and the Pakistan-based Haqqani network and Lashkar-e-Taiba, focused on Indian and American targets, remain active in Afghanistan and beyond. A smaller international security presence, emboldened terrorist networks, and a more active Taliban combine to worsen the security environment. At the same time, China's concerns about terrorism in Xinjiang have spurred Beijing to host reconciliation talks involving the Taliban.

India's government watches these developments warily. Viewed from New Delhi, a descent into disorder in Afghanistan recalls the chronic threats India faced in the late 1990s. India fears a return to the days when terrorists used Afghanistan as a base to plot against Indian targets. Preventing that outcome is a top Indian priority—one the United States shares.

INDIA'S CAPABILITIES

Seen as a friend and honest broker by most Afghans, India is the fifth-largest bilateral donor to Afghanistan with over \$2 billion in pledged support. Assistance has focused on infrastructure, engineering, training, and humanitarian needs. India constructed the Afghan parliament building, part of the interprovince Ring Road, electrical lines, and the Salma Dam, among others. India has also trained Afghan civil servants in Indian academies. The Confederation of Indian Industry has trained more than one thousand Afghans in carpentry, plumbing, and welding. The Self-Employed Women's Association of India—a women's trade union—has educated more than three thousand Afghan women in microenterprise.

India's \$2 trillion economy already accounts for 27 percent of Afghan exports—the second-largest export market—and offers enormous opportunity once Afghanistan becomes better connected to India through full implementation of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement. The Indian private sector plays a critical role in expanding commercial ties. The Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry manages the regional chambers of commerce consultation that was established as a confidence-building measure under the Istanbul Process, a platform for regional dialogue. In 2011, an Indian consortium won the tender for the Hajigak iron ore mine in Bamiyan province.

India was the first country to sign a security pact with Afghanistan, the 2011 Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), committing India to further security training and potential equipment assistance. India has carried out limited training of Afghan forces, always on Indian soil. Former President Hamid Karzai requested arms from India, but after lengthy delays from New Delhi, President Ashraf Ghani dropped the request. A desire not to exacerbate tensions with Islamabad likely played a role.

Diplomatic coordination on Afghanistan has become more regionally centered, involving India much more deeply. The International Contact Group on Afghanistan now includes more than fifty countries and regional organizations, and India hosted the January 2014 ministerial. Creation of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process in 2011 embedded India in a new diplomatic calendar focused on Afghanistan. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, concerned about Afghanistan's stability, has begun the process of accession for India and Pakistan. They, along with Afghanistan, participate in the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia and the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan.

India can do more, but New Delhi's concerns about poking a Pakistani hornets' nest have limited the security partnership. Pakistan views Indian influence in Afghanistan as inimical to its interests and sees itself as the legitimate regional influence in Afghanistan, even though this view undermines sovereign Afghan initiatives with India. Attacks on the Indian embassy in Kabul in 2008 and 2009 and on the consulate in Herat in 2014 were carried out by the Taliban, Haqqani network, and Lashkar-e-Taiba—the latter two Pakistan-based terrorist groups have links to Pakistani security agencies. Indian officials want to minimize the odds of terrorist attacks on their territory—hence India's limited security role despite the SPA, and New Delhi's focus on conducting security training for Afghans on Indian soil. In order to avoid a Pakistani backlash, India has not sent forces to Afghanistan, except to protect its diplomatic facilities and construction teams.

At the same time, Indian officials strongly resist the idea that Pakistan should have veto power over its regional role. That sentiment has been magnified as China becomes more active in Afghanistan; India does not want China to displace India's influence in its own region. Moreover, the Modi government has taken a harder line with Pakistan. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has crafted a regional doctrine prioritizing ties with all the South Asian Area of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) neighbors. He envisions pulling the region up as India rises. But he also expects Pakistan to crack down on terrorism emanating from its territory—a stance Washington supports—but Islamabad seems unable or unwilling to implement.

The United States endorses India's development and economic role in Afghanistan and heralded the India-Afghanistan SPA, but has said little about Indian security assistance. Support across civilian security areas necessary for rule of law and

shoring up Afghan forces could be an Indian strength. Islamabad may object. The United States should discuss with Pakistani officials the benefits of a larger Indian role, including in civilian security areas, and be upfront about how greater stability in Afghanistan will benefit Pakistan. Budget support and training in unobjectionable areas like literacy and medicine, particularly with no boots on the ground, has not and will not pose any risk to Pakistan.

Reasonable proposals for Indian collaboration in Afghanistan involving no Indian troops on the ground should not be subject to a Pakistani veto. To alleviate Pakistani anxieties, the United States should encourage New Delhi and Kabul to be transparent with Islamabad on their joint efforts. With Pakistan and India now embedded together in regional diplomatic mechanisms, added disincentives exist against Pakistani attempts to deny Indian support to Afghanistan when it would clearly benefit the region through greater stability. The most recent example of this changed dynamic took place at the November 2014 SAARC summit. A regional electricity agreement—supported by all SAARC countries except Pakistan—ultimately secured unanimity after the SAARC countries counseled Pakistan to agree for the betterment of the region.

STABILIZING AFGHANISTAN DURING THE TRANSITION

New Delhi's interests in a unified, stable, and independent Afghanistan converge with Washington's. The Obama administration should substantially escalate consultation with India and seek greater Indian involvement in areas of its special capacity—democracy, economics, and civilian security—by undertaking the following steps:

Preserve Kabul's delicate political equilibrium. India and the United States should draw on their experiences with democracy to advise the unity government in Kabul as it works with a power-sharing structure unanticipated in the constitution. Given his involvement, Secretary of State John Kerry should coordinate with India's foreign minister, especially on the likely challenges of amending the Afghan constitution to reflect the country's new governing structure.

Advance regional economic integration. Through its dynamic private sector and its development support, India's assistance to Afghanistan has been fully compatible with the U.S. New Silk Road initiative. New Delhi has become a leader in regional economic mechanisms. U.S. officials should prioritize connecting Afghanistan to the Indian market. This effort should include pressing Pakistan to permit transit trade to the Attari road integrated check post on the Indian edge of the India-Pakistan border to fulfill the letter and spirit of the 2011 Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement.

Seek budget support from India for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). It takes around \$4 billion annually to support the ANSF. The United States has been the major sponsor over the years and should seek India's help. China has stepped up assistance with a 2014 pledge of \$327 million, though not specifically for the ANSF. This topic should be raised by the U.S. ambassador to India at the highest appropriate level and discussed by national security advisors.

Partner with India on counter-improvised explosive device (IED) training. India's Institute of IED Management, a Central Reserve Police Force academy, could be a node for ongoing training for Afghan forces, the police in particular. The Pentagon's Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization (JIEDDO) has been developing international partnerships on counter-IED training, and India's institute provides a perfect opportunity to develop a regional partner—especially as JIEDDO shrinks in size.

Partner with India on ANSF support-function training. Literacy training remains a critical ANSF need. The U.S. special inspector general assessed the NATO-run \$200 million literacy program as having only "limited impact." India runs the world's largest adult literacy program. Military emergency medicine is another area of strong Indian talent. Logistics and supply-chain management are also areas that could help the ANSF perform better in their challenging terrain. The United States and India have had great success with joint training for third countries, such as with agriculture extension training for African countries. Shifting training for these support functions from the current Western contractors model to India, which is closer and has greater regional expertise, would offer more bang for the buck.

Alyssa Ayres is senior fellow for India, Pakistan, and South Asia at the Council on Foreign Relations.

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