

India in Afghanistan, part I: strategic interests, regional concerns

By Christine Fair, October 26, 2010

India's profile in Afghanistan has been a but looming concern for New Delhi, Washington, Brussels and of course Islamabad with all wondering what is the optimal role for India in Afghanistan's reconstruction in light of the enduring security competition between India and Pakistan. On the one hand are those who to expand India's presence in Afghanistan through increased Indian training of Afghan civilian and military personnel, development projects, and expanded

economic ties. These observers are aware of India's long-standing and robust ties with Kabul and Afghans' generally positive public opinion towards Indians and India. Notably, in late August 2010, Afghanistan's National Security Adviser Rangin Spanta told an Indian journalist, "We would like to expand cooperation with India in order to strengthen Kabul's ability to secure itself."

On the other hand are those that caution against such involvement. This view was articulated forcefully by then-top NATO commander in Afghanistan Gen. Stanley McChrystal in his August 2009 "COMISAF's Initial Assessment." McChrystal opined:

Indian political and economic influence is increasing in Afghanistan, including significant development efforts and financial investment. In addition, the current Afghan government is perceived by Islamabad to be pro-Indian. While Indian activities largely benefit the Afghan people, increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan is likely to exacerbate regional tensions and encourage Pakistani countermeasures in Afghanistan or India.

Other analysts see Indian and Pakistani competition in Afghanistan as a new "Great Game" and argue that Afghanistan can be pacified only through a regional solution that resolves once and for all the intractable Indo-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir.

Despite the seeming importance of India's interests in Afghanistan and the regional impacts of the same, there have been few recent studies of these issues. I recently authored a report that analyzes India's current interests in Afghanistan, how it has sought to achieve its aims, and the consequences of its actions for India, Pakistan, and the international efforts to stabilize Pakistan and Afghanistan.



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India rising

India's interests in Afghanistan are not only Pakistan-specific but equally, if not more importantly, tied to India's desire to be and to be seen as an extra-regional power moving toward great power status. India has long bristled at the tendency among international analysts to hitch India to Pakistan. India is keen to throw off any comparison to Pakistan -- a state it views as its diminutive and less consequential neighbor. Thus while India's presence in Afghanistan has Pakistan-specific utility it is also about India's emergent ability to influence its extended strategic neighborhood.

American officials are often unaware of how Indians conceive of their neighborhood. Indian policy analysts claim that **India's strategic environment** stretches to the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf in the west (some will even claim the eastern coast of Africa as the western-most border of this strategic space); to the east, it includes the Strait of Malacca and extends up to the South China Sea; to the north, it is comprised of Central Asia; and to the south, it reaches out to Antarctica.

Raja Mohan, a doyen of Indian security analysis, explains in comparable terms that India's grand strategy:

Divides the world into three concentric circles. In the first, which encompasses the immediate neighborhood, India has sought primacy and a veto over the actions of outside powers. In the second, which encompasses the so-called extended neighborhood stretching across Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral, India has sought to balance the influence of other powers and prevent them from undercutting its interests. In the third, which includes the entire global stage, India has tried to take its place as one of the great powers, a key player in international peace and security.

Thus, in many regards, India's interests in Afghanistan can be seen as merely one element within India's larger desire to be able to project its interests well beyond South Asia.

Why India cares about Afghanistan

There are at least three principle reasons why India has direct interests in **Afghanistan**.

First, India has had to contend with many significant security challenges that stem from the Taliban's regime in Afghanistan in the 1990s. Pakistan has raised and supported several militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen/Harkat-ul-Ansar, and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami among others, which operate in India. However, all of these groups have trained in Afghanistan, with varying proximity to the Taliban and by extension al-Qaeda. Thus India is absolutely adamant that Afghanistan should not again become a terrorist safe haven.

Second, India is interested in retaining Afghanistan as a friendly state from which it has the capacity to monitor Pakistan and even, where possible, cultivate assets to influence activities in Pakistan. While India is keenly interested in cultivating a significant partnership with Afghanistan, Pakistan busies itself trying to deny India these very opportunities.

Third, developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan have important and usually deleterious effects upon India's domestic social fabric as well as its internal security apart from the well-known problems in and over Kashmir.

Indian interlocutors have explained to me that Islamist militancy coexists with a burgeoning Hindu nationalist movement that seeks to re-craft India as a Hindu state. Hindu nationalists and their militant counterparts live in a violent symbiosis with Islamist militant groups operating in and around India. Islamist terrorism in India and the region provides grist for the mill of Hindu nationalism and its violent offshoots.

How India can achieve these aims

India has sought to establish its presence in Afghanistan from the early days of its independence from Britain in 1947. In 1950, Afghanistan and India signed a "Friendship Treaty." India had robust ties with Afghan King Zahir Shah's regime. Prior to the Soviet invasion in 1979, New Delhi continued to formalized agreements and protocols with various **pro-Soviet regimes** in Kabul.

While India's role in Afghanistan was constrained during the anti-Soviet jihad, between 1979 and 1989 India reportedly expanded its development activities in Afghanistan, focusing upon industrial, irrigation, and hydroelectric projects. That India was able to sustain this presence attests to the **importance** that India attached to this relationship and India's willingness to persevere.

After the Taliban consolidated their hold on Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, India struggled to maintain its presence and to support anti-Taliban forces. However, Indian objectives in Afghanistan remained necessarily modest given the constrained environment. India aimed to undermine, as best it could, the ability of the Taliban to consolidate its power over Afghanistan, principally by supporting the Northern Alliance in tandem with other regional actors.

Working with Iran, Russia, and Tajikistan, India provided important (but not fully detailed) resources to the Northern Alliance, the only meaningful challenge to the Taliban in Afghanistan. According to journalist **Rahul Bedi**, India also ran a twenty-five-bed hospital at Farkhor (Ayni), Tajikistan, for more than a year. The Northern Alliance military commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud, died in that hospital after he was attacked by al-Qaeda suicide bombers on September 9, 2001. Through Tajikistan, India supplied the Northern Alliance with high altitude warfare equipment worth around \$8 million. India also based several "defense advisers," including an officer of a brigadier rank, in Tajikistan to advise the Northern Alliance in their operations against the Taliban.

Since 2001, India has relied upon development projects and other forms of humanitarian assistance. To facilitate these projects and to collect intelligence (as all embassies and consulates do), India also now has consulates in Jalalabad, Kandahar, Herat, and Mazar-e-Sharif, in addition to its embassy in Kabul. There also are a number of smaller-scale activities throughout Afghanistan. According to U.S., British, and Afghan officials I interviewed over the last several years, India's activities are not isolated to the north, where it has had traditional ties, but also include efforts in the southern provinces and in the northeast, abutting the Pakistani border.

Christine Fair is an assistant professor at Georgetown University and the author of *Cuisines of the Axis of Evil and Other Irritating States*. In part two of this post, she will explore the future of Indian interests in Afghanistan.

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