PROJECT MUSE®

Securing Indian Interests in Afghanistan Beyond 2014

C. Christine Fair

Asia Policy, Number 17, January 2014, pp. 27-32 (Article)

Published by National Bureau of Asian Research

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2014.0016>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/536779>

Securing Indian Interests in Afghanistan Beyond 2014

C. Christine Fair

Few countries are as motivated to stay the course with Afghanistan as is India, whose interests there are numerous and enduring. Over the last decade, India has largely used its amicable relations with President Hamid Karzai and the U.S.- and NATO-provided security umbrella to pursue its varied objectives in Afghanistan. However, as the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force in 2014 looms, India must now craft its future policy amid numerous sources of uncertainty. No one knows who will govern a post-Karzai Afghanistan or what role, if any, the Taliban will have at the central and subnational levels of governance. No one knows how the United States will disengage and what security forces, if any, will remain for modest operational support or sustained training of Afghanistan's fledgling security force. Equally worrisome, no one can say whether the United States or other members of the international community will continue their financial support for a bloated Afghan government that has no ability to pay for itself, and if they do, for how long. Worse yet, will the United States again outsource its Afghanistan policy to Pakistan? These are all pressing questions for India. This essay seeks to briefly outline India's policy preferences, the means it has to execute these preferences, and the domestic and international alliances that will likely shape India's ability to stay the course in Afghanistan after 2014.

Indian Interests in Afghanistan

While it has long been recognized as the preeminent power in South Asia, in recent years India has projected itself as a rising power in the international system. In the past, India largely reacted to events within its extended strategic environment, which it sees as comprising the entire Indian Ocean basin and much of central and southwest Asia. Increasingly, however, India wants to play a decisive role in determining regional security throughout its near and extended strategic environment. Consistent with this goal, New Delhi has become more interested in proactively employing its formidable and growing economic and political influence to prevent developments that undermine its strategic interests.

C. CHRISTINE FAIR is an Assistant Professor at Georgetown University and co-editor of *Asia Policy*. She can be reached at <ccf33@georgetown.edu>.

India's current and future interests in Afghanistan should be viewed through the lens of India's emergence as an extraregional power and an aspiring global actor. It hopes that Afghanistan will not revert once more to a sanctuary for Islamist terrorism taking diktat from Pakistan. Through continued investment and support in Afghanistan, India aims to mitigate Pakistan's tenacious efforts to cultivate Afghanistan as a client state. Most importantly, Afghanistan, along with Iran, is an important corridor through which India can project power and influence throughout Central Asia and beyond. By pursuing its varied interests in Afghanistan, New Delhi can demonstrate that its foreign policies are not driven solely or even primarily by Pakistan. Over the last decade, India has succeeded in some measure by cultivating a suite of sophisticated diplomatic relations with an astonishing array of countries in Southwest, Central, and Southeast Asia. Afghanistan and Iran are of particular import for India because they are its only gateways for the transport of goods into and out of Central Asia and beyond, particularly as Pakistan is not likely to ever offer India access to its ground lines of control.

Above and beyond using engagement with Afghanistan to advance its position as an aspirant to global power, India needs to address significant and persistent security concerns that emanate from Afghanistan, as well as from Pakistan. Most of the militant groups that have terrorized India since the early 1990s—e.g., Harkat-ul-Jihad-Islami (HuJI), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), Harkat-ul-Mujahideen/Harkat-ul-Ansar (HuM/HuA), and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)—have trained in Afghanistan, with varying degrees of connection to the Afghan Taliban and, by extension, al Qaeda.¹ Most of these groups (i.e., HuJI, HuM/HuA, and JeM) are also of the Deobandi school of Islamic thought, as are the Afghan Taliban. These Deobandi groups all share enduring and complicated personal and organizational ties through a network of Deobandi madrasas, mosques, and Islamic scholars; they have benefited from the protection of various factions associated with the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam, a Pakistan-based Islamist political party representing the interests of the Deobandi *ulema* (religious scholars). LeT, in contrast, is tied to the Ahl-e-Hadith interpretative tradition, which never co-located with the Taliban and instead operated its own training facilities in Afghanistan. Despite the U.S.-led occupation of Afghanistan, these groups continue to operate from sanctuaries in Pakistan, where most still enjoy sustained patronage from Pakistan's intelligence agencies, which

¹ LeT is a notable exception.

employ them against India. India dreads Afghanistan again becoming a terrorist safe haven.

India also seeks to secure and retain Afghanistan as a friendly state from which it has the capacity to monitor Pakistan and possibly even influence events there. Pakistan, for example, has long alleged that India has worked with the Afghans to destabilize Balochistan by supporting Baloch rebels. Pakistan also alleges that India is supporting the Islamist terrorists operating throughout Pakistan. New Delhi denies these accusations as vigorously as Islamabad makes them. While Pakistan's maximalist allegations are most certainly false, India's insistence on complete innocence is also unlikely to be true. This puts the two sides in indirect conflict in Afghanistan, which has become increasingly bloody. Pakistan's terrorist and insurgent proxies have attacked Indian workers, diplomats, soldiers, and intelligence personnel in an effort to increase the cost of India's presence in the country.

Additionally, the future of Afghanistan has a number of important domestic impacts on India, which motivate New Delhi's apprehensions about Islamist militants based in Afghanistan and Pakistan. First and foremost, militant groups are actively recruiting disaffected Indian Muslims throughout India, even going as far as establishing franchises in the country that are increasingly distant from their parent institutions in Pakistan. Second, Islamist militancy in India coexists in devastating synergy with a growing Hindu nationalist movement. Proponents of Hindu nationalism seek to reshape India as a Hindu state, and Hindu extremists have used Islamist violence in India to justify their anti-Muslim violence. In turn, Islamist militants justify their own actions on the basis of "Hindu" oppression. In the process, India's ostensibly secular fabric is at risk with increasing communal polarization that worries moderates of all faiths.

Securing These Interests without the U.S. Security Umbrella

India and Afghanistan have enjoyed cordial relations since the early days of Indian independence, including signing a friendship treaty in 1950. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979–90), India's presence in the country was restricted due to the U.S. decision to work almost exclusively with Pakistan to create thousands of *mujahideen* (with Saudi funding) to fight the Soviet Union. In the post-Soviet era, New Delhi supported whatever government was in place, provided that it was opposed by Pakistan. Once the Taliban consolidated power in 1996, India was again marginalized and forced to pursue very modest goals. Working with Iran, Tajikistan, and

Russia, India chose to support the Panjshir-based Northern Alliance, which was led by Ahmad Shah Massoud and posed the only significant challenge to the Taliban. Following the routing of the Taliban after September 11 and the expanding presence of the United States and the International Security Assistance Force, India was able to reopen its consulates in Herat, Jalalabad, Kandahar, and Mazar-e-Sharif, in addition to its embassy in Kabul. New Delhi has pursued a variety of development and humanitarian projects as well as made a long-term commitment to help rebuild Afghanistan's institutions and infrastructure. In October 2011, India and Afghanistan signed a security pact according to which both states agreed to expand their cooperation in counterterrorism operations, the training of various Afghan security forces, and trade. Pakistan, understanding that it is the mostly likely object of expanded counterterrorism ties, was appropriately disquieted by these developments. Islamabad already sees Afghanistan's security forces as being deeply anti-Pakistan without the addition of direct Indian influence.

India has been caught off guard by recent developments in Afghanistan. Despite being Washington's most important South Asian partner, New Delhi was not informed of U.S. intentions to engage the Afghan Taliban in "peace talks." India rejects the notion that there can be a disaggregation of the Taliban into "good" and "bad" factions that the United States can variously engage and isolate. It views such efforts as a U.S.-Pakistan condominium to find some means of allowing the United States to disengage in Afghanistan while again outsourcing parts of its Afghanistan policy to Pakistan, as it did during the 1990s. After Washington's announcement of its intentions to pursue a negotiated settlement with the Taliban, India understood that it will have to develop its own policy options in Afghanistan under the assumption that the United States may not support the Indian agenda in the future. Consequently, India will have to find the means of pursuing these interests without the U.S.- and NATO-provided security umbrella.

India has long felt the brunt of deteriorating security conditions in Afghanistan, which have adversely affected its ability to execute projects and ensure the safety of its institutions and personnel. New Delhi understands that the future operating environment is uncertain. There are very real limits to its ability to project power in Afghanistan, despite the fact that Afghans are generally very well disposed toward India and Indians. First and foremost, Pakistan retains the advantage of geography. Second, and equally important, many Pakistani citizens are consanguineal and co-ethnic with Afghans across the border. Third, Pakistan has demonstrated that it is highly motivated to accept more risks than India. Because Pakistan is so

risk acceptant, it will continue to support groups like the Haqqani network, LeT, and the Afghan Taliban. Indeed, because these groups have been so effective in checking India's influence in Afghanistan, Pakistan has refused to even marginally curb their operational capacity.

Taken together, the Indian public seems divided about the relative costs and benefits of its country's investments in Afghanistan. For many Indians, corruption, economic stagnation, and chronic internal insecurity seem more pressing concerns than the fate of Afghanistan. Some Indians have also grown wary of India maintaining its current presence, much less expanding its activities, in Afghanistan. Others see New Delhi's ability to shape events in Afghanistan as a litmus test for the aspiring international power. After all, if India cannot influence events in Afghanistan to advance its own interests, how can it credibly claim the mantle of a global power?

Navigating a Post-Karzai Afghanistan: Butter or Guns?

In 2014, Karzai will cease to be the president of Afghanistan. Even though presidential elections loom, no obvious front-runner has emerged. Moreover, it is more likely than not that some Taliban presence will be ensconced in subnational, as well as national, offices. India, like other actors, must plan its future position in Afghanistan under considerable uncertainty. In this environment, New Delhi will need to continue to engage actors from across Afghanistan's political spectrum. This will come easily to India, which has long sustained ties with Afghan political elites—many of whom have family and educational ties to India.

The course of action that India will pursue in Afghanistan may also be influenced by its own general elections, which are scheduled for spring 2014. The incumbent Congress-led coalition has come under sustained attacks from the Hindu-nationalist opposition party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and its ideologically aligned allies. The BJP has lambasted the Congress Party for failing to assert a more aggressive Indian role in the Afghan endgame but has not offered its own way forward.

With the unpredictable course of the United States, India will redouble its efforts to engage Afghanistan's other neighbors. Iran, in particular, is likely to become ever more important to India. The two countries have long worked together both to build an important north-south trade corridor and to invest in the logistical infrastructure to permit the movement of goods and people through Iran and Afghanistan. Iran is the only corridor through which India can project its interests

in Central Asia. Despite warming ties with the United States, India has largely maintained its controversial relationship with Iran. However, the various sanction regimes targeting Iran and its nuclear program have hindered Indo-Iranian cooperation, principally by depriving Iran of capital and by increasing the cost of some kinds of Indian cooperation with the regime. The recent diplomatic breakthrough between Iran and the United States, should it endure, could eventually pave the way for more effective Indo-Iranian cooperation in Afghanistan and the broader region. After all, both countries prefer that Afghanistan not come under the influence of an extremist Islamist regime, even though they have very different relationships with the United States.

Amid speculation that it may step up its security ties with Afghanistan, India seems most steadfastly committed to maintaining an assistance program focused on economic investment, human capital development, and the rebuilding of Afghan institutions. India is unlikely to retrench from this commitment irrespective of whether a BJP-led or a Congress-led government emerges after the spring 2014 elections, though a BJP-led government may pursue India's interests even more aggressively. While there is some uncertainty about the specific course that India's future government will stake out, there is near certitude that Pakistan will interpret these activities in the most dangerous terms possible and will redouble its efforts to ensure that Indian attempts to stay the course will be neither easy nor inexpensive. ♦