

Rising Indian influence in Afghanistan worries US and Pakistan

By Ajay Prakash
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The top US military commander in Afghanistan has warned that India's growing influence in the country could "exacerbate regional tensions" and encourage "countermeasures" by Pakistan, India's historic rival in south Asia.

In a confidential report submitted to US President Barack Obama on August 30, General Stanley McChrystal wrote, "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."

McChrystal's comments point to a strategic dilemma facing Washington. The US is anxious to court India as a counterweight to a rising China, has welcomed India's increasing involvement in Afghanistan, and calculates that Indian and American interests coincide in seeking to develop pipelines that would draw central Asia's oil reserves toward south Asia and the Indian Ocean.

It is also very eager to develop joint operations with the Indian military. When asked whether the US was ready to seek Indian military assistance in counter-terror operations and counter-insurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, Lieutenant General Benjamin R. Mixon, head of the US Army's Pacific Command, said, "The Indian Army is a professional force and the US Army will be comfortable with it anywhere."

But at the same time, the US is dependent on Pakistan's logistical and military support to salvage its war to subjugate Afghanistan and is well aware that its ever-escalating demands are undermining the Pakistani government's popular support and legitimacy and exacerbating the tensions within the shaky Pakistani federation.

India and Pakistan have been trading accusations about each other's involvement in Afghanistan for years. New Delhi claims that Pakistan's military-intelligence establishment continues to patronize the Taliban, whose rise to power in the mid-1990s took place under Pakistan's sponsorship. Islamabad counters that India is taking a disproportionate place in Afghanistan, with a view to squeezing Pakistan strategically, and that it has used its growing influence in Afghanistan to support the Balochi nationalist insurgency in Pakistan's western province.

After a bomb exploded outside the Indian embassy in Kabul on October 9, killing 17 people but none of the embassy personnel, Indian think-tanks and much of the press

charged that the Taliban, which claimed responsibility for the attack, had carried it out at the behest of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. India's government, for its part, did not directly accuse Islamabad of responsibility, probably in deference to Washington's wishes. The Obama administration would not appreciate a further crisis in Indian-Pakistani relations when it is in the midst of a heated debate over its strategy in the so-called Af-Pak war. In any event, the Indo-Pakistani peace process has been frozen by New Delhi for all intents and purposes since the November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack.

India did publicly blame the ISI for a similar attack on its Kabul embassy in July 2008, which killed 41 people, including a senior diplomat and the defence attaché.

Commenting on the most recent bombing targeting the Indian embassy in Kabul, Siddharth Varadarajan, the *Hindu's* strategic affairs editor wrote, "The attackers want to underline the McChrystal report and make the point that any attempt to rely on India or involve India (in any new US policy) will complicate matters."

Speaking shortly after last month's attack, Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao said New Delhi will take "whatever measures" are necessary to safeguard the security of "our personnel and our interests in Afghanistan."

Harsh V. Pant, currently a visiting professor at IIM-Bangalore, said that if India wants to be recognised as a global power its first step must be "to respond to the latest attack in Kabul with greater military engagement to support its developmental and political presence in Afghanistan."

India supported the US invasion of Afghanistan, provided intelligence, and helped facilitate the US's link-up with the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. New Delhi saw the Afghan war as a golden opportunity to reverse Pakistan's increased influence in Afghanistan and to advance its own geopolitical interests in oil-rich central Asia.

During the administration of George W. Bush there were repeated tensions between Washington and New Delhi over the US's mercenary relationship with the Pakistani government and military. But overall, Indo-US ties greatly expanded, with the US declaring its eagerness to assist India in becoming a "world power" and toward that end, negotiating a unique status for India—a non-signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, within the world nuclear regulatory regime.

Since Obama took office, Indo-US relations have become more fractious. New Delhi is apprehensive that its interests will get short-shrift due to Washington's focus on its relations with Pakistan and China.

India angrily rebuffed the suggestion made by Obama and his aides during the 2008 presidential campaign that in return for Pakistan doing Washington's bidding in the Af-Pak war, the US might assist Pakistan in resolving its six-decades' old dispute with India over Kashmir. New Delhi has also been troubled by Obama's support for a United Nations Security Council resolution calling on all nations to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). India rejects the NPT's norms as discriminatory and has refused to sign the CTBT on the grounds that it could imperil the development of India's "strategic deterrent," i.e. its

nuclear weapons arsenal.

Yesterday India took angry exception to a paragraph in the joint statement that Obama and Chinese President Hu Jintao issued at the conclusion of their summit meeting. The paragraph committed the two countries to working to “promote peace, stability and development” in south Asia. “The Government of India,” declared its Foreign Ministry, “is committed to resolving all outstanding issues with Pakistan through a peaceful bilateral dialogue in accordance with the Simla Agreement. A third country role cannot be envisaged.”

The Indian government is also anxious about reports that the US and the puppet government of Hamid Karzai are intent on persuading sections of the Taliban to enter into peace negotiations and ultimately incorporation into Afghanistan’s government. Indian officials and media commentators have repeatedly declared that there is no such thing as “good Taliban.” Behind the rhetoric is the fear that Islamabad’s influence in Afghanistan will grow significantly in the event of a rapprochement with elements hitherto associated with the Taliban.

When the Taliban took power in Afghanistan in 1996 with the support of Pakistan and the US, India lost all influence in Kabul. New Delhi never recognized the Taliban government.

“In a broad sense,” declared a recent *Hindustan Times* editorial, “the presidential elections reflect the failure of the non-Taliban and non-Islamicist Afghan leadership to find a power-sharing formula among them. This makes Karzai and the present configuration in Kabul all the more dependent on the US government for support. If the US wavers, Mr. Karzai is almost certain to continue his policy of trying to find an accommodation with some elements of the Taliban. Neither of these scenarios is good news for India or other nations that have suffered the terrorist-friendly policies of the first Taliban regime.”

Anxious to consolidate its position in post-2001 Afghanistan, the Indian government has invested more than \$1.2 billion in rebuilding the country’s infrastructure, including power plants, and in training Afghan civil servants and police. India is Afghanistan’s sixth largest bilateral donor.

Last January, India completed construction of the 218 kilometre Zaranj-Delaram highway in southwest Afghanistan, which makes it possible to transport goods from Iran to Kabul and across Afghanistan. With the building of this highway, India has developed a land-route to Afghanistan that bypasses Pakistan. For decades Islamabad had effectively scuttled Indo-Afghan trade by refusing to allow Indo-Afghan truck traffic to traverse its territory.

This Monday, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki travelled to India, for a two-day visit. The first high level contact between the two countries since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was re-elected last June, the Indo-Iranian talks reportedly focussed on energy cooperation, transit routes to central Asia, the sharing of information on anti-government insurgent activity in Pakistan-Afghanistan, and the possibility of reviving the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) natural gas pipeline project.

According to the *Hindu*, Mottaki and various Indian officials “also discussed prospects of trilateral dialogue between India, Iran and Afghanistan on transit routes to central Asia, with the Iranian port of Chabar to be the staging point for goods. ‘Our interest in having a trilateral agreement was underlined,’ said informed sources about the transit route beginning from the Chabar port. It was planned to construct a railway line from Chabar to Bam. From there, goods would be taken from the Afghan border town of Zaranj to Delaram on an Indian-built road to the Afghan garland highways, which provide access to several central Asian republics.”

The new road certainly threatens Pakistan’s commercial position in Afghanistan. At present 37 percent of Afghan’s foreign trade is with Pakistan, 15.9 percent with the European Union and 12.5 percent the US.

There are more than 4,000 Indian workers and security personnel working on different aid and reconstruction projects in Afghanistan. Following the kidnap and murder of an Indian engineer by the Taliban in 2006, New Delhi sent personnel from the country’s mountain-trained paramilitary force to protect Indian workers. Nearly 500 Indian police are currently deployed in Afghanistan.

The Indian Army has long planned for the deployment of its personnel in Afghanistan to train Afghan National Army (ANA) troops, but to date the Indian military’s presence in the war-torn country has been limited to providing some English-language training and participating in a couple of humanitarian projects.

In an article published in early July in conjunction with a visit to India by Afghan army chief General Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, Indian commentator C. Raja Mohan argued that if India has thus far resisted appeals for greater military involvement from Kabul it is because of US opposition: “[W]ith Pakistan making a big deal out of Delhi’s rather limited security cooperation with Kabul, Washington has over the last few years cautioned India against raising its profile in Afghanistan beyond economic reconstruction. Even the Bush Administration, which was so friendly to India, was not enthusiastic about seeing the extension of Indo-Pak rivalry into Afghanistan.”

But sections of the military are unhappy with New Delhi’s caution. Retired General Shankar Roychowdhury, a former Chief of Army Staff and a former Member of Parliament, has described the Afghan war as a “war of necessity” for India. He argues that building up the ANA is “the obvious area on which India should focus in its own long-term interests.”

In addition to its embassy in Kabul, India has opened four consulates in Afghanistan, in Jalalabad, Kandahar, Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif. Pakistan claims that these consulates are being used by the Indian foreign intelligence agency, the Research and Intelligence Wing (RAW), to create unrest across the border in Pakistan’s Balochistan province. The Pakistan government has repeatedly accused India of involvement in the separatist conflict in Balochistan and has claimed that RAW is training secessionists.

On a recent trip to the US, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi told the *Los Angeles Times* that India’s “level of engagement [in Kabul] has to be commensurate with [the fact that] they do not share a border with Afghanistan, whereas we do ... If

there is no massive reconstruction [in Afghanistan], if there are not long queues in Delhi waiting for visas to travel to Kabul, why do you have such a large [Indian] presence in Afghanistan? At times, it concerns us.”

Indian think-tanks are leaning heavily on the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government to intervene more actively in Afghanistan. M.K. Bhadrakumar, a former diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service, has noted, “Influential sections of Indian opinion are stridently calling for an outright Indian intervention in Afghanistan without awaiting the niceties of an American invitation letter.”

Sections of the Indian ruling class see positive aspects to a substantial Indian military presence in Afghanistan. Sushant K. Singh, editor of the strategic affairs journal *Pragati: The Indian National Interest Review*, wrote recently, “An Indian military involvement in Afghanistan will shift the battleground away from Kashmir and the Indian mainland. Targeting the jihadi base will be a huge boost for India’s anti-terrorist operations, especially in Kashmir, both militarily and psychologically.”

He insists that the Indian military should operate independently in Afghanistan like “the 13,000 US soldiers under the Operation Enduring Freedom operating independently alongside the NATO-ISAF [International Security Assistance Force].” He called for an independent command structure for the Indian military presence, which could be deployed in western Afghanistan, “allowing US and ISAF forces to concentrate on the provinces adjoining Pakistan.”

Think-tanks and press pundits are insisting that India cannot remain a “soft power.” Dr. Subhash Kapila, a former military officer and diplomat, has written that India has so far been reluctant to resort to “hard power.” However, he writes, “As India grows more powerful and her strategic worth figures in the global strategic calculus ... [it] may not continue to be reluctant and restrained.” He called for a reorientation of US policy in south Asia from “Pakistan-Centric” to an “India-Centric” fixation.

The Indian government is looking to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s visit to the US this month to take Indo-US relations to a new level. The Indian ambassador to the US recently boasted, “the India-US relationship has evolved into a truly comprehensive partnership of mutual trust and confidence ... that is increasingly global in reach, and [based on] deepening strategic understanding.”

But despite the warming of relations over the past two decades, any Indo-US partnership remains fraught with tensions and ambivalences as the ruling elite of each country ruthlessly pursues its own interests.