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OCCASIONAL PAPER

# India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan

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Implications for the United States  
and the Region

*Larry Hanauer • Peter Chalk*



CENTER FOR ASIA PACIFIC POLICY

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## Summary

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India and Pakistan have highly disparate goals for Afghanistan, and they thus undertake very different activities there. Delhi has striven to bolster the government in Kabul and integrate Afghanistan into wider regional political and economic structures. This has not been done out of any sense of altruism. By strengthening Afghanistan, India advances its own national security objectives—namely, eliminating a critical safe haven for terrorists who have attacked India and continue plotting to do so in the future, projecting power throughout South Asia (and beyond), and gaining access to Central Asian trade and energy resources. Although Delhi's goals for Afghanistan certainly involve minimizing Islamabad's influence there, the government's overall policy is geared primarily to advancing India's broader domestic and regional interests independently of its rivalry with Pakistan.

In contrast, Pakistan's goals for Afghanistan are mainly—although not exclusively—India-centric and focus primarily on undermining Delhi's influence in Afghanistan. Islamabad seeks a weak Kabul government dominated by a pliant, supportive Taliban so that Pakistan can maintain “strategic depth” against an Indian invasion, guarantee safe haven for Islamist proxies that it supports, prevent Delhi from projecting power in South Asia, and obstruct India's ability to support separatists in the Pakistani province of Balochistan. In Islamabad's Afghanistan calculus, protecting itself against Indian encroachment takes precedence over pursuing Pakistan's broader geopolitical and economic goals. Part of the reason for this strategic orientation is the preeminent decisionmaking role played by Pakistan's military, which emphasizes security matters over virtually all other elements of foreign policy. So long as India is viewed as an existential threat, and so long as the military plays a central role in setting Pakistani policy, it is unlikely that there will be a fundamental shift in this policy bias.<sup>1</sup>

With its military-dominated decisionmaking apparatus focused on internal security concerns and on keeping other powers from exerting influence in Afghanistan, Pakistan has little of positive value to offer Afghanistan or other countries in the region. Pakistan is not positioned well to boost trade, and it has demonstrated little willingness to take steps designed to improve the lives of ordinary Afghans. By contrast, India's democratic polity, institutionalized decisionmaking processes, relative internal stability, apolitical military, large consumer base, and growing economy make it a far more palatable partner for Kabul. Thus, although Hamid Karzai's government has clearly been prepared to play India and Pakistan against one another—often effectively—it has also taken explicit steps to distance itself from Islamabad while embracing Delhi's cooperation and assistance.

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<sup>1</sup> Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, *South Asia and Afghanistan: The Robust India-Pakistan Rivalry*, Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2011, p. 21–22.

Traditionally, the United States has portrayed its policies in South Asia as aiming to strike a balance between India and Pakistan in recognition that both are important partners (albeit for different reasons). However, since the early days of the George W. Bush administration, Washington has sought to “delink” the two countries on the assumption that India, as a rising power that is capable of both contributing to regional stability and countering growing Chinese influence, could have more to offer over the long term. It was this calculus that led to the conclusion of a U.S.-Indian Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2004 and a supplemental accord the following year that codified U.S. assistance to India’s civilian nuclear sector.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this preference, there is no doubt that Washington has become increasingly dependent on Pakistan’s cooperation to combat the near-term threat of Islamic extremism for which, over the past 11 years, it has provided Pakistan with some \$16 billion in security-related assistance. The importance of Islamabad’s counterterrorism cooperation, as well as its assistance to the Afghan war effort, has driven the United States to accommodate Pakistani sensitivities by encouraging India to remain on the sidelines of international efforts in Afghanistan. With the dual threat of al Qaeda and the Taliban high on the U.S. agenda and a large U.S./North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) force in Afghanistan, whatever additional contributions that India could make to Afghan security and reconstruction have been seen as less critical to U.S. policy in Afghanistan than ensuring Islamabad’s continued partnership.

That said, U.S. courting of Pakistan—whether through the provision of billions of dollars in U.S. aid or past commitments to minimize Indian involvement in Afghanistan—has so far failed to reduce Pakistan’s support for militancy and terrorism, and there is no reason to think that this will change. Washington has repeatedly learned that it cannot rely on Islamabad to rein in militants whom the Pakistani military sees as valuable strategic assets in countering Indian power and influence—one of the reasons the United States has come to rely increasingly on unilateral operations to combat terrorists.

In addition to backing insurgents who have repeatedly attacked coalition forces in Afghanistan,<sup>3</sup> Islamabad has undermined Washington’s efforts to negotiate a political settlement with the Taliban, which is seen as critical to securing the eventual withdrawal of U.S. combat troops; obstructed shipments of military materiel to U.S. and NATO forces by closing its borders to such cargo; refused to investigate how Osama bin Laden managed to hide in the country for so many years without being detected; pledged to increase purchases of Iranian oil despite international sanctions on Tehran; and allowed Chinese officials to examine the wreckage of a U.S. helicopter that crashed during the raid on the al Qaeda leader’s compound in Abbottabad.<sup>4</sup>

By early 2012, Pakistan’s repeated, deliberate efforts to undercut U.S. policies had clearly prompted U.S. officials to reconsider the value of the overall security partnership with Islamabad. This became clear when Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, during a June 2012 trip to Afghanistan and India, issued Washington’s starkest criticism yet of Pakistan, pointedly stat-

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<sup>2</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, “The Merits of Dehyphenation: Explaining U.S. Success in Engaging India and Pakistan,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Autumn 2008, pp. 30–32, 36.

<sup>3</sup> For details on one such attack, see David S. Cloud and Alex Rodriguez, “CIA Gets Nod to Step Up Drone Strikes in Pakistan,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 8, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Anna Fifield, “Pakistan Lets China See US Helicopter,” *Financial Times*, August 14, 2011.

ing that Washington was “reaching the limits of [its] patience” with Islamabad’s refusal to crack down on terrorist safe havens operating in its territory.<sup>5</sup>

Panetta further noted India’s positive contributions to Afghanistan’s economic and commercial development and, arguably more significantly, expressed support for Delhi’s training of the country’s nascent armed forces and encouraged it to continue with this security assistance mission. Panetta’s implicit nod to Indian military engagement in Afghanistan represented a significant shift in U.S. policy away from Pakistan and an acknowledgment that Delhi had more to offer in terms of promoting Afghanistan’s internal stability.

As the United States prepares to draw down its military presence in Afghanistan, it will become less dependent on Pakistan to transport military materiel or to undertake efforts to rein in extremist attacks on U.S. troops. At the same time, Washington will seek to ensure that its departure does not leave a security vacuum or a break in reconstruction efforts. To help prevent such developments, Washington could promote a proactive Indian role in Afghanistan—particularly in the security sector—as a means of fostering internal and regional stability and as a way to preserve and build on U.S. achievements in Afghanistan. Doing so would require U.S. policymakers to once again delink U.S. policies toward India and Pakistan to take advantage of the long-term strategic benefits of partnering with India.

Greater Indian involvement in Afghanistan will promote objectives that both the United States and India share. Indian political mediation and training for the Afghan military and police can help avert violence and internal conflict. At the same time, Delhi’s interactions with the Kabul government—which have involved all Afghan ethnic groups to some degree, despite India’s history of support for Tajiks, Uzbeks, and other non-Pashtuns—will help marginalize the Taliban and the extremist groups that target both India and the United States. Just as importantly, India’s continued development aid can contribute to improvements in health care, education, power generation, and other critical sectors, and its extensive private investment and efforts to integrate Afghanistan into regional trade arrangements will promote the type of economic growth that is critical for the country’s long-term stability.

A robust Indian role in Afghanistan should serve to advance other U.S. foreign policy objectives as well. In its efforts to gain greater access to Central Asian energy markets, for example, Delhi will need to develop an effective trade and transportation infrastructure in Afghanistan to connect with the Central Asian Republics (CARs), particularly Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. This will, in turn, reduce China’s influence in South and Central Asia—an objective that both Washington and Delhi share. Furthermore, as India increasingly aspires to be a dominant regional actor, its contributions will help reduce the level of U.S. involvement and resources needed to stabilize that part of the world. Supporting a more robust role for Delhi—which would contribute to Afghanistan’s security, stability, and economic development—is thus a more effective long-term strategy for both countering terrorism and stabilizing Afghanistan than continuing to partner with Pakistan on short-term counterterrorism operations.

Because Islamabad would vociferously oppose both an increasingly robust Indian presence in Afghanistan and U.S. support for such a role, Pakistan would likely respond in ways detrimental to both Indian and U.S. interests. It could, for instance, retaliate against India

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<sup>5</sup> Jim Garamone, “U.S. Reaching Limit of Patience with Pakistan on Safe Havens,” American Forces Press Service, June 7, 2012.

with political, economic, and military pressure while moving to hinder U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and undermine U.S. counterterrorism efforts.

However, Islamabad's actual retaliatory options are not likely to be very effective at influencing U.S. or Indian policies. Pakistan's cooperation on counterterrorism is already only half-hearted at best; it takes action only against groups that are seen to pose a domestic threat while supporting such entities as the Haqqani network and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). The recently signed U.S.–Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement gives the United States the ability to continue using Afghan territory to pursue al Qaeda and Taliban militants, which would enable U.S. forces to launch attacks on militants' bases in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). In addition, because a long-established theme of Pakistani foreign and security policy has been to use jihadi proxies to offset Delhi's political, demographic, and military superiority, it is conceivable that the Indian public would not necessarily link a future terrorist attack to changes in the government's Afghan policy. As such, it is questionable whether the specter of (Pakistani-backed) retributive extremist strikes would actually deter India from pursuing its regional economic and political interests. To be sure, the potential costs associated with enhancing India's profile in Afghanistan must be considered and weighed against the benefits of any such move. However, the drawbacks of withholding Indian assistance simply for fear of eliciting a negative reaction from Islamabad are arguably greater than the pain Pakistan could inflict on either Washington or Delhi through its response.

Should India determine that it can best advance its regional interests by playing a more robust role in Afghanistan, its government would have a spectrum of options available to it. These include, in order of increasing assertiveness, boosting development assistance and investment; deploying additional paramilitary forces to protect Indian diplomats, aid workers, and infrastructure projects; continuing to provide limited military training to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in India; expanding the types and extent of security assistance provided; conducting military and police training inside Afghanistan; and deploying combat troops to conduct counterterrorism and counterinsurgency (COIN) missions. Of these, the first and last choices would be least preferable. Many Indians already seem to have concluded that years of development assistance alone have not helped to significantly advance India's regional interests, while the deployment of Indian combat troops to Afghanistan would serve as an extreme and very visible provocation of Pakistan. Delhi's most likely course of action would therefore be more attenuated, focusing on increased trade and investment and on instituting moderately assertive protective and security assistance measures. At the same time, India would probably seek to reestablish contacts with leaders of Afghanistan's Tajik and Uzbek communities, as well as build ties with less extreme Taliban figures, as a way of expanding its options for its future bilateral relationship with Kabul.

In sum, not only does Delhi have more to offer than Islamabad to the security and prosperity of South and Central Asia, but its assistance to the ANSF—combined with an increasingly proactive role in fostering and safeguarding Afghan economic and commercial development—also provides the best hope for advancing both U.S. and Indian regional interests. As the United States prepares to withdraw its combat forces from Afghanistan in 2014, it should therefore encourage India to fill any potential security vacuum that might thereby arise by adopting a more robust political, economic, and security stance toward Kabul.