

Under the Shrinking U.S. Security Umbrella: India's End Game in Afghanistan?

On December 24, 1998, five Pakistani terrorists associated with Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI)—a Pakistani jihadist organization—hijacked an Indian Airlines flight in Kathmandu with the goal of exchanging three Pakistani terrorists held in Indian jails for the surviving passengers. Pakistan's external intelligence agency, the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), facilitated the hijacking in Nepal. After a harrowing journey through Amritsar (India), Lahore (Pakistan), and Dubai (United Arab Emirates), the plane landed at Kandahar Air Field in Afghanistan, then under Taliban control. Under public pressure, the Indian government ultimately agreed to the terrorists' demands to deliver the three prisoners jailed in India.¹ Both the hijackers and the terrorists who were released from prison transited to Pakistan with the assistance of the ISI. Masood Azhar, one of the freed militants, appeared in Karachi within weeks of the exchange to announce the formation of a new militant group which he would lead, the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JM).

This incident dramatically underscores why New Delhi cannot take its eyes off of Afghanistan and the Taliban. JM quickly became one of the most vicious terrorist groups operating in India, and is one of many groups active in India that has long had ties to Afghanistan and the Taliban (it also has enjoyed support from the ISI),² threatening vital Indian national security interests.

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India has re-established its presence in Afghanistan under the NATO security umbrella.

Less than three years after the hostage swap, the United States routed the Taliban and Hamid Karzai took the reins of Afghanistan's interim government. On December 22, 2001, India's Minister for External Affairs, Jaswant Singh, flew to Afghanistan to participate in Karzai's inauguration and to re-open the Indian embassy, which closed on the eve of the Taliban's seizure of Kabul in 1996.³ With the U.S.-led invasion after 9/11 and subsequent occupation, India has been able to steadily re-establish its presence in Afghanistan while free-riding under the U.S.

and NATO security umbrella. India, with its \$1.2 billion pledged to Afghanistan, is the fifth largest bilateral donor and the most significant donor in the region.⁴ What will India do in Afghanistan? What are New Delhi's current interests in Afghanistan, and does it have the means to achieve these goals? What are the consequences of its activities for India, Pakistan, and international efforts to stabilize Afghanistan?

India's Interests in Afghanistan and Beyond⁵

The doyen of South Asian security, Raja Mohan, explains how India defines its strategic space, arguing 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.⁶

India pursues several strategic interests across these defined spaces. First, as Mohan notes, India wants to be, and to be seen by others as, the dominant power in South Asia. Second, India wants to be the preeminent power within the Indian Ocean basin and have a decisive role in determining regional security throughout this area, which India sees as its extended security environment. Third, India increasingly seeks to proactively prevent developments which undermine its strategic interests in South Asia and beyond. This is an important departure from India's past behavior, which tended to be reactive to such developments. To achieve these goals throughout these three concentric circles, India employs its formidable and growing economic and political influence.⁷

At least three reasons motivate India's investments in Afghanistan. First, India wants to rid itself of the projection that it is singularly obsessed with

Pakistan, and has succeeded in doing so in part through its sophisticated diplomatic relations with an astonishing array of countries in Southwest, Central, and Southeast Asia. Afghanistan, along with Iran, is an important gateway that will allow India to move goods into and out of Central Asia and beyond. As such, Afghanistan is an important corridor through which India can project its influence well beyond Afghanistan.

Second, while India's engagement with Afghanistan advances its position as an important power beyond South Asia, other interests in Afghanistan specifically advance regional security concerns localized in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Many of these are tied to the proliferating Islamist militant groups which have terrorized India. Virtually every Islamist militant group operating in and against India (e.g., HUJI, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen/Harkat-ul-Ansar, among others) trained in Afghanistan with varying connections to the Taliban and by extension al Qaeda. (LeT is a notable and important exception. Unlike these other groups which trained often in camps co-located with the Taliban and al Qaeda, LeT always maintained its own camps in Kunar in northeast Afghanistan. Thus while LeT has considerably ideological affinity with al Qaeda, the evidence that the two groups are linked is scant.⁸) Naturally, India dreads a future Afghanistan that again becomes a terrorist safe-haven for groups targeting India.

Although India downplays its interests in securing and retaining Afghanistan as a friendly state from which it has the capacity to monitor Pakistan, and even possibly cultivate assets to influence activities in Pakistan, it most certainly has such aims. Pakistan seeks to undermine India's position in Afghanistan by supporting the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani network, and even groups such as LeT, which has been increasingly active in Afghanistan since 2004.⁹

Third, and often unappreciated, India has a number of *domestic* concerns which motivate its apprehensions about Islamist militancy based in Afghanistan and Pakistan. These Islamist militant groups have profoundly deleterious effects upon India's domestic social fabric as well as its internal security situation for several reasons. For instance, these Islamist militant groups are actively recruiting disaffected Indian Muslims from across the country and even establishing Indian franchises increasingly far away from their parent institutions in Pakistan.¹⁰ Also, Islamist militancy co-exists in a devastating synergy with India's lumbering Hindu nationalist movement, which seeks to re-craft India as a Hindu state and which occasionally indulges in violence of its own. Hindu extremists justify their anti-Muslim violence on the basis of Islamist violence in India. Increasing Hindu nationalist sentiment and concomitant violence in turn validates the arguments deployed by Islamist militants who claim to be fighting "Hindu" oppression of Muslims in India.¹¹

There are very real limits to India's ability to project its interests in Afghanistan.

India's Capabilities to Achieve These Goals

India has enjoyed excellent relations with Afghanistan from the early days of Indian independence, including signing a Friendship Treaty in 1950. After the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, however, India's opportunities in Afghanistan were constrained in some measure until 1992. This was due to the efforts of the United States to defeat the Soviet Union by nearly exclusively

working with Pakistan and the thousands of "mujahideen" created to fight the Soviet Union. Although the development of a U.S.-backed Islamist insurgency seriously circumscribed India's ability to project its interests in Afghanistan, India still sustained important projects. Fahmida Ashraf, a Pakistani scholar of India's relations with Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, has noted that between 1979 and 1989, India *expanded* its varied development activities in Afghanistan, focusing upon industrial, irrigation, and hydroelectric projects despite the adverse conditions there.¹²

After the Taliban consolidated its control over most of Afghanistan in 1996, India was marginalized and pursued very modest goals. India supported the Panjshir-based Northern Alliance (NA) in alliance with other regional actors such as Iran, Tajikistan, and Russia, among others (led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, the NA was the only significant challenge to the Taliban). There is considerable opacity surrounding Indian assistance to the Northern Alliance. India established and manned a 25-bed hospital at Farkhor (Ayni), Tajikistan for more than a year that aided the Alliance. In fact, when Masood was attacked by al Qaeda suicide bombers on September 10, 2001, he was rushed to this hospital by helicopter where he succumbed to his massive injuries. Based from Tajikistan, India supplied the NA with high-altitude warfare equipment (worth nearly \$8 million), and also dispatched several "defense advisers," including an army officer of brigadier rank to provide operational guidance to the NA in their anti-Taliban operations. Indian helicopter technicians from India's clandestine Aviation Research Center (ARC)—affiliated with India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW)—helped maintain the Soviet-made Mi-17 and Mi-35 attack helicopters.¹³

Since 2001 and the routing of the Taliban, India has focused its efforts upon development projects and humanitarian assistance. In the immediate wake of the Taliban's expulsion, Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee announced a \$100 million line of credit to Afghanistan, pledged one million tons of wheat for displaced Afghans, and dispatched a team of doctors and technicians in

December 2001 to establish a camp for fixing artificial limbs for amputees.¹⁴ Since then, India has committed \$750 million and pledged another \$450 million to Afghanistan.¹⁵ India is also increasingly involved in strategic infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, such as building a transmission line to provide power to Kabul, a hydroelectric project in Herat, as well as the Zaranj-Delaram road that connects the Ring Road in Afghanistan to the Iranian port in Chahbahar.¹⁶ However, with the degrading security environment in Afghanistan, India has faced considerable setbacks in these various projects.

Although Pakistan often opines about the "mushrooming Indian consulates" in Afghanistan, in fact India only has consulates in Jalalabad, Kandahar, Herat, and Mazar-e-Sharif in addition to its embassy in Kabul. This is in addition to a number of smaller-scale activities throughout Afghanistan, including in the south.¹⁷ This footprint facilitates India's various projects and likely aids India's ability to collect intelligence (as nearly all embassies and consulates do).

India has trained Afghan civilian and military personnel and has provided scholarships to Afghan students to study in India—the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) has offered as many as 500 scholarships a year for Afghans.¹⁸ At times, Indian officials have expressed an interest in having a larger role in training Afghan National Security Forces, arguing that India's experience with regimental military structures better situates it to train a multi-ethnic force than the United States and its NATO partners. Although the international community generally welcomes Indian development assistance programs, it has not embraced India's offers to train Afghanistan's security personnel.¹⁹

The rapidly deteriorating security conditions in Afghanistan have adversely affected India's ability to execute its projects and ensure the safety of its institutions and personnel. India is not alone in this regard—most international actors have been so constrained. Insurgents have attacked Indian engineers, medical staff, and government employees, including purported intelligence operatives. The Indian embassy in Kabul was attacked twice and its consulates in Herat and Jalalabad were assaulted.²⁰

India has tried in some measure to protect its key personnel in the country. For example, to protect civilians with the Border Roads Organization (BRO) who were building the southern portion of the Ring Road, India deployed the Indo-Tibetan Police Force (ITPF) as well as a small number of army commandos. It should be noted that using the BRO in this effort outraged Pakistanis because, according to the BRO mission statement, it supports helping India's "armed forces meet their strategic needs by committed, dedicated and cost effective development and sustenance of the infrastructure."²¹ After the embassy and other attacks, India is expanding the ITPF presence in Afghanistan to protect key Indian installations.²² These measures have infuriated Pakistan. It should be noted that some of these attacks have been linked to the ISI.²³

More controversially, some analysts interviewed by this author in the United States, the United Kingdom, Afghanistan, and Pakistan believe that India is engaging in intelligence operations against Pakistan from Afghanistan as well as Iran. UN officials told this author in Kabul in August 2009 that the National Directorate of Security, Afghanistan's domestic intelligence organization, is running weapons to Baloch insurgents in Pakistan on behalf of India. British analysts have also conceded to this author that they too have inferential evidence that India's involvement in Afghanistan is not entirely benign. Pakistan believes that Afghanistan is a willing partner in India's purportedly anti-Pakistan designs. For instance, Afghanistan has long harbored Baloch rebels. According to information made available through WikiLeaks, President Karzai admitted in January 2007 to sheltering more than 200 Baloch nationalists and their families who had fled Pakistan. However, Karzai denied that India is helping them—a claim Pakistan rejects.²⁴

Mushahid Hussain, a former Pakistani senator and chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee (among other important public and private sector posts), has made one of the boldest assertions of India's nefarious activities in Afghanistan. He claims that India uses its consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar to foster insurgency in Pakistan. Furthermore, he explained that:

... the Afghan Police, the Border Security Force and customs officials facilitate the visit of Indian diplomatic staff and intelligence agents to border areas, and help them to hold meetings with dissatisfied pro-Afghan dissidents, anti-state elements, and elders of the area ... Indian agents are carrying out clandestine activities in the border areas of Khost and in Pakistan's tribal areas of Miranshah with the active support of Afghan Border Security Force officials.²⁵

In recent years, Pakistan has claimed that India, along with Afghanistan, supports the Pakistan Taliban as well.²⁶ Pakistani officials often cite "uncircumcised fighters" that they have captured or killed as evidence that these fighters are not Muslim and likely Hindu (i.e., Indian) operatives.²⁷ Although these claims help galvanize Pakistan's armed forces to target their own citizenry by formulating these domestic enemies as Indian agents, and contribute to the ever-evolving narrative that Pakistan's internal and external security challenges are reducible to India, Pakistan's maximalist claims are unlikely to be true. Mehsuds (a tribe in FATA) do not routinely circumcise their young men and the ranks of the Pakistan Taliban include many Mehsuds. It is perhaps more likely that these uncircumcised fighters are Pakistani Mehsuds rather than Indians or even Gorkhas, as sometimes alleged.

While these allegations are nearly impossible to verify, they should not simply be ruled out for the sake of convenience or deference to the burgeoning U.S.–Indian strategic relationship. For one thing, the United States intelligence community *does not* collect on these activities and thus is not in a position to

empirically adjudicate the merit, or lack thereof, of Islamabad's claims. Based on this author's fieldwork in Iran (where India has a consulate in Zahidan, which borders Pakistan's restive Balochistan province), Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, anecdotal evidence suggests that although Pakistan's most sweeping claims are ill-founded, Indian claims to complete innocence are also unlikely to be true. The United States is simply ill-served to discredit Pakistan's claims in the absence of intelligence to shed light on the issue. In fact, not collecting intelligence on these claims provides further grist for Pakistan's anti-American mill, conveying disregard for Pakistan's legitimate security interests. While conceding the possibility that some of Islamabad's claims are valid, it is also important to remind Pakistan's leadership that the scale of India's activities against Pakistan pale in comparison to Pakistan's sponsored activities in and against India.

As the foregoing discussion suggests, there are very real limits to India's ability to project its interests in Afghanistan despite the fact that Afghans are generally very well disposed toward India and Indians. First, Pakistan has the advantage of geography, and many of Pakistan's citizens are blood relatives and co-ethnic with many Afghans. This affords Pakistan myriad advantages in terms of cultivating assets and allies to be used against India.

Second, Pakistan likely has a greater willingness to accept risks than does India. Because of Pakistan's relative lack of risk aversion, it will continue to pursue dangerous policies to minimize India's presence in Afghanistan, including continued support of groups such as the Haqqani network, LeT, and the Afghan Taliban, among others. As is well known, these groups have attacked Indian facilities, officials, and civilians, likely at Pakistan's behest and with the support of the ISI.

Third, the Indian public is divided about the relative costs and benefits of its investments in Afghanistan and may grow wary of maintaining its current presence with increasing risks, much less expanding its activities in Afghanistan. As discussed below, these risks will no doubt grow when the United States and NATO shift away from major military operations.

Risks for India will grow when the U.S. and NATO shift away from major military operations.

Gauging a Post-American Afghanistan

Despite deepening security threats from both the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan-based proxies operating against Indian personnel and institutions in Afghanistan, India has shown considerable resilience to staying the course in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, there is a fierce and growing domestic debate

gathering in India. New Delhi has long expressed concern and even frustration over Washington's handling of Islamabad and its steadfast refusal and/or inability to compel Pakistan to strategically abandon militancy as a tool of foreign policy

A fierce and growing domestic debate is gathering in India.

and to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure that has inflicted such harm in India, the region, and even on U.S. interests and assets. Indian officials have expressed concern about U.S. naïveté toward Pakistan and Washington's continued provision of massive military assistance to Pakistan, including lucrative reimbursements under the Coalition Support Funds program and access to conventional systems that are more appropriate to target

India than Pakistani insurgents. Worse, Indian officials are concerned that this assistance supports Pakistani militant groups. India's Army Chief Deepak Kapoor has told at least one top U.S. official that "India is worried ... [that] ... some part of the huge U.S. military package to Pakistan will find its way to the hands of terrorists targeting India."²⁸

The first year of Barack Obama's presidency exacerbated these concerns. Accustomed to high-level wooing by the Bush administration, New Delhi was nonplussed by the lack of comparable attention paid to India by the Obama administration. The deputy assistant secretary of state position for India, for example, remained unfilled until the fall of 2010. Part of this ostensible neglect was due to the newness of the Obama administration and its interagency review of the wars it inherited, the financial crisis, and other pressing domestic issues. The other factor was the Indian general election of 2009 and the Obama administration's belief that it would be prudent to await the outcome before pursuing its own initiative toward India. In addition to smarting from this perceived neglect, India also doubted the Obama administration's commitment to seeing the Indo-U.S. civilian nuclear deal to fruition.

Finally, Obama's misconstrued December 2009 announcement that U.S. troops will begin withdrawing from Afghanistan in July 2011 left India deeply concerned about the future of Afghanistan, the likely resurgence of the Taliban in Afghan politics, and the future influence of Pakistan in these developments. Even though U.S. officials recently announced that the United States may sustain military operations until 2014, Indians no doubt remain concerned about American willingness to pursue a course of action that satisfies New Delhi's concerns.

India, like other regional actors, is hedging its policy options as it games Washington's likely moves in Afghanistan. This has given rise to a lively debate within India about the nature of Indian interests, their importance, and the costs

and benefits of pursuing them. Some Indians are increasingly calling for India to find some way of placing troops on the ground should the United States and NATO continue to draw down kinetic operations and shift ever more resources toward training Afghan National Security Forces and traditional development projects.²⁹

Historically, India has resisted operating outside of a UN mandate, with a strong preference for Chapter VI peacekeeping missions over Chapter VII peace-enforcement missions. India's political leadership would have to persuade India's variegated polity that dispatching military forces to Afghanistan advances India's core national security interests. This would be a hard sell. Indian political figures, particularly in the Congress Party, have resisted enraging the sentiments of important Muslim constituencies who may vigorously oppose such a move.³⁰ Given India's tumultuous coalition-based political system, dispatching troops without a robust national consensus, howsoever unlikely, would imperil any national government. Nonetheless, there is a vocal—if still marginal—set of commentators and analysts who believe that India's preeminent security interests reside in Afghanistan and thus demand serious attention, including dispatching troops.³¹

At the other extreme are those Indians who, much like some Americans, do not believe that the benefits are worth the risks, and India should thus leave Afghanistan if and when international troops leave. Along these lines, D. Suba Chandran of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies in New Delhi has recently argued that India needs a "Plan B," and contends that this would require India to "cut its losses and leave Afghanistan, perhaps with a minimal presence, adequate enough to trap Pakistan."³² Of course, there are intermediate positions. Shanthie Mariet D'Souza of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses in New Delhi argues that India's current policy is on track and should be sustained.³³ Others agree but also contend that India should dedicate genuine security forces to protect the 4,000 Indian nationals working in the embassy and consulates and on other initiatives in Afghanistan.³⁴

Stability in South Asia: The Problem with Dehyphenation

The Bush administration dramatically restructured the way the United States engages India and Pakistan by "dehyphenating" its relations with both. Ashley Tellis, the progenitor of the policy, elaborated on this development in a 2000 RAND transition document.³⁵ Tellis argued that a dehyphenated policy in South Asia would have three distinct features: First, U.S. calculations would systemically decouple India and Pakistan—that is, U.S. relations with each state would be governed by an objective assessment of the intrinsic value of each country to U.S. interests, rather than by fears about how U.S. relations with

one would affect relations with the other. Second, the United States would recognize that India is on its way to becoming a major Asian power of some consequence and, therefore, that it warrants a level of engagement far greater than the previous norm, as well as an appreciation of its potential for both collaboration and resistance across a much larger canvas than simply South Asia. Third, the United States would recognize that Pakistan is a country in serious crisis that must be assisted to achieve a "soft landing" that dampens the currently disturbing social and economic trends by, among other things, reaching out to Pakistani society rather than simply the Pakistani state.

These arguments have an obvious logical eloquence that is belied by the fact of the Indo-Pakistan security competition. Simply put, dehyphenation in practice is nearly impossible because both India and Pakistan continue to see relations with the United States as a zero-sum game, and this perspective obviously affects how India views its interests in Afghanistan.

The limits of dehyphenating U.S. relations with India and Pakistan are most stark when one considers U.S. military endeavors to stabilize Afghanistan. U.S. efforts to forge and sustain a tactical relationship with Pakistan, centered on the war in Afghanistan at whatever price Pakistan asks, have irked India. At the same time, U.S. efforts to forge a strategic relationship with India have discomfited Pakistan, particularly the U.S. commitment to help India become a global power—including military assistance, missile cooperation, and the civilian nuclear deal.³⁶ Calls made by prominent U.S. commentators and analysts to encourage India to expand its role in stabilizing and rehabilitating Afghanistan have similarly vexed Islamabad, which demands the opposite.³⁷ While many Indians want the United States to take a harder line against Pakistan, many also want the United States to sustain its combat commitments in Afghanistan indefinitely. Yet, these are mutually incompatible expectations: the United States cannot be more aggressive toward Pakistan when it relies upon Pakistan nearly exclusively to sustain the war in Afghanistan through the ground lines of communication.

Recognizing the regional span of the Indo-Pakistan conflict, many prominent analysts link Pakistan's support of the Taliban with its unresolved security competition with India over Kashmir. New York University's Barnett Rubin and journalist Ahmed Rashid, writing of India's activities in Afghanistan, argue that "...pressuring or giving aid to Pakistan, without any effort to address the sources of its insecurity, cannot yield a sustainable positive outcome."³⁸ Rubin and Rashid propose a regional solution which suggests that Afghanistan could be resolved through working on the Kashmir problem.

The Heritage Foundation's Lisa Curtis has similarly but cautiously argued that a "transformation of Pakistan-Afghanistan ties can only take place in an overall context of improved Pakistani-Indian relations . . ."³⁹ This take on the regional

security dynamic animated the approach pursued by recently deceased Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Proponents of dehyphenation criticize this logic and fear that such arguments will motivate the United States to again pursue policies with India and Pakistan with due consideration of their ongoing dispute rather than an empirical assessment of the intrinsic value of engaging each country.

This discussion suggests that there are very important negative externalities associated with dehyphenation which obscure some of the policy's successes in transforming the U.S.–India relationship. While the United States has sought Pakistan's support of U.S. goals in Afghanistan through lucrative allurements and diplomatic hectoring, U.S. efforts to help India become a global power have arguably done much to undermine U.S. relations with Pakistan by exacerbating and deepening Pakistan's security concerns about India, which motivate much of Pakistan's noxious policies in the first instance. It may very well be the case that the United States cannot realize its goals toward India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan simultaneously, however appealing the logical elegance of dehyphenation may be.

Simultaneously reaching U.S. goals toward India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan may simply be impossible.

While the United States may be at the limits of its national power in balancing its interests among Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, India too is experiencing its own limitations in the very region over which it claims hegemony. India may have to decide whether it wants to increase its influence and activities in Afghanistan, while encouraging further Pakistani adventurism in India and elsewhere, or whether it is prudent to scale back its objectives in Afghanistan to appease Pakistan. Much depends upon this decision. If India cannot effectively secure its interests in Afghanistan, how can India demonstrate that it has what it takes to be a power of any consequence outside of South Asia—much less globally?

Notes

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