

India's Role in a Changing Afghanistan

As 2014 draws to a close, the war in Afghanistan will reprise the peripheral role it occupied for the United States and NATO between 2001 and 2006: out of sight, out of mind, and a distraction from other more pressing strategic challenges. Al-Qaeda's center of gravity has shifted away from Pakistan, at most a few hundred al-Qaeda operatives are left in Afghanistan, and the United States and European publics are weary of war.

For India, however, the Western drawdown of forces, culminating in the withdrawal of all US troops by 2016, will represent the greatest adverse structural shift in its security environment for over a decade, with potentially far-reaching implications for the Indian homeland and the country's regional position. It is a mistake to think that New Delhi would be inclined or able to salvage a disappointing military campaign on behalf of the West. The risk exists that India, like other regional actors anxious over the prospect of a security vacuum in the coming years, may adopt more independent and assertive policies in Afghanistan which diverge from those of the United States. However, one would be equally remiss to overlook the fundamental congruity of interests between Washington and New Delhi, and the opportunities that this might afford for cooperation.

India's Assessment of Afghanistan

The dominant Indian view of Afghanistan over the past decade is that the West has botched its war.¹ It failed to break the Taliban's back with a 30,000-strong

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India may adopt more independent and assertive policies in Afghanistan.

troop surge in 2010, largely because it was unable or unwilling to target the insurgency's cross-border sanctuaries in Pakistan. Now, Indian thinking runs, the West seeks a face-saving exit by partially resurrecting Islamist rule in Kabul with the help of Pakistan, the Taliban's primary historic benefactors. The debacle surrounding the opening of a Taliban office in Doha in the summer of 2013—an episode recounted in greater detail in a

moment—exemplified these concerns. To Indian observers, the mangled opening looked like a U.S. and European effort to undercut President Hamid Karzai's authority and appease the already confident insurgents, a Faustian pact with the Taliban that might purchase short-term stability and domestic electoral contentment, but at the price of incalculable long-term dangers. As veteran Indian national security reporter Praveen Swami put it, the United States is “subcontracting the task of keeping the peace in Afghanistan to the [Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI],” Pakistan's intelligence service.²

India's fears stem partly from the fact that it has so much to lose. Its diplomats, intelligence officers, soldiers, and aid workers watched as their country's economic, political, and capacity-building role in Afghanistan bloomed in the decade after 2001.³ For instance, India built Afghanistan's new parliament building, constructed new infrastructure like roads and power lines, ran hospitals, trained Afghan army officers, invested in Afghan mineral wealth, and pledged \$2 billion in aid between 2002 and 2012. Now, they worry that India will bear the brunt of the Taliban's gradual renewal or, worse, restoration. In January 2014, India's former National Security Advisor M.K. Narayanan argued that “Taliban extremism in [Pakistan and Afghanistan] shows no signs of muting itself...if they succeed in Afghanistan, India is their next target. We need to be on our guard.”⁴

These Indian fears are frequently filtered through the analogy of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, which saw Afghan veterans travel to Indian-controlled Kashmir where they amplified an indigenous insurgency that ravaged the territory in the 1990s. Today, many Indian security officials worry that combat-hardened fighters—including members of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the group responsible for the attacks on Mumbai in November 2008—will once again move eastward into Kashmir.⁵ Some Indians point to volatility along the Line of Control (LoC) between India and Pakistan, which last year experienced its most serious skirmishes since the landmark 2003 ceasefire, as an indication of the post-2014 threat.⁶ Pakistani-sponsored attacks on Indians in Afghanistan, diminished in recent years, might flare up again. Lashkar-e-Taiba suicide bombers, who had in previous years assaulted India's embassy in Kabul,

attacked India's consulates in Jalalabad in August 2013 and Herat in May 2014; India considers these a taste of things to come. Growing security risks could jeopardize India's massive investments, including a \$10 billion stake in the Hajigak iron-ore mine. All this could gradually sever India's broader access to Iran and Central Asia; indeed, India reportedly sought to renegotiate its Hajigak stake as a result of both legal uncertainty and heightened violence in the province.⁷

These anxieties have a second component. While India fears the withdrawal of a Western security umbrella that has somewhat—though not entirely—shielded its interests in Afghanistan, it also fears the replacement of that umbrella with a conscious Western effort to gradually legitimize and reintroduce those very same insurgents who squeezed India out of Afghanistan for the entirety of the 1990s. Western officials would naturally dispute the Indian characterization of their policy, but it is important to understand the terms of disagreement.

In theory, President Karzai has supported diplomatic efforts toward reconciliation. He established a High Peace Council to lead talks and authorized its members to visit Doha, has been calling the Taliban his “brothers” for years, and recently insisted that the United States ought to compel the Taliban to the negotiating table before he would sign a crucial U.S.–Afghan security accord, the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA). But Karzai has also been nervous about this diplomacy, not least because it played badly among many nationalists at home and, in Karzai's view, was being used to diminish his influence and status. In 2012, for example, Karzai had withdrawn his ambassador to Qatar in protest at feeling cut out of talks. In recent years, those talks have reportedly remained at an incipient stage, largely concerned with confidence-building measures (particularly between the United States and the Taliban) and involving such issues as prisoner swaps, rather than the details of a full-blown peace agreement. Setbacks have commonly occurred and contacts frequently interrupted—such as when the name of a key Taliban negotiator was leaked to the public.⁸

However, in 2013, the warring parties agreed that talks prove easier if the Taliban were permitted to open a political office outside of Afghanistan. This process, like previous talks, was supposed to be “Afghan-owned and led,” a phrase frequently invoked by every country involved in regional diplomacy.⁹ The Obama administration reportedly promised Karzai that the Taliban's office—to be located in Doha, Qatar—would not look like a government-in-exile.¹⁰ U.S. officials also claimed that Qatar had agreed with the Taliban that the office, which would use the neutral-sounding name of “Political Bureau of the Afghan Taliban,” was intended to serve as a platform for confidence-building measures such as prisoner swaps and, eventually, talks between the Afghan government and the insurgents themselves. The ultimate aim was reconciliation between

Afghanistan's democracy and a gradually disarmed Taliban, thereby easing the long-term pressure on the Afghan state after most Western combat forces depart at the end of 2014.

Yet, whether as the result of misunderstanding or Qatar's ineptitude in enforcing these understandings, these promises were broken in June 2013 when the office launched. The Taliban employed the politically-charged name "Political Office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" (the term the Taliban used during their period of rule), flew their flag, and played a Taliban anthem. The Afghan government felt that these steps gave the office the appearance of a formal diplomatic mission, thus unduly reinforcing the Taliban's claims to political legitimacy.

Karzai's immediate response, that same month, was to cancel crucial talks over the BSA, which will among other things govern how many Western troops can stay in Afghanistan beyond 2014. Although a BSA text was later agreed upon in November 2013—one that would allow a force of 8,000-10,000 troops to remain in Afghanistan beyond 2014 for training purposes and limited counterterrorism missions, albeit under strict conditions—Karzai later declared that he would not sign it until after the April 2014 elections, and only then if the United States were to fulfill further conditions, such as the return of Afghan detainees from Guantanamo Bay and the application of U.S. pressure on the Taliban to talk to the Afghan government directly.¹¹

The importance of a BSA, the need for the broader process of talks, and the significance of potential reconciliation all come from the failures of the military campaign. Even with 9,800 US troops likely to remain until 2016, Afghanistan will remain highly fragile—certainly more so than was hoped when the Obama administration conducted its review of the war four years ago. Even General Nick Carter, who until summer 2013 was the deputy commander of the NATO-led coalition and thus more likely to present an overly optimistic picture, acknowledged at the time of his departure that Kabul would not control all of its Afghan territory in the years ahead. He spoke of "local political solutions," a euphemism for Taliban dominance in parts of the country.¹²

In other cases, senior NATO military officers with experience in Afghanistan caution against the view that the Taliban can gain control of major Afghan cities, as it did between 1994 and 2001. But they also acknowledge that the Afghan army is able to do little more than hold the line against an insurgency that remains unbroken by the 2010 surge. Over time, and regardless of whether a BSA is eventually signed, the risk is that the international community grows exhausted, funding dries up, interest declines, the Afghan army eventually splits along ethnic or other lines, regional competition intensifies in anticipation of this outcome, and a renewed, internationalized civil war becomes a realistic longer-term prospect. Nearly all of the gains of the past decade-and-a-half

would disappear.¹³ It is this prospect that drives the Western interest in talking to their Taliban adversaries.

As one of the most important regional powers involved in Afghanistan, India might be expected to take a central role in this diplomacy. Even other countries notionally opposed to the Taliban, such as Iran, have opened their own contacts with the insurgents in recent years.¹⁴ For many Indian officials, however, the Doha episode vindicated longstanding suspicions about reconciliation, and India has remained absent from talks. In an op-ed in the respected Indian newspaper *The Hindu*, a few days after the June 2013 Doha debacle, Afghanistan's own ambassador in New Delhi warned Indians that "the forces of terrorism were being rewarded at the expense of the democratic gains."¹⁵ The episode reinforced Indian concerns that the very process of talks was putting their long-term interests at risk by rehabilitating a fundamentalist movement with inextricable ties to anti-Indian militants operating both in and outside of Afghanistan. For Delhi, talks were intended more to lubricate Western withdrawal than to ensure the long-term stability of Afghanistan.¹⁶ Whereas Western nations could depart from the region, India could not vacate its own neighborhood.

Although these talks are presently moribund, partly as a result of the 2014 Afghan national elections, they are likely to resume as this political uncertainty subsides, which will bring many of these questions back into play. In June 2014, the exchange of five Taliban detainees held in Guantanamo Bay for U.S. Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl was seen, by the White House, as a possible catalyst for broader talks.¹⁷

Indian and U.S. Interests in Afghanistan

India presently seeks a stable, strong, and democratic Afghanistan capable of resisting an encroaching insurgency that has historically found shelter and support from the two countries' common neighbor, Pakistan. Unlike during Afghanistan's civil war in the 1990s, when India joined with Iran and Russia to support the mostly Uzbek and Tajik anti-Taliban militias of the Northern Alliance, India is presently focusing its modest but notable security efforts on the broad-based Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) that have been fostered and equipped by NATO over the past several years.

NATO's security umbrella over the past decade has also allowed India's political, economic, and even social position in Afghanistan to expand greatly.

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India even boasts a modest military presence across Afghanistan's northern border with Tajikistan.¹⁸ Of all the regional actors involved in Afghanistan, India possesses what is likely the greatest stake in the status quo, the greatest fear of deteriorating security after 2014, and perhaps the greatest positive influence over the government of the day in Kabul. But, this is coupled with wariness of U.S. policies, and a reticence to be drawn in too deeply.

As Congressional and U.S. public interest in and patience with Afghanistan wanes, it will become ever harder for the United States to sustain the financial and other burdens involved in supporting Afghan forces and the Afghan state. This is particularly true if President Hamid Karzai's successor remains impervious to political reform and the U.S.–Afghan relationship remains strained, although the early indications suggest that the two candidates in the final run-off, Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani, will be less fractious than Karzai. As regional powers downgrade their expectations of U.S. leadership, this risks generating a self-fulfilling chain of actions: anticipating that the Afghan state will collapse as it did after the Soviet withdrawal, each country hedges its bets and extends support to the various non-state actors waiting in the wings—whether pro- or anti-Taliban—thereby weakening Kabul's authority further and reinforcing the original pessimism.

Cooperation and coordination between the United States and India in their assistance to Kabul can only do a limited amount to dampen this hedging behavior, but their policies have proceeded on parallel but separate tracks for too long. The two countries have duplicated common efforts, particularly those focused on Afghan security forces, and have at times held unduly skeptical views of the other's policies.

The United States should now more strongly encourage and support a responsible Indian effort to develop and strengthen Afghanistan's beleaguered security forces, working with New Delhi to identify and address key weaknesses which limit the ANSF's ability to contain the still-resilient insurgency. This cannot supplant NATO's training and mentoring efforts, but it can supplement it—and it acquires particular importance in the event that all foreign forces are compelled to leave Afghanistan after 2014. Past U.S. efforts to marginalize India's role, for fear of provoking Pakistan, have needlessly alienated New Delhi and yielded few benefits in the U.S.–Pakistan relationship.

At the same time, the United States faces a challenge in persuading India to support the objective of a political solution to the conflict. Part of this must involve so-called "reconciliation" with the leadership of the insurgency, else the Afghan state and its armed forces would remain wards of the international community in perpetuity. India's stance on this issue is important, because if New Delhi feels that political talks with the Taliban or other insurgent factions are compromising Indian interests, it might in the

future rebalance its support away from the elected Afghan government and toward other Afghan factions, including those opposed to reconciliation. The May 2014 election of Narendra Modi as Indian prime minister and his swift appointment of a hawkish National Security Advisor, former Intelligence Bureau Director Ajit Doval, might increase these risks. In July 2013, Doval wrote that “if despite our best efforts, desired results do not come forth, start preparing for the worst ... right from today, jointly and more resolutely. You often don’t have to fight the wars you had prepared for in advance.”¹⁹ This would intensify regional competition and increase the risk of a proxy war, developments that would put at risk the international community’s significant achievements in Afghanistan. Conversely, Indian support for talks and any eventual political settlement would affect Kabul’s calculus, as well as that of other regional actors, and increase the viability of any such settlement. The current challenge for the United States is to harness and reinforce India’s presently constructive role, while persuading the newly elected Government in New Delhi of the importance of talking to the insurgency with a view to a political settlement.

Distrust of Political Settlement

As explored above, India has two main fears in Afghanistan. The first is general anxiety about the withdrawal of the U.S. security umbrella, and how it may affect Indian national security and the strengthening of Afghan security forces. The second is distrust of a political settlement with insurgents perceived as implacably hostile to Indian interests. India’s position thus appears to come from two conflicting assumptions: that the future of Afghanistan faces severe risks, and that such a beleaguered state has no need for compromise with its enemies. India has accommodated armed rebels at home—even going as far as to amend its constitution, most notably for the formation of the state of Nagaland²⁰—and Indians have always been comfortable with talking while fighting. Why, therefore, are Indians so worried about contacts with the Taliban?

India distrusts any potential political settlement with Taliban insurgents.

In part, this stems from a mistaken tendency to view the Taliban in simplistic and internationally threatening terms. As the Indian defense journalist Ajai Shukla astutely noted last year, “the Taliban has been painted as a monolithic clone of Pakistan,” whereas Mullah Omar, the spiritual leader of the Taliban, is in fact a “far more stubborn, independent leader who resents ISI bullying.”²¹ Omar has also been losing control for years. Alex Strick van Linschoten and

Felix Kuehn, who have written extensively on the Taliban, argue that a “younger generation of commanders” are increasingly “independent, both financially and ideologically from the old-school Kandahari Taliban leadership.”²² Yet, New Delhi tends to emphasize the hierarchical nature of the insurgency and downplay the autonomy of its strands and subsidiaries, or the extent to which parts of the Taliban rankle at Pakistani efforts to control the group.

Indian fears also arise from an acute—and not unfounded—sense of victimhood that lingers from an earlier phase of the Afghan war. In 2009, the late Richard Holbrooke was appointed U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. He swiftly became India’s *bête noire* for trying to absorb the Kashmir dispute into his remit.²³ The implication was that the road to peace in Kabul went through Kashmir. Pakistan’s hostility to India in Afghanistan, and therefore its support for the Taliban, was explained, in this view, by Indian intransigence rather than Pakistan’s historic support for Afghan Islamists. Around the same time, a major report by General Stanley McChrystal, then commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan, cautioned that “increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan is likely to exacerbate regional tensions and encourage Pakistani countermeasures.”²⁴ Only the previous year, U.S. intelligence concluded that the ISI had assisted the radical Haqqani network in a deadly attack on India’s embassy in Kabul. Indians were furious: they were building infrastructure in Afghanistan, Pakistan’s proxies were bombing that infrastructure, and India received the blame. To some extent, Holbrooke is the specter haunting today’s diplomatic efforts—New Delhi views one of his successors, James Dobbins, with serious reservations because his regional diplomacy is still seen to favor Pakistan.²⁵

U.S. and European officials no longer view Indian involvement in Afghanistan as destabilizing.

To some extent, then, India views reconciliation talks as a misguided Western initiative that furthers Pakistan’s efforts to control Afghanistan’s future, at the cost of India’s position in the country. Yet, this assessment is unfair and out of date, for several reasons. For one thing, U.S. and European officials no longer view Indian involvement in Afghanistan as destabilizing. In part, this is because of widespread frustration with Pakistan’s role in the conflict, but it also reflects a recognition that Afghanistan needs all the help it can get. Although Pakistani officials have reportedly sought to enlist Western governments in

their effort to curb Indian involvement in Afghanistan—most notably during the ongoing UK–Afghanistan–Pakistan trilateral summits held in London—they have met with little success,²⁶ and few Western officials any longer suggest that India

ought to shut down its Afghan consulates, terminate its development projects, or sever its extensive ties to Afghan ministries. Indeed, for the past four years, the United States has encouraged India to support Afghan security forces, and it has been the Indian government which has responded warily. A U.S. diplomatic cable describes how, as early as February 2009, India's foreign minister actually turned down a U.S. request from then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice "for unspecified Indian support for Afghan security forces"—out of concern for Pakistan sensitivities.²⁷

Secondly, the Indian caricature of talks as a Pakistani-orchestrated ploy both overstates how far along the reconciliation process is and overlooks unambiguous, stark red lines that then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton set out over three years ago in a speech to the Asia Society: insurgents must stop fighting, cut ties to al-Qaeda, and abide by the Afghan constitution.²⁸ Reading the Indian press, one would scarcely understand that these conditions exist. Where they are mentioned, they are misrepresented. Kanwal Sibal, a former Indian foreign secretary, warned that "these red lines are being blurred by NATO's anxiety to withdraw."²⁹ But there is no evidence for this whatsoever. Karzai himself, who has otherwise railed against many aspects of Western policy, argued in October 2013 that "the return of the Taliban will not undermine progress."³⁰ And for all the talk of a face-saving departure, no Western official thinks that a deal will be struck before the majority of combat troops are out. A dignified exit is desirable, but this is not what is driving talks.

India should realize that giving the Taliban an office in Doha may have conferred some legitimacy on the group, but would also have helped free them from the ISI's powerful influence. At present, Pakistan has been able to pressure those Pakistan-based Taliban members and their families who tried to talk directly to the Afghan government without Pakistan's intercession. This is the fate that befell Taliban operations chief Mullah Baradar, who was arrested in Karachi in 2010 and only released last year under heavy restrictions.³¹ Indian diplomats are able to talk to Taliban representatives in Qatar such as they never could have done in a Pakistani city. They might discuss the Taliban's attitude towards Indian interests, its connection with anti-Indian militants such as LeT and the Haqqani network, and the Taliban's own approach to reconciliation. India could even spell out its own red lines, signaling what actions the Taliban might take to diminish Indian concerns. India has in the past shown some interest in such discussions: in November 2013, India's domestic intelligence service reportedly insisted that former Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef be granted a visa to India in order to allow back-channel talks.³²

But there is no sign that India has taken advantage of this potential opportunity to engage more meaningfully. New Delhi is marginalizing itself by complaining from the sidelines, when it could be working to shape the process to

its own advantage. Pakistan will never be cut entirely out of the peace process—their geography will always enable them to act as spoilers, both sheltering and manipulating insurgents—but the Doha office would have created more distance, allowing Taliban leaders to pursue approaches that might otherwise meet with opprobrium from the Pakistani military establishment.

Are the Indians correct to assume that the Taliban will never respect the red lines then-Secretary Clinton announced? The evidence is mixed. A study published by the Royal United Services Institute in 2012, based on high-level interviews with Taliban figures, found that “the Taliban leadership and base deeply regret their past association with al-Qaeda,” and that they would be open even to a continued U.S. presence on Afghan soil.³³ This cannot be taken on trust. But it is becoming increasingly clear that at least parts of the Taliban—especially the older generation—are less interested in exporting violence. This belief, more than anything else, is driving a wedge between the United States, which is seeking reconciliation talks, and Indian views of Afghanistan.

Of course, the Taliban is not the only insurgent group in Afghanistan. Others, like the Haqqani network, famously described by Admiral Mike Mullen as a “veritable arm of the ISI,” are closer to Pakistan, more extreme, and surely less reconcilable.³⁴ India is right to be wary of their reported inclusion in talks.

Closer consultation between U.S. and NATO policymakers, both to clarify Western policy on red lines but also to better understand Indian concerns, might go some way to narrowing this gap. India cannot and should not have a veto on the pace and manner of talks, but simply ignoring Indian concerns would prove dangerous. Although India has studiously avoided this approach so far, were it to begin to support non-state Afghan actors and groups (notably Tajik-dominated militias with which it was allied in the 1990s) as a hedge against an adverse political shift, it might change the internal Afghan calculus over talks and prompt aggressive responses from Pakistan and others. On the other hand, were India to use its leverage in Kabul to support talks and any eventual settlement that emerges, such a settlement would prove far more durable.

Building Up the ANSF

There is no easy way for the United States and its allies to balance the competing demands of various actors, but it is useful to view the West’s approach to Afghanistan as comprising two planks: trying, mostly unsuccessfully, to fashion a political settlement, and trying to strengthen Afghanistan’s security forces. India is wary of the former, but approves of the latter. It is clear that the current state of Afghanistan’s beleaguered security forces—over 5,000 soldiers a month are quitting the army—cannot fight the insurgency in perpetuity, not without unsustainable injections of cash by a skeptical U.S. Congress.³⁵

India is trying to shore up these forces, and it is here where opportunities for a larger Indian role and greater international cooperation exist. India will reportedly train over 1,000 Afghan army personnel in 2013–14, roughly twice as many as the previous year.³⁶ But it is still holding back. In spring 2013, Karzai traveled to New Delhi with a wish list of second-hand Indian heavy arms and aircraft that cannot be obtained from Western allies who feel that they have reached the limit of their commitment, and a request that India establish a training center in Afghanistan itself. On a later trip to New Delhi the same year—Karzai's third visit in the space of less than a year—he reiterated this request.³⁷

The West's approach to Afghanistan comprises two planks.

With the exception of a few helicopters and some minor equipment, the preceding Indian government, voted out of office in May 2014, stalled on these demands. Some of Karzai's requests have certainly been unrealistic—large-scale deployments of Indian trainers on Afghan soil would create an unacceptable vulnerability to attacks by insurgents—but India has proffered a baffling and implausible set of excuses for its broader reluctance to provide assistance: the equipment could end up in the wrong hands, Moscow must give permission for the transfer of Soviet-era arms, and India lacks “surplus capacity” in arms.³⁸ In February 2014, India's foreign minister declared that “we are not in the game of giving people large-scale equipment which is lethal,” and promised only logistical support and refurbishment of Afghan helicopters.³⁹ Three months later, India struck an innovative agreement with Russia whereby it would pay Moscow to transfer light artillery and mortars to Afghanistan. India and Russia would also re-start an armaments factory near Kabul and prepare an inventory of obsolete Russian equipment in Afghanistan that might be refurbished.⁴⁰ However, this agreement was limited in scale and scope.

India's real concerns have little to do with a lack of capacity or Russian permission. Many of the items on Karzai's weapons wish list are being phased out of India's arsenal anyway, or are built by India itself. Karzai was rebuffed in part because of Indian fears that arms transfers might disrupt the re-emerging dialogue with Pakistan, in part because of the political paralysis imposed by anticipation of India's national elections, which concluded in May 2014, but also because, as Praveen Swami put it, “no one is sure the Afghan army will hold together,” a judgment that has divided Indian policymakers.⁴¹

Yet under these circumstances, India is hardly in a position to expect that Western nations continue to funnel billions of dollars annually—\$120 billion was spent by the United States alone in 2011⁴²—to a corrupt and unreformed state whose own soldiers have inflicted a disturbing proportion of NATO

casualties in so-called “green-on-blue” incidents. India cannot complain that NATO is leaving behind an under-powered ANSF, but then remain reticent to extend its own efforts in this regard. Indian concerns would have more credibility were India to show more initiative itself; on the other hand, India would be more likely to act assertively if it had firmer backing from the United States and its allies. It is telling that Indian security officials held talks this year not just with Japan, but also with China and Iran over funding ANSF requirements.⁴³

As a way of kick-starting this process, New Delhi, Kabul, Washington, and other governments with an important role in the security sector of post-2014 Afghanistan should form a multinational joint working group to assess the points of vulnerability for Afghan forces. This would ensure that the ANSF receives the arms and equipment that it needs, rather than those that Afghan military leaders deem to be the most prestigious, such as the T-72 tanks that Afghanistan reportedly requested from India.⁴⁴ The United States might even consider funding some transfers from India to Afghanistan, given that this could prove more cost-effective than the alternatives. It would require the same pragmatism and flexibility that NATO showed in its willingness to fund and facilitate the maintenance of Afghan helicopters by Russia.⁴⁵ It would also allow the scrutiny of more provocative equipment—particularly any which might raise concerns in a potential Afghan–Pakistan border conflict such as particular types or volume of long-range artillery. In December 2013, Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s adviser on foreign affairs, Sartaj Aziz, explicitly stated that Islamabad had no problem with New Delhi’s assistance to Afghan security forces,⁴⁶ so India should not feel unduly inhibited. Nor should the United States feel inhibited, given that its own logistical dependence on Pakistan, and therefore the latter’s ability to coerce Washington, will decrease as troop numbers in Afghanistan shrink over the last six months of 2014.

Another useful starting point would be for India to send a small number of trainers to the British-established Afghanistan National Army Officers’ Academy (ANAOA) and the U.S.-established National Military Academy of Afghanistan. This would integrate Indian efforts with existing NATO ones, and it would afford Indian trainers—many of whom have extensive domestic counterinsurgency experience—with much greater protection from attacks by the Haqqani network or the LeT. In turn, trainers from NATO countries, with over a decade of combat experience in Afghanistan, might share this experience and their lessons with the various Indian institutions that host Afghan officers.

Ramping Up India’s Role

Despite the great strides made in the U.S.–India relationship over the past decade, the relationship has operated below its potential in Afghanistan. The

reasons for this have included the centrality of Pakistan to U.S. strategy in the region, India's own desire to limit its exposure to the conflict, and comparatively little need for Indian contributions as long as NATO remained engaged. These conditions are all changing—the Western drawdown from the region is looming as one of India's greatest near-term security challenges, and both the United States and India face important choices over their future posture in Afghanistan.

India does not need Western imprimatur to develop its relationship with Afghanistan, one that Indian policymakers might argue has been more successful than its U.S.–Afghan counterpart. However, building the capacity and cohesion of the Afghan state and its security forces—with the objective of maintaining pressure on the insurgency in the years ahead—is an aim Washington and New Delhi share, since both would lose a great deal from deteriorating security. Yet, both countries have thus far failed to explore ways in which their separate efforts might act complementarily. The United States should encourage and directly support India's role in fostering and equipping the ANSF, a role that can and should grow larger as part of its broader effort to encourage India's global rise. As an ancillary benefit, this will also provide a balance to China's rapidly growing, albeit mostly commercial, presence in Afghanistan.

At the same time, it is important to persuade India of the merits of a broader political strategy in Afghanistan that includes talks with insurgents. If talks defy the odds and turn into a settlement, it will undoubtedly affect India's interests—but those interests will come under greater risk if the insurgency remains at its present strength after Western troops leave and Western interest dwindles. Moreover, the Afghan government itself, alongside the Taliban, is the primary actor in the reconciliation process, and will become more of an independent actor as the foreign troop presence shrinks: Washington and New Delhi would wield more influence over Kabul in this regard if they coordinate their positions and emphasize their own preferred red lines. Overall, refusing to talk to the Taliban will not forestall their return, but only prevent the United States from possibly peeling away moderate parts of what is an increasingly fragmented movement, and averting a full-blown civil war.

The Indian diagnosis of the past decade-and-a-half in Afghanistan may be correct in part. There are many things that might have been done better: the United States might have erred in announcing a fixed withdrawal date; it should certainly have made greater efforts to curb Pakistan's support for the

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Taliban over the past decade; and it was wrong to keep India on the margins in the early stages of the campaign. But it is far from clear whether these things—or another decade of fighting—would have truly changed the course of the war, given the pathologies of the Afghan government, NATO's own mistakes, and circumstances beyond the coalition's control.

Today, the Taliban's resilience cannot be wished away. But there is much that India and NATO can do together to build up the Afghans' capabilities in the decade ahead, rather than working on parallel but separate tracks, as at present. India's upgraded training of Afghan officers and its logistical assistance should offer only a start. But there is ultimately no substitute for talks, unless India feels like taking on a chunk of what will become an unacceptable annual \$4.1 billion bill for Afghan security forces after 2014, or deploying its own troops.⁴⁷ Given India's strong connections to different communities in Afghanistan and its goodwill among Afghans, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government could play a powerful and positive role in buttressing Afghan security forces. It could also take a positive role in any broad-based peace talks that might eventually occur, which would ultimately do more to secure both Indian and U.S. economic and political interests in Afghanistan than the deteriorating status quo.

Notes

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