

India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership: An Analysis of India, Afghanistan and Pakistan Perspectives

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Abstract- The India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership signed on October 04, 2011 was the first agreement that Afghanistan has formally entered into with any country to reconstruct Afghanistan, help guarantee its security and is linked with the drawdown of US forces from Afghanistan. Afghanistan views the strong ties with India as a means to assuage the sense of insecurity and capable of assisting the war-torn nation to stabilize the helpless nation on account of the debilitating power struggle anticipated in the power vacuum following the withdrawal in 2014 of the US and NATO forces. Pakistan is concerned about the agreement and is quite suspicious of encirclement by India. Perspectives of three countries i.e., India, Afghanistan and Pakistan on India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership 2011 are attempted to analyze in the present article.

Index Terms- India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership, Perspective, Pakistani Suspicion, Indo-Afghan Pact

I. INDIA AFGHANISTAN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT

On October 04, 2011, during the visit of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai to India both countries signed Strategic Partnership agreement "based on mutual understanding and long-term trust" outlines areas of common concern including trade, economic expansion, education, security and politics. This is the first such agreement that post-Taliban Afghanistan has ever formally entered into with any country to help guarantee its security as international troops begin withdrawing from the war-torn country after more than a decade of fighting and is designed to address the challenges of transition as much as prepare ground for preventing the reversal of gains beyond 2014.¹ This agreement is linked with the drawdown of US forces from Afghanistan. It covers security cooperation, trade and economic ties, as well as social and cultural exchanges. The two leaders have also signed two separate deals increasing links in mining and energy which represented "a new dimension in economic relations" to enable Kabul to integrate more effectively with the Indian economy and other economies in South Asia.

The agreements come at a time of severely strained ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The people of India sympathized with Afghanistan as it sought to cope with "acts of

terrorism, particularly the assassination of [peace envoy] Burhanuddin Rabbani". Karzai has accused Pakistan of supporting militant networks in his country and of having links to the assassination of peace envoy and former president Burhanuddin Rabbani.

This historic document is symbolic of the mutual trust and confidence between the two nations; it has also served to introduce a new twist to the already complex geo-political situation in the region. More specifically, it has added a new dimension to the ongoing turmoil in the somewhat unpredictable relationship between India and Pakistan as also has aggravated tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

II. AFGHANISTAN PERSPECTIVE

Afghanistan views strategic partnership agreement is to support, to reconstruct Afghanistan and future commitment at a time when other countries are talking of downsizing or even complete withdrawal. During Karzai's visit to India, he told the media that "This strategic partnership is not directed against any country. He also stated that "Pakistan is our twin brother, India is a great friend. The agreement we signed with our friend will not affect our brother." The Government and the common people in Afghanistan view the agreement on strategic partnership with India as a reiteration of the strong traditional bonds between the two nations that have existed for centuries. Afghanistan sees India, a better position to play a more constructive role in rebuilding the shattered economy of Afghanistan, a nation devastated by the prolonged and seemingly interminable conflict than Pakistan. In which Afghanistan views Pakistan not in a position to compete with India in respect of economic cooperation as India for years of economic aid without conditions or in the realm of foreign policy where India is being seen as a mature, seasoned and proactive player on the global scene. Afghanistan has clearly opted to go along with a partner that can effectively contribute to stability and prosperity. In the past decade, India has already donated nearly \$2 billion by way of economic assistance. India has accumulated a fund of goodwill amongst the common people through her strong focus on programmes related to the development of infrastructure such as roads, telecommunication facilities and power generation and also invested in education, human resource development as investment in the future leadership and healthcare.

But beyond the lure of funds for reconstruction, the Government of Afghanistan also views the strong ties with India as a means to assuage the sense of insecurity and capable of assisting the war-torn nation to stabilize the helpless nation on account of the debilitating power struggle anticipated in the

¹ Arvind Guptam, 'Strategic Partnership with Afghanistan: India Showcases its Soft Power,' IDSA Comment, October 10, 2011.

power vacuum following the withdrawal in 2014 of the US and NATO forces.

III. INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

For India the strategic partnership agreement is more than just that as it aims to propel the relationship beyond a mere aid-donor equation to a much higher plane with training of the Afghan National Security Forces and the Afghan National Police included as an important and integral part of the agreement. India sees a strong, independent, stable, prosperous and democratic Afghanistan as being critical to her security interests and for overall stability of the region in the evolving geo-political and geo-strategic scenarios. Building up and sustaining the capability of the Government of Afghanistan through external assistance to provide for her own security is therefore the first and indispensable step in the pursuit of this objective. For India, Afghanistan is undoubtedly a very important partner in the region to project its power status and to secure its entry into energy rich and untapped markets of Central Asia.

At a press conference in Delhi, Mr Singh said that the strategic partnership between the two countries will create an "institutional framework" so that India can help in Afghan "capacity building" in the areas of education, development and people-to-people contacts. But the real motive was to secure its entry into the market of Central Asia and to block Pakistan.

India helps Afghanistan's reconstruction in light of the enduring security competition between India and Pakistan. On the one hand are those who want to expand India's presence in Afghanistan through increased Indian training of Afghan civilian and military personnel, development projects, and expanded economic ties. India's interest in Afghanistan is Pakistan-specific on one side, but more importantly, tied to India's desire to be and to be seen as an extra-regional power moving toward great power status.

IV. PAKISTANI SUSPICIONS

Pakistan is deeply suspicious of Indian influence across its western border. For much of its history, Pakistan has pursued a policy of "strategic depth" in Afghanistan by training, funding, and arming groups that can act as proxies for Pakistani interests. Pakistan is concerned that India's economic and political linkages are building up Indian capacity to destabilize Pakistan. It is widely believed in Pakistan that the Indian consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar are covertly supporting Balochi insurgents against Pakistan.

Pakistan's concerns that India is trying to encircle it by gaining influence in Afghanistan has in part led to "continued Pakistani ambivalence toward the Taliban," argues a new report by the independent, U.S.-based Pakistan Policy Working Group. The report says Pakistani security officials calculate that the Taliban offers the best chance for countering India's regional influence. Pakistan's support for the Taliban has led to increased instability in Afghanistan, from the growth of terrorism to upped opium cultivation. But Islamabad denies any support for the Taliban and says it is committed to fighting terrorism. U.S. military and intelligence officials have

repeatedly warned that Pakistan's tribal areas along the Afghan border continue to serve as safe havens for the Taliban and al-Qaeda to stage attacks against Afghanistan. Experts say Pakistan's cooperation in counterterrorism is vital to winning the war in Afghanistan. Pakistan also competes with India for access to consumer markets in Afghanistan. Pakistan sees Iran's Chabahar port, which India hopes to use as its route for trade with Afghanistan, as a rival that would compete with its new port at Gwadar, which was built with Chinese assistance.

Despite assurances from President Hamid Karzai that, "the new partnership with India was not meant as a form of aggression towards Pakistan" and readiness on the part of both the signatories to the agreement to accommodate Pakistani interests and address her apprehensions, the overt expression of strategic partnership is bound to cause serious discomfort to Pakistan especially on account of the "strategic" connotation of the agreement. Indian involvement in the training of Afghan National Security and Police Forces, in all likelihood, will be unpalatable to Pakistan. In her perception, the agreement will facilitate direct access to Afghanistan for Indian forces with the possibility of the country being "sandwiched" between two not-so-friendly neighbours. Pakistan sees the move by India as a new "great game" directed against herself and her mentor, China. She also views the agreement as a major impediment to her vision of the establishment of a bloc consisting of Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey duly patronized by China to counterbalance India's rise as a regional power and contain US hegemony. It would not be surprising therefore that in the new situation, Pakistan brands Afghanistan as an enemy equated with India and undertakes a complete review of her foreign policy.

V. INDO-AFGHAN PACT AND PAKISTAN CONCERN

The India and Afghanistan Pact came on the heels of the killing of former President Burhanuddin Rabbani and the subsequent suspension of reconciliation talks with the Taliban, leading many to conclude that it was signed in order to isolate Pakistan. But the agreement was more than five months in the making, designed to address the long-standing demands of the Afghan people. A series of official visits and private deliberations since January of that year culminated in Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's announcement in May of the two countries' plans for a strategic partnership. During an interview in Kabul in the days following the establishment of the pact, former Interior Minister Ali Jalali said he "recognizes the agreement as a document making official the close ties that already exist between the two countries." Shah Mahmood Miakhel, former Deputy Minister of Interior, strongly supported the agreement as "useful for reconstruction and stability of Afghanistan to prevent civil war or proxy war."

Indeed, Sajjad Ashraf, a former Pakistan ambassador to Singapore and now a professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, cautioned against a knee-jerk Pakistani reaction to the Indo-Afghan treaty. In a paper for the Institute of South Asian Studies, he said that a careful reading of the pact suggests that the countries involved want to develop Afghanistan as a hub linking South and Central Asia since it sits in both regions; which isn't such a bad thing for the countries of south Asia but especially Pakistan which by its geography as landlocked

Afghanistan's neighbor with the longest border has a key role to play. Ashraf said: "If the three countries can reach an understanding and let India develop Afghan capacity leading to regional economic integration, Pakistan too becomes a winner. In the age of globalization, following any other course will result in Pakistan lagging behind.

VI. FUTURE IMPLICATION OF INDIA AFGHANISTAN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT

The signing of a strategic partnership between India and Afghanistan on October 4, 2011 during Afghan President Hamid Karzai's visit to India was a landmark event. The document is significant for its implications for Indo-Afghan relations as well as for India's wider neighbourhood policy. The agreement positions India and Afghanistan for the post-2014 situation when the international forces are scheduled to withdraw and hand over security responsibilities to Afghan forces. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was categorical in his support for the Afghan people when he stated at a news conference that "India will stand by the people of Afghanistan as they prepare to assume the responsibility for their governance and security after the withdrawal of international forces in 2014."

Pakistan takes India-Afghan relations as detrimental to its own interests. Its zero-sum attitude to regional cooperation creates many security dilemmas in the region. President Karzai is in an unenviable position. On the one hand, he sees Pakistan as playing a destabilizing "double game" in Afghanistan; and, on the other, he regards Pakistan as a "brother", while describing India as a "great friend". The nuance to be underlined here is that friends always help while brothers can sometimes do great harm. Pakistan is singularly placed to hurt Afghanistan's interest. This is well recognized in Afghanistan where India enjoys warm welcome while Pakistan often comes for stinging criticism. Pakistan, concerned over the India-Afghanistan strategic partnership, is likely to step up pressure on the Afghan government. Pakistan's negative reaction to the Indo-Afghan Strategic partnership was expected.

There is a politico-security component to the strategic partnership but the agreement does not tantamount to a security alliance. The agreement states clearly that the strategic partnership is not directed against "any other state or group of states". India has merely agreed to assist in the "training, equipping and capacity building programmes for Afghan national security forces." Going beyond the security dimension, the partnership arrangement also dwells on trade and economic cooperation, capacity development and education, social cultural & civil society and people to people relations. Significantly, the agreement provides for a high powered implementation mechanism. A "Partnership Council" at the Foreign Ministers' level with four separate joint working groups, on political & security consultations, trade and economic cooperation, capacity development and education, and social cultural & civil society interactions, will be set up. The numerous existing dialogue mechanisms between the two countries will be consolidated and brought under the Partnership Council. The two sides will also have a regular strategic dialogue. The setting up of a Partnership Council will ensure that bilateral relations get sustained attention.

VII. CONCLUSION

The Strategic Partnership agreement which was signed during the visit of Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai to India on October 04, 2011 was the first agreement that Afghanistan has formally entered into with any country to help guarantee its security and is linked with the drawdown of US forces from Afghanistan. It was meant to reconstruct Afghanistan. But beyond the reconstruction, the Government of Afghanistan also views the strong ties with India as a means to assuage the sense of insecurity and capable of assisting the war-torn nation to stabilize the helpless nation on account of the debilitating power struggle anticipated in the power vacuum following the withdrawal in 2014 of the US and NATO forces. For India the strategic partnership agreement is more than just that as it aims to propel the relationship beyond a mere aid-donor equation to a much higher plane with training of the Afghan National Security Forces. India sees a strong, independent, stable, prosperous and democratic Afghanistan as being critical to her security interests and for overall stability of the region in the evolving geo-political and geo-strategic scenarios. It also includes coping with "acts of terrorism. Even though Karzai made his remark that the agreement with India will not affect Pakistan. Pakistan views India as trying to isolate Pakistan through this agreement and is bound to cause serious discomfort to Pakistan especially on account of the "strategic" connotation of the agreement. Indian involvement in the training of Afghan National Security and Police Forces, in all likelihood, will be unpalatable to Pakistan. It is a new dimension in economic relations to enable Kabul to integrate more effectively with the Indian economy and other economies in South Asia.

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