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On Afghanistan: Keep India in the Loop

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During his visit to attend the recent Nuclear Security Summit hosted in Washington D.C., Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh heard reassuring words from President Barack Obama. For instance, Pakistan was strongly advised to wind up the activities of Lashkar-e-Toiba, a terrorist group created by Pakistan's military intelligence in the late 1980s for the specific purpose of waging cross-border conflict against India. The group, intelligence analysts across the world believe, has become a global threat today. Closing down its activities would be a necessary step in the war against terror. Obama has also urged Pakistan in general to step back from pushing low-intensity conflict against India.

The U.S.-India relationship, however, continues to fly through a patch of mild atmospheric turbulence. A growing anxiety among knowledgeable officials and analysts on the Indian side is that the administration of President Obama does not accord the same degree of special value to the India relationship as the George W. Bush administration did during its second term. One reason why such a perception has gained ground may be the priorities that the Obama administration seems to have set for itself in Afghanistan.

Although President Bush had more or less outsourced the Afghan war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban to the Pakistani military and had shifted attention and resources to Iraq, President Obama, while boosting resources as well as military effort significantly in Afghanistan, has also set 2011 as the year in which U.S. forces will begin withdrawing from the region. Sensing an end game, interested players have begun to make their moves.

The priorities of the current White House are, understandably perhaps, largely domestic and, therefore, political. Leading stewards of this tactical approach are seasoned political operatives like Rahm Emmanuel and David Axelrod. Their aim is, first, to minimize an expected decline after November's Congressional elections of the majority that the Democrats enjoy in the Senate and the House of Representatives; and, second, to ensure a second term for their boss in 2012. Both are legitimate political goals, which produce repercussions on the way priorities are set for other areas, including foreign policy.

Announcing a date for bringing American soldiers back home from the desolate hills of Afghanistan suited such goals. Add to that some pressure from Britain, the leading ally of the United States in the Afghan war, also for domestic political reasons. The war is highly unpopular in the United Kingdom, which is going to the polls in a few more weeks. The government of Gordon Brown must show its intention to get out of Afghanistan quickly.

Gautam Adhikari, FICCI-EWC
Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that "The U.S.-India relationship, however, continues to fly through a patch of mild atmospheric turbulence....One reason why such a perception has gained ground may be the priorities that the Obama administration seems to have set for itself in Afghanistan."



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The British foreign secretary, David Miliband, has come out, in the latest *New York Review of Books*, with a plan for Western withdrawal, and handing over Afghanistan to the Afghans. It sounds like a reasonable plan for a structured withdrawal. Except when he asserts: “No country in the region, let alone the international community, will again allow Afghanistan to be dominated, or used as a strategic asset, by a neighboring state.” How exactly the international community will ensure that is left unexplained. The neighboring state in question—Pakistan—is acutely aware of that reality and may be biding its time.

As happened within a few years of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, Pakistan’s Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) established effective control over Afghanistan through their proxy, the Taliban. It seems very unlikely that the Pakistani army and the ISI, in perpetual search for “strategic depth” against India, will not pull off the same virtual arrangement once again after the United States and NATO presence is no longer there in any meaningful way. That is the main reason why they continue to protect the leadership of the Afghan Taliban. In a few years, the vacuum can again be Pakistan’s to fill by proxy.

American and British efforts to integrate as many Taliban fighters as possible have begun as part of a counter-insurgency strategy. It makes sense to carry out such an effort. After all, as one steps up a military offensive one should also offer a way out for those who are willing to lay down their arms and switch sides. But, in pursuit of a quick exit plan, any premature negotiations with the Taliban leaders sheltering in Pakistan will be playing right into the hands of Pakistan’s military. The Taliban have gained considerable influence in Afghanistan over the past few years. Negotiating with its leadership without first decimating their ranks—through fighting as well as incentives—can be a huge mistake.

Unfortunately, there are those in U.S. and British policy circles who would not mind letting the Taliban regain effective power—thereby facilitating Pakistani control—after obtaining promises from the leadership to maintain stability and renounce al-Qaeda. Astute analysts, such as Ashley Tellis of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Lisa Curtis of the Heritage Foundation, have warned against such a danger in testimonies before the U.S. Congress. Writes Curtis in a recent paper: “The U.S. must be clearheaded about Pakistani goals in the region and accept that Pakistani interests often run counter to U.S. efforts to protect the U.S. homeland from future 9/11 type attacks. While the United States seeks to prevent Afghanistan from again serving as a safe haven for international terrorists, Pakistan’s primary goal is to curb Indian influence in the country.”

India, which has devoted more than a billion dollars to help Afghan reconstruction, is almost a bystander in the process that is currently unfolding. But, along with Russia, China and Iran, India has as vital an interest in stabilizing Afghanistan, and Pakistan, as the United States. Terrorism emanating from the region is planned and executed by malevolent minds infesting that non-existent Af-Pak border. They are protected and sustained by the Pakistani military. The United States and India need to work on the same page while planning carefully for an eventual withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan.

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