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## India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership: Beyond 2014?

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### Abstract

*The formalisation of the Agreement on Strategic Partnership (ASP) between India and Afghanistan on 4 October 2011 caught instant and worldwide media attention. Coming ahead of the much convoluted US-Afghan strategic partnership, this agreement is seen to be a new twist in the great game. For the Afghans, it is a reaffirmation of the positive role India has played in the reconstruction of their country and future commitment at a time when other countries are talking of downsizing or even complete withdrawal. The partnership agreement, being first of its kind in post-Taliban Afghanistan, is designed to address the challenges of transition as much as prepare ground for preventing the reversal of gains beyond 2014. In highlighting the utility in India's soft power approach, the paper argues that India's decade-long aid-only policy has been successful in consolidating its gains through such institutional processes. However, it would be useful to see if India and Afghanistan could navigate through the difficult contours of regional security environment as they are poised to jointly address the challenges of transition and beyond.*

### Locating the ASP: India's Aid-Only Policy in Afghanistan

India returned to post-Taliban Afghanistan to revive its earlier historical, cultural and civilisational relationship. Even as countries joined hands behind the United States (US)-led

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military offensive against the Taliban, New Delhi adopted an ideational role and soft power approach of providing developmental assistance for the reconstruction of the war-ravaged country.

India's primary national security interests in Afghanistan, since then, have centred on supporting the nascent democratic regime, thereby denying space for the return of the Taliban. From a security paradigm, India's concerns of terror emanating from the extremely volatile Pakistan-Afghanistan border spilling into its territory are real and imminent. A strong, stable and democratic Afghanistan would act as a bulwark to reduce the dangers of extremist violence and terrorism destabilising the region.<sup>2</sup> As a major economic and regional power, India has worked towards reviving the role of Afghanistan as a land bridge, thereby connecting South Asia with Central Asia to tap on energy resources. With the prospects of linking stability with greater regional economic integration, India has actively promoted greater trade and economic integration of Afghanistan with South Asia.<sup>3</sup>

While India's involvement in Afghanistan has accrued huge costs, it has generated tremendous goodwill among the local Afghans.<sup>4</sup> With pledged aid close to US\$2 billion, India today is the fifth largest bilateral donor in the country. India's development and reconstruction activities including infrastructure development, power generation, capacity building, health and education are in sync with the local needs. Unlike aid provided by other international donors who rely on alternate delivery mechanisms, India's aid mostly delivered through the Afghans, has hinged on local ownership and participation.

Whether it is the high visibility infrastructure projects in the north and west of Afghanistan or the small scale low visibility projects in the south and east, the emphasis has been on local participation and capacity building. In difficult and insurgency prone areas of the south and east, India has invested in small development projects (SDPs) with greater local participation

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<sup>2</sup> Even after a decade of international military intervention, the Taliban insurgency has spread to relatively peaceful and stable north and west Afghanistan, in addition to further intensification of linkages with Pakistan-based anti-India groups. A worrisome development has been expansion of Lashkar-e-Toiba's activities beyond Kunar and Nooristan provinces to other parts of Afghanistan. Observations are based on author's discussions with officials and locals from Nuristan province during field visit to Afghanistan in October 2010.

<sup>3</sup> These views and perceptions were gathered from interactions and discussions with senior Indian government officials in New Delhi and Kabul in October 2010 and October 2011. For an excellent and detailed exposition of Indo-Afghan relations, see Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, 'India' in Ashley J. Tellis & Aroop Mukharji (eds), 'Is A Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan?' (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010). [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/regional\\_approach.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/regional_approach.pdf). Accessed on 23 July 2010. Also see C. Christine Fair, 'India in Afghanistan and Beyond: Opportunities and Constraints', A Century Foundation Report, Washington, D.C.(2010), <http://tcf.org/publications/2010/9/india-in-afghanistan-and-beyond-opportunities-and-constraints/pdf>. Accessed on 23 September 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Author's interviews and discussions with Afghan government officials, political leaders, academia, security personnel, women's groups and locals in various Afghan provinces (May-June 2007, October 2010, March 2011, May-June 2011, October 2011) indicated an appreciation of India's role in rebuilding their country. Also see Tom A. Peter, 'India outdoes US aid efforts in Afghanistan', Global Post (9 September 2010), <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/afghanistan/100908/india-outdoes-us-aid-efforts-afghanistan>. Accessed on 12 September 2010. Also see Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, 'India's Aid to Afghanistan: Challenges and Prospects', Strategic Analysis, Vol.31, No.5 (September 2007).

and in tandem with the local needs. India's assistance has broad cultural acceptance given the way aid is delivered within the socio-cultural milieu having shared history, culture and tradition. A decade later, while the international community's decade-long involvement has come under renewed scrutiny, the prudence of India's method of engagement has become increasingly understood and even emulated.<sup>5</sup>

What is striking is a constant demand by the Afghans' across broad spectrum for India to do more in that country, even in the Pushtun heartland.<sup>6</sup> There is demand for adding to the lone cold storage facility India has built in Kandahar. Afghan goods otherwise are sold cheap to Pakistani buyers, who store them in their cold storages and sell these back at a much higher price to the Afghans. In an interview with Shah Wali Karzai, political leader in the south, he was emphatic that India should do more in South Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> There is demand for setting up cement factories, irrigation and power projects, road building, health facilities, increasing the number of scholarships for Afghan students to study in India.<sup>8</sup> Visa application lines mainly for medical tourism are expanding. Similar requests are made across the broad spectrum of Afghanistan's diverse geographical and ethnic grouping whether in Mazar-e-Sharif in the north, Herat in west or Jalalabad in the east. To that extent, the formalisation of the ASP of 4 October 2011 is a natural corollary of India's constructive role in the stabilisation of Afghanistan, played thus far.

### **A Shift in India's Neighbourhood Policy?**

A survey of India's relations with Afghanistan indicates that peace and stability in Afghanistan have remained important foreign policy objectives for India. Being members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), both countries maintained neutrality in the Cold War atmospherics. The signing of a Friendship Treaty in 1950 paved the way for development of New Delhi's friendly relations with King Zahir Shah's regime, which continued till the brief interregnum caused by the march of the Taliban to the seats of power in Kabul.<sup>9</sup> Building on

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<sup>5</sup> Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, 'India's Stake in Afghanistan', *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, No. 20, (Spring/Summer 2011).

<sup>6</sup> On the day of the signing of the agreement, the author travelled from Kabul to Kandahar, getting a rare glimpse of the Afghan perception on India's aid and development activities. Author's discussions with political leaders like Shah Wali Karzai, Qayoom Karzai and Mehmood Karzai in Kandahar on 5 October 2011 while indicating an appreciation for India's assistance also put forward demands for India to initiate high visibility projects like cement factories, road construction and build more cold storages. In discussion with airport manager, Mr Ahmedullah Faizi, the need for more cargo flights to export pomegranates and dry fruits was highlighted. Author's discussions with women groups in Kandahar brought out the need for small-scale income generation activities and health facilities. Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, *Indian-Afghan strategic partnership: perceptions from the ground*, *The Af-Pak Channel*, Foreign Policy, Washington DC, (26 October 2011), [http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/10/26/indian\\_afghan\\_strategic\\_partnership\\_perceptions\\_from\\_the\\_ground](http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/10/26/indian_afghan_strategic_partnership_perceptions_from_the_ground). Accessed on 27 October 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Author's interview with Shah Wali Karzai, Kandahar, 5 October, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Author's interviews with political leaders, government official, non-governmental organisations and women groups in Kandahar, 5 October 2011.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed survey of Indo-Afghan relations, see Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, *India, Afghanistan and the 'End Game'?*, ISAS Working Paper No.124, Singapore (14 March 2011), <http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/A>

the Treaty of 1950, the ASP is a recognition of the need to restore and take forward the historical, traditional and civilisation relationship. In a statement to the media during the visit of the Afghan President Karzai, the Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh explicitly stated, 'Our cooperation with Afghanistan is an open book. We have civilisation links, and we are both here to stay'.<sup>10</sup>

Formalisation of the ASP, though seen by many as a new twist in the great game, has made a tremendous impact in terms of strategic communication. It has sent a strong message to the Afghans, region and international community. Being the first to sign such an agreement, India has demonstrated its independence and commitment to rebuilding Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> Coming ahead of the US-Afghan strategic partnership deal, which is embroiled in differences and conditionalities<sup>12</sup>, the India-Afghan agreement was a demonstration of India's willingness to help a neighbour in need. Given that the agreement was based on requests and conditions set by the Afghans through a series of consultative meetings and deliberations, there were little hiccups in finalising the deal.<sup>13</sup>

For those who warned against India being caught in a reputation trap of being overstretched in a distant country of negative security interests, or even piggy backing on international military efforts, the ASP is a much needed demonstration of India's risk-taking ability. To that extent, it can be seen as a sign of the maturing of India's foreign policy. As India builds its relationship in the neighbourhood and moves ahead with several path-breaking initiatives in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar, the first strategic partnership with distant Afghanistan has signalled India is ready to partner with countries even in adverse and difficult conditions. Thus, Afghanistan's 'Support for the reform and expansion of the United Nations Security Council, including a permanent seat for India in the Council'<sup>14</sup> as stated in the ASP, is thus more than symbolic.

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nd\_Game'\_23032011185007.pdf. Accessed on 12 October 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Statement to the media by PM Manmohan Singh during visit of President Karzai, Speeches/Statements, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, (4 October 2011), <http://mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=530118346>. Accessed on 11 October 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Coming ahead of the Partnership agreements with US, UK, EU, France and others, India is the first to lead rather than being part of an orchestra thereby avoiding implications associated with such perceptions. Author's discussions with senior diplomats in New Delhi and Kabul, October 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, 'The Emerging Faultlines of the US-Afghan Strategic Partnership', ISAS Brief No. 210 (10 August 2011), [http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/ISAS\\_Brief\\_210\\_-\\_Email\\_-\\_The\\_Emerging\\_Faultlines\\_15082011115335.pdf](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/ISAS_Brief_210_-_Email_-_The_Emerging_Faultlines_15082011115335.pdf). Accessed on 20 October 2011. US seeks India-Afghan strategic partnership document like deal, Indian Express, New Delhi (13 October 2011).

<sup>13</sup> During author's discussions with Afghan government officials at the Foreign Ministry in Kabul in March and May 2011, it was brought to notice that Afghans were asking for such an agreement for a considerable time. Most of the requests by the Afghans or 'menu of options' were put forward during the Indian National Security Adviser's visit to Kabul in March 2011 were acceded to.

<sup>14</sup> 'Text of Agreement on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan', Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (4 October 2011), <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=100018343&pid=2339>. Accessed on 5 October 2011.

## Engaging or Isolating Pakistan?

The timing of the strategic partnership, coming at the heel of the killing of former President Burhanuddin Rabbani and the suspension of peace process with the Taliban thereafter and an all-time low in Afghan-Pakistan relations and the worsening of the US-Pakistan relations following the attack on the US embassy in Kabul, led many to conclude that the emerging India-Afghan alliance was directed at isolating Pakistan.<sup>15</sup> Mounting criticisms against Karzai government's inefficiency and corruption combined with the failure of reconciliation process led many to believe that by 'reaching out to India was about more than balancing against a relentlessly hostile Pakistan - it was also a safety valve for domestic pressure'.<sup>16</sup> President Karzai's visit to New Delhi and the signing of the ASP was seen as an 'act of desperation' by some, while others view it as his 'classic balancing act using a divide and rule tactic' be in domestic politics or regional power play.<sup>17</sup> Karzai's attempt to soft pedal his new strategic embrace with India by referring to India as 'a friend' to Afghanistan, Pakistan a 'twin brother'<sup>18</sup> led some to conclude that 'after signing the strategic agreement, Karzai was having second thoughts'.<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding such mixed signals, President Karzai's blowing hot and cold with Pakistan, including his recent statement in 'supporting Pakistan if it ever went to war with the United States',<sup>20</sup> can be best construed as Karzai's hedging strategy of accruing benefits of such defiance of the west and at the same time keeping an window of opportunity open for negotiations.

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<sup>15</sup> Jack Healy and Alissa J. Rubin, Afghanistan Favors India and Denigrates Pakistan, *The New York Times*, (4 October 2011), [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/05/world/asia/afghanistan-curries-favor-with-india-and-denigrates-pakistan.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/05/world/asia/afghanistan-curries-favor-with-india-and-denigrates-pakistan.html?_r=1). Accessed on 6 October 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Shashank Joshi, 'India's Strategic Calculus in Afghanistan', *The Af-Pak Channel*, Foreign Policy (6 October 2011), [http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/10/06/indias\\_strategic\\_calculus\\_in\\_afghanistan](http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/10/06/indias_strategic_calculus_in_afghanistan). Accessed on 10 October 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Some even foresee Karzai using the agreement as a pressure tactic to accrue similar benefits from Pakistan. Author's discussions with government officials, political leaders, intelligentsia and policymakers in Kabul and Kandahar in October 2011 demonstrated mixed reactions in terms of Karzai's motives. However, there was broad based support and expansion of India's continued role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

<sup>18</sup> Following the signing of the agreement, Afghan President Hamid Karzai said in a conference: 'The signing of the strategic partnership with India is not directed against any country. It is not directed against any other entity. This is for Afghanistan to benefit from the strength of India.' The Afghan President said, delivering the third R.K. Mishra memorial lecture organised by the Observer Research Foundation. Karzai salve on 'twin brother' Pak, *The Telegraph*, Calcutta, 6 October 2011, [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1111006/jsp/nation/story\\_14592975.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1111006/jsp/nation/story_14592975.jsp). Accessed on 7 October 2011. President Karzai, added, however, at engagement with Islamabad had 'unfortunately not yet received the result that we want'. 'Pakistan out twin brother, India a friend', *Hindustan Times* (5 October 2011). <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Pakistan-our-twin-brother-India-a-friend-Karzai/Article1-753826.aspx>. Accessed on 6 October 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Seema Mustafa: Afghanistan hates Pakistan today only to love it tomorrow, *Daily News and Analyses*, New Delhi, (10 October 2011), [http://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/column\\_seema-mustafa-afghanistan-hates-pakistan-today-only-to-love-it-tomorrow\\_1596900](http://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/column_seema-mustafa-afghanistan-hates-pakistan-today-only-to-love-it-tomorrow_1596900). Accessed on 11 October 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Though this was Karzai's rhetorical response to a hypothetical question, it has been seen as hedging, without little or no support from his domestic constituency. Ray Rivera And Sangar Rahimi, 'Afghan President Says His Country Would Back Pakistan in a Clash With the U.S.', *The New York Times*, (23 October 2011), <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/24/world/asia/karzai-says-afghanistan-would-back-pakistan-in-a-conflict-with-us.html>. Accessed on 23 October 2011.

While it is convenient to link the timing of the signing of the agreement with that of the worsening US-Pakistan and Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, what has missed the eye is that the agreement was long in the making to address the demands of the Afghans. The idea of such partnership was mooted following President Barack Obama's announcement of drawdown in December 2009. A series of high profile visits and deliberations since the visit of the Indian External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna in January 2011 had culminated in Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's May 2011 visit to Kabul where he had emphasised on India's commitment of engaging Afghanistan through a partnership agreement.<sup>21</sup> At the joint declaration between India and Afghanistan on that occasion, Prime Minister Singh had specifically mentioned, 'India and Afghanistan decided to establish a strategic partnership covering all areas of mutual interest. Based on mutual understanding and long-term trust in each other, this partnership envisages the elevation of their multi-faceted ties to a higher level, both in the bilateral field and international arena. The two sides decided to hold follow up discussions in the near future towards preparation of a strategic partnership document between the two countries.'<sup>22</sup> In an interview with Pakistan's Geo TV, Karzai categorically stated, 'Our relations with India, our signing of the strategic partnership with India, it did not happen at the spur of the moment. This is something that we have been working on for years now.'<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, potential presidential contender and former minister Ali Jalali, 'recognises the agreement as a document officialising the close ties that already exist between the two countries. It's good as a long overdue recognition of the strengthening of India-Afghan relations which if extended would be to the advantage of Pakistan.' He added that 'although the timing of the agreement could spark off perceptions that the pact was a reaction to the rising tension between Kabul and Islamabad following the assassination of the head of the Afghan High Peace Council, former President Burhanuddin Rabbani, by a Pakistani-linked Taliban suicide attacker, the strategic partnership document in fact was initialised months before the incident'.<sup>24</sup> During an October 2011 interview in Kabul, Shah Mahmood Miakhel, Afghan's former Deputy Minister of Interior, strongly supported the agreement as 'useful for reconstruction and stability of Afghanistan to prevent civil war or proxy war in Afghanistan'.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, 'The message from Kabul', *Business Standard* (14 May 2011), <http://www.business-standard.com/india/news/shanthie-mariet-dsouzamessagekabul/435511/>. Accessed on 15 May 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Joint Declaration between India and Afghanistan on the occasion of the visit of Prime Minister of India, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (12 May 2011), <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=100517624>. Accessed on 10 October 2011. Also see Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, 'The message from Kabul', *Business Standard* (14 May 2011), <http://www.business-standard.com/india/news/shanthie-mariet-dsouzamessagekabul/435511/>. Accessed on 12 October 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Would stand by Pakistan if it is attacked by India or US: Karzai, *Pakistan News 24*, <http://www.pakistannews24.com/2011/10/22/would-stand-by-pakistan-if-it-is-attacked-by-india-or-us-karzai/>. Accessed on 23 October 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Prof. Ali Jalali, Former Minister of Interior, Kabul, 6 October 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Shah Mahmood Miakhel, former Deputy Minister of Interior, Kabul, 3 October 2011.

In stark contrast, Pakistan's strategy of the use of proxies in regaining its 'strategic depth' and negotiating a favourable post-withdrawal in Kabul has met with a dead end. The systematic destabilising activities carried out from their sanctuaries have cost Pakistan the goodwill of the Afghans. Even in the traditional Pushtun heartland such anti-Pakistan sentiments have risen. Talks of direct military action to destroy sanctuaries and safe havens, repeated border incursions and shelling have raised the anger among the Afghans.<sup>26</sup> It would be important to note that compared to India's US\$2billion aid, Pakistan has invested US\$300million towards reconstruction and development of its war-ravaged neighbour.<sup>27</sup>

Further, it is misleading to construe that the agreement is directed at sidelining or isolating Pakistan. The talks of emergence of India-US-Afghan alliance directed against Pakistan, does not hold ground. Though India's development assistance has complemented the civilian component of international military's counter insurgency effort and Americans of late have sought India's help of working together on joint projects, India has refrained from such association for dangers of over identification, maintaining its independence as well as heeding to the sensitivities of neighbouring countries.<sup>28</sup> With the announcement of drawdown and withdrawal of international troops by 2014, many perceive India to step in to fill in the vacuum. It has led some to construe the agreement as a 'groundbreaking extension of the Kabul-New Delhi relations to defence seems to have received an approving nod from the White House. It is quietly pleased to see India step forward to fill the critical gaps that would arise in the wake of the pullback of the US-led Nato troops from Afghanistan in about three

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<sup>26</sup> Discussions with the locals in Kabul and Kandahar in October 2011 indicated anger with the Pakistani establishment for carrying out destabilising activities in their country. In addition to gathering opposition to President Karzai and his attempts at reconciliation, there is anger against the neighbouring country for the sanctuaries provided to the Taliban insurgency which have been able to carry out systematic elimination of key leaders. Any tilt by President Karzai towards Pakistan would not be viewed favourably even in the south, where many feel is the time for direct military action to eliminate the sanctuary. Also see, Tom A. Peter, Plot to assassinate Afghan President Karzai foiled, *The Christian Science Monitor*, (5 October 2011), <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2011/1005/Plot-to-assassinate-Afghan-President-Karzai-foiled>. Accessed on 6 October 2011.

<sup>27</sup> 'Donor Financial Review, Report 1388', Ministry of Finance, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, (November 2009), <http://www.undp.org.af/Publications/KeyDocuments/Donor'sFinancialReview%20ReportNov2009.pdf>. Accessed on 25 September 2010.

<sup>28</sup> The possibility of joint projects in the area of agriculture, education and women's empowerment has been explored since President Obama's visit to India in 2010, but nothing has materialised thus far. While USAID (United States Agency for International Development) wants to partner in the widely popular scholarship programme and work with women's groups, there are apprehensions among Indians regarding such association, which could lead to the projects being targeted or coming under suspicion in some regions. Women groups like SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Organisation) have preferred to work alone or in the framework of SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation). There are some individual and sectoral initiatives that have been taken by USAID organisations with Indian institutions on their own, without the involvement of the Indian government, like sending students to Indian agricultural universities at their own expenses. Author's interview with senior government officials and policymakers in Washington DC in May 2011 and New Delhi, October 2011. Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, Why Afghanistan could dominate talks with Obama, *Rediff* (4 November, 2010), <http://www.rediff.com/news/column/obama-visit-why-afghanistan-could-dominate-india-us-talks/20101103.htm>. Accessed on 5 November 2010. Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, India-US Strategic Dialogue: Can India and US be partners in Afghanistan?, *Al Arabiya* (19 July 2011), <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/07/19/158285.html>. Accessed on 20 July 2011.

years'<sup>29</sup>. Despite talks of partnering and outsourcing, Indian policymakers have avoided the pitfall of such associations. India's deliberate decision of not to put boots on ground indicates a different view in New Delhi.

With Afghanistan emerging as a potential theatre of rivalry, India signalled that it was ready to discuss the larger Afghan situation with Islamabad during foreign secretary-level talks. During the 1980s, the two sides discussed Afghanistan regularly. On umpteen forums it has been clarified that both India and Afghanistan are willing to accommodate Pakistan's genuine interests. The ASP itself notes that it is not directed against any country and group of countries. In spite of the criticisms the Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs has issued of the strategic pact, it remains to be seen if the country will see reason in adopting a mature and rational Afghan policy.<sup>30</sup> As succinctly put by an Afghan political leader in Kandahar: 'If Pakistan has to compete with India in gaining the goodwill among the Afghans, it has to be on the plank of reconstruction and development, and not acts of subversion and selective assassinations or providing sanctuaries.'<sup>31</sup> The ASP by emphasising on regional economic cooperation has provided the platform for such constructive regional cooperation.

### **Engagement Beyond 2014?**

While India's aid-only policy in Afghanistan has been criticised as piggy backing on the international military efforts, it has generated intense domestic debate; given the vulnerabilities its projects and personnel face in Afghanistan. The ASP, thus, silences the critics as it marks the consolidation of gains made by India through its soft power approach and in a way can be seen as an expansion of India's role to secure its primary national security interests. It's a classic case whereby gains accrued through soft power approach have translated into long-term gains. A strong, stable and democratic Afghanistan would reduce the dangers of the return of extremist forces to the seats of power and the consequent violence and terrorism destabilising the region.<sup>32</sup> The ASP is an attempt to extend and expand on the institutional framework for future cooperation in the fields of political and security cooperation, trade and economic cooperation, capacity building and education, social, cultural, civil society and people-to-people relations even beyond 2014.

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<sup>29</sup> Dilip Hiro, Slippery road ahead, *The Times of India*, New Delhi, (14 Oct 2011), [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-10-14/edit-page/30275812\\_1\\_afghanistan-and-pakistan-taliban-hamid-karzai](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-10-14/edit-page/30275812_1_afghanistan-and-pakistan-taliban-hamid-karzai). Accessed on 16 October 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Sajjad Ashraf, India-Afghanistan Strategic Agreement: Opportunity for Peace and for Pakistan, ISAS Brief, No.218 (18 October 2011).

<sup>31</sup> Interview with senior Minister and political leader (on the condition of anonymity), Kandahar, 5 October 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Contrary to views that New Delhi opposes the return of the Taliban, an interesting caveat is New Delhi's supports the reintegration and reconciliation of Taliban commanders and fighters in an Afghan led process.



## Security Sector

India's decision to expand the training of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSFs), particularly Afghan National Police (ANP) is significant in building local capacities in providing security to the country. Even with an inflated Afghan army, by all means an economically unsustainable project, a capable police force is essential to protecting local communities and building confidence. Afghanistan has repeatedly requested for trainers, equipment and capacity building among its police force.<sup>33</sup> In the south, there are requests for India's assistance in training Special Forces, techniques of community policing, developing field kits and police sensitisation programmes.<sup>34</sup> The ASP, which paves way for the training of Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) will yield long-term institutional benefits and influence in terms of information sharing, capacity building and support functions.<sup>35</sup>

## Political Sector

India is indeed looking beyond merely engaging the present political dispensation or indulging one ethnic or political grouping. The ASP, thus, would ensure continuity of India's initiatives by making them free from personal choices, orientations, whims and fancies of future leaders or prevailing regional security environment. Continued engagement in Afghanistan is bound to develop a range of stakeholders in that country, preventing a complete reversal of gains made by India. Moreover, the agreement has provided a much needed institutional mechanism in terms of 'regular foreign office consultations and strategic dialogue'<sup>36</sup> to sustain the process beyond 2014.

## Trade and Economic Development

Through the ASP, India and Afghanistan have committed 'to deepening and diversifying cooperation in sectors such as agriculture, rural development, mining, industry, energy, information technology, communications, transport, including civil aviation.' The agreement is a reiteration of India's commitment to Afghanistan's economic progress and its development as a land bridge between South Asia and Central Asia. Significantly, two MoUs (Memorandums of Understanding) were also signed for the development of minerals and

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<sup>33</sup> Discussion with Sediq Sediqqi, Spokesman, Director of Communication, Ministry of Interior Affairs, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Kabul, 8 October 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with General Abdul Raziq Achikzai, chief of police in Kandahar province, Kandhar, 5 October 2011.

<sup>35</sup> The training would be incremental depending on the needs on the ground. Indian Air Force will increase the numbers and trainings would be focused towards support services, leadership, aviation medicine and visit by some senior Afghan officers to expose them to aviation culture, which was almost non-existent here for last 20 to 30 years. Supply of non-lethal equipment is likely to continue along with defensive and support equipment. In the past, India gifted aircraft refuelling bowsers - similarly gifting of some more vehicle, clothing are in the pipeline.

<sup>36</sup> 'Text of Agreement on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan', Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (4 October 2011), <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=100018343&pid=2339>. Accessed on 5 October 2011.

natural gas in Afghanistan, which is said to hold mineral deposits worth US\$1 trillion. A consortium led by state-run Steel Authority of India (SAIL) could invest up to US\$6 billion in Hajigak mines in Bamiyan province, potentially being the single biggest foreign investment.<sup>37</sup> The interest in gas and mineral exploitation as indicated by the neo-liberal thinking in India far surpasses the narrow realist interpretation of a zero sum game with Pakistan.

India is working towards building Afghanistan as a transit country, in terms of economic integration of South Asia and Central Asia. One way out of the present conundrum is to involve Pakistan in a regional cooperative framework, prodding it to give up its restrictive trade and transit agreements by highlighting the benefits that will flow into its economy. The existing mechanisms under SAARC would be useful in this context. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline could be another such useful cooperative venture. The emphasis on 'regional economic cooperation' in the ASP indicates India's vision of binding the countries in the region through a mutually beneficial cooperative framework which would be a win-win situation for the countries of the region.

### Capacity Building and Education

The capacity building and educational initiatives included in the agreement are signs of India's commitment to invest in the future leadership of the country, which is in sync with India's long-term vision of helping to build a stable democratic Afghanistan. The agreement reads: 'In response to Afghanistan's need to strengthen its administration and governance at national and sub-national levels, India offers its experience of governance at the national, state, district and local body levels, and technical assistance in setting up a permanent, career-based civil service suitable for Afghan realities.'<sup>38</sup> India's efforts to accommodate Afghans in its educational institutions, facilitating entry, financial and local support, language training, and good mentoring services could enable a whole generation of Afghans to acquire skills and professional qualifications in Indian institutions, thereby building lasting bonds and intellectual connectivity between the people of the two countries.

### Social, Cultural, Civil Society & People-To-People Relations

As a part of cultural diplomacy, Indian musicians have been training young Afghans in musical instruments like *tabla* and *sitar*. Such joint musical performances have been occurring both in Kabul and places like Jalalabad, cementing the cultural ties and historical

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<sup>37</sup> Sanjeev Miglani, 'Indian firms eye huge mining investment in Afghanistan', *Reuters* (14 September 2011), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/09/14/afghanistan-india-idUSL3E7KB02A20110914?feedType=RSS&feedName=everything&virtualBrandChannel=11563>. Accessed on 11 October 2011.

<sup>38</sup> 'Text of Agreement on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan', Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (4 October 2011), <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=100018343&pid=2339>. Accessed on 5 October 2011.

traditions of the region.<sup>39</sup> India has actively provided assistance to women's groups through self-employment schemes, health and capacity building, not only in Kabul, but also in the western province in Herat. Being long-term stakeholders in the rebuilding of the social and economic fabric of the war-ravaged society, this mode of aid delivery has proved to be effective in sustaining and even expanding such programmes. Training and exchanges in Islamic studies, particularly Islamic jurisprudence, would be vital in the task of fortifying Afghanistan with its Hanafi tradition from being overwhelmed by Wahhabism.<sup>40</sup> Sports like cricket and football are likely to get an upward push with India sending teams for the Subroto Cup Football Tournament in November 2011.

The ASP by no means is a routine friendship agreement. For the slim page document, it has set the roadmap for future engagement in crucial sectors not only for Afghanistan but also for the region. The ASP has provided a much needed institutional mechanism to sustain the process beyond the cut-off year for the drawdown of international forces, without being subjected by the vagaries of political dispensation in Kabul or the prevailing regional security environment. More importantly, the agreement has set the stage for other neighbouring countries to benefit from greater regional economic integration, investment, trade and transit. It is upon the neighbouring countries to seize this opportune moment, which would help South Asia move from narrow zero sum game and unending cycle of conflict to a win-win situation for the entire region.

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<sup>39</sup> Author's interview with Gul Agha Sherzai, Governor of Nangarhar province, and interactions with locals at the India-Afghan musical concert, (Jalalabad, 12 October 2010).

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Rangina Hamidi, women entrepreneur and daughter of the slain mayor of Kandahar, Hamidi, Kandahar, 4 October 2011.