

US and India discuss joint strategy against Afghanistan's Taliban regime

Keith Jones

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Indian and US government officials held high-level talks in Washington earlier this month focusing on their countries' common interest in opposing Afghanistan's Taliban regime. Over two days, India's Joint Secretary for the Americas, Alok Prasad, and Joint Secretary for Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, Vivek Katju, met with senior State Department, National Security Council and Pentagon officials, including President Clinton's Deputy National Security Advisor, John Steinberg.

These talks represent a new level of US-Indian diplomatic cooperation. They underscore that Washington and New Delhi intend to use the recent convergence of their interests in opposing the Pakistani-organized incursion into the Kargil-Dass-Batalik of Indian-held Kashmir to kick-start efforts at developing a new strategic partnership.

Indian and US officials have frequently discussed Afghanistan, but, according to an Indian newspaper account, they have never before held such “long, intensive discussions on Afghan developments and their implications for the region and beyond.”

At the conclusion of the talks, Alok Prasad said he expected the Indo-US dialog over Afghanistan to continue. “We have not worked out the exact details of how this is going to be done, but we expect to have continuing consultations on this aspect [of Indo-US relations].”

Just before the Indian delegation left for Washington, Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh told a media briefing India will now pursue a “pro-active” policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan. Declaring that India has vital interests in Afghanistan, Singh said the days of India's “supine acceptance” of developments in Afghanistan were over.

Both the US and India recently imposed sanctions against Afghanistan, whose Taliban regime has been

officially recognized by just three states, although it has held power since the end of 1996. Moreover, US and Indian diplomats are expected to work together at the coming session of the United Nations to press for further international action against the Taliban, citing its support for “terrorism” and drug trafficking and its human rights record.

The US is demanding that the Taliban hand over Osama bin Laden, whom it accuses of masterminding last year's bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and cease its support for Islamic fundamentalist groups active beyond Afghanistan's borders. Washington has also protested against the Taliban's treatment of women.

In the past, the US has been more than ready to turn a blind eye to the repression of women by Afghani religious and tribal leaders. It armed, financed and provided logistical support to the Islamic fundamentalist opposition to the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan out of which the Taliban ultimately emerged.

Washington's growing opposition to the Taliban is rooted in the calculation that it and similar Islamic fundamentalist groups in the region constitute an obstacle to US plans to gain control of the oil and natural gas reserves of the Central Asian republics of the former USSR.

That Pakistan enjoys close relations with the current Kabul regime—many observers see the current Taliban regime as largely a Pakistani creation—is unquestionably a major factor in the growing chill in Pakistani-US relations. There have been suggestions that Islamabad's ultimate objective in supporting the Taliban is to ensure that a Central Asian oil pipeline passes through Afghanistan to the Pakistani port of Karachi.

India accuses the Taliban of supporting the secessionist agitation in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir and of supplying many of the guerrilla fighters who took part in the Kargil-Dass-Batalik incursion. It is likely that the Taliban regime or at least former Taliban fighters were involved in the fighting in Kargil.

At the same time, India has every interest in linking its arch-enemy Pakistan to the Taliban. Speaking September 1, Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh charged that Afghanistan was the hub of global terrorism. He claimed India had evidence that Osama bin Laden was involved in the Kargil incursion—evidence “we will reveal at an appropriate time.”

The US and India have historically taken radically opposed stances on events in Afghanistan. India, which was bound to the USSR through various “friendship treaties,” publicly defended the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and continued to support Najibullah as Afghani president following the Soviet pullout in 1989. Explained one Indian journalist, “Afghan developments in the 1980s and 1990s deepened the strategic dissonance between India and the US. But now for the first time in 20 years, New Delhi and Washington find themselves singing from the same sheet of music on Afghanistan.”

Opposition to the Taliban and the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia are important examples of what an Indian Foreign Office spokesman has described as New Delhi's and Washington's increasing “overlapping interests.” Another reason the US is anxious to improve relations with New Delhi is that it views India, which is only now being fully opened to foreign investment, as a potentially lucrative market and source of cheap labor. The US also looks to India as a possible counterweight to China's growing economic and geopolitical influence in Asia.

A US-Indian strategic partnership has yet to be consummated. Plans for a visit to India by Clinton, which have repeatedly been put off, are on again, with the US president now expected to go to New Delhi early next year. But too warm a US embrace of India could destabilize the subcontinent, by encouraging the Indians to court confrontation with Pakistan or contributing to the collapse of Pakistan's Muslim League regime.

Although Washington is far from pleased by

Pakistan's recent meddling in Afghan affairs, this meddling was actively encouraged by the US during the Cold War. Moreover, US strategists are keenly aware that the Pakistani state, which is already all but technically bankrupt, could collapse under the weight of a myriad of communal and national-ethnic antagonisms.

Nonetheless, the US tilt toward India in the recent conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir represents a new era in geopolitical relations in Asia. Last week, the US State Department joined India in rejecting a Pakistani call for the United Nations to implement earlier resolutions urging a popular referendum on Kashmir's status. Said US State Department spokesman James Rubin, “I just urge you to not get trapped into facile analogies that don't apply. Kashmir is not East Timor.”

The Indian government's new engagement with Afghanistan and Central Asia has widespread support in the country's political elite. The *Hindu*, a liberal daily opposed to India's current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition, recently applauded what it termed New Delhi's new “pro-active policy towards Central and South Central Asia.” The lead editorial in the September 10 *Hindu* declared: “The Washington review should help narrow the gap in the perceptions of India and the US, bringing the American viewpoint closer to India's for the first time in decades and laying the ground for coordination in the effort to stamp out the common menace posed by the rise of the Taliban.”



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