

Indian prime minister cements relations with Afghanistan's puppet regime

Deepal Jayasekera, Kranti Kumara
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Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made a two-day official visit to Afghanistan in late August as part of an aggressive attempt by the Indian ruling elite to realise their strategic ambitions in south and central Asia. These ambitions include containing traditional rival Pakistan and using Afghanistan as a “land-bridge” to the oil reserves and markets of the former central Asian republics of the Soviet Union.

Arriving in Kabul on August 28, the Indian Prime Minister expressed unreserved support for the US-installed puppet government of Hamid Karzai, stating that “the emergence of a moderate, democratic and prosperous Afghanistan is essential for peace and stability in the region as a whole.”

After a two-hour discussion in Kabul, Singh and Karzai agreed to raise Indo-Afghan relations to a “new stage of partnership.” In the presence of Indian and Afghan officials, they signed three new accords on education, healthcare and agricultural research.

They also issued a joint statement condemning global terrorism as a threat to democracy and declared that “there can be no compromise with those who resort to terrorism.” This statement was clearly aimed at the Taliban and other forces that have mounted armed resistance to the US military occupation of Afghanistan. It also dovetails with Indian characterisations of the Pakistani-supported insurgency in Indian-controlled Kashmir.

Karzai expressed his wish for Afghanistan to join the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) so as to foster Afghanistan's economic integration with South Asia. The Indian elite has increasingly identified SAARC as pivotal to extending its economic and political influence across the subcontinent, and hopes to make an economically integrated subcontinent a springboard for its drive for world-power status.

Both the current Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government and the previous Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) governments have expended a great deal of energy seeking influence in Afghanistan. Since 2002, Indian governments have spent around US\$500 million dollars—a considerable sum for an impoverished country like India—towards high-visibility building projects such as roads, hospitals and schools, with the hope that such expenditures will garner them the good will of

the impoverished Afghan masses and influence in Kabul.

India is providing training to Afghan diplomats, and its military and police forces, and to Afghan engineers and doctors. It also has gifted three Airbus planes along with spare parts and training to the fledging Afghan airlines, Ariana, and has signed a civil aviation agreement that provides for direct flights from two cities in India to Kabul and for Indian training of Afghan airport personnel, air traffic controllers and aircraft maintenance technicians.

During his visit, Manmohan Singh announced a further US\$50 million dollars in aid and took part in a stone-laying ceremony for a new parliament building that is being built by Indian companies and architects.

Despite the illegitimate character of the Karzai regime, the Indian government has feted Karzai ever since he was first installed by the US as the interim head of the Afghan government following the overthrow of the Taliban in December 2001.

The Indian ruling elite has long sought influence in Afghanistan, especially in competition with Pakistan. In keeping with its Cold War military-defence alliance with the Soviet Union, New Delhi supported the various Moscow-backed regimes in Kabul from the late 1970s through the 1992 downfall of Najibullah to US- and Pakistani-sponsored Islamic militia. In the power struggle that ensued, India favoured the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance, but in 1996, the Pakistan-backed Taliban routed the Northern Alliance and other rival militias and took power.

The close relations between Islamabad and the Taliban regime greatly vexed New Delhi. The Pakistani elite boasted that Afghanistan gave it “strategic depth” in any future conflict with India and the Taliban regime lent support to anti-Indian Islamacist groups in Kashmir.

Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, India's coalition government, then led by the Hindu-supremacist BJP, rallied to support the US invasion of Afghanistan. The Indian elite viewed this support as a means of cementing the new partnership it had developed with Washington following the collapse of the USSR and its own repudiation of the national economic development strategy it had pursued since India became independent in 1947.

Current Indian activities in Afghanistan continue to complement US goals. The Indian Prime Minister's visit coincided with preparations for a further stage-managed election to pick a parliament in the face of mounting armed opposition. Expressing Washington's gratitude for New Delhi's support for the Karzai regime, the US Ambassador to India, David Mullford, said that the Bush administration was appreciative of the efforts the Indian government had taken in combating "terrorism" and to help Afghanistan.

It would be a mistake, however, to believe this confluence of interests will necessarily continue indefinitely. One reason the Indian elite has been so anxious to involve itself in Afghanistan is because it wants to limit the extension of US geo-political and military influence into what it perceives as its backyard.

Another important consideration for New Delhi is the important influence Pakistan continues to wield in Afghanistan. Although Pakistan had patronised the Taliban regime, the US, as part of the arrangements under which Islamabad repudiated its support for the Taliban and assisted in the US conquest of Afghanistan, agreed that Islamabad should continue to have a significant say in the affairs of its northern neighbour.

While currying favour with Washington and countering Islamabad clearly are important factors behind New Delhi's Afghan policy, India's scramble for oil, markets, and influence in the former oil republics of Central Asia and in the Middle East are at least as pivotal.

Afghanistan is very strategically situated: Iran lies to its west, Pakistan on the east and south, and the central Asian republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to the north. With control of Afghanistan comes control of the land routes between the Indian subcontinent and resource-rich central Asia, as well as of a potential corridor to Iran and the Middle East.

India is heavily dependent on foreign oil and has identified increasing and diversifying its sources of energy as pivotal to its economic development. Of the 2.4 billion barrels of oil India consumed in 2003, 1.4 billion barrels were imported.

In pursuit of these goals, the Indian ruling elite attaches great strategic importance to Afghanistan, ascribing to it the role of a "land-bridge" between South Asia and Central Asia and possibly to Iran as well.

India's attendance at the July meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), an alliance of China, Russia and the newly independent Central Asian republics, further highlights New Delhi's ambitions in the region. New Delhi maintains close economic, political and military ties with several central Asian countries and has built a military base in Farkhor, Tajikistan, close to the Afghan border.

India has expressed great interest in proposed natural gas pipelines in the region, including one from Turkmenistan to India through Afghanistan and Pakistan and another from Iran through Pakistan.

When asked during a joint press conference with Hamid Karzai, as to which gas line he would prefer, the Indian Prime

Minister said, "We need both the pipelines—Iran-Pakistan-India and pipeline from Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India. India's needs for commercial energy are increasing at an explosive rate."

Neither one of the pipelines may come to fruition, however. The Bush administration adamantly opposes the gas pipeline from Iran because of its hostility to the Iranian government; the pipeline from Turkmenistan cannot be built and used without political stability in Afghanistan.

The Indian government also wants to boost trade and investment in Afghanistan, as well as in Iran and Central Asia. However, Indian exports to Afghanistan and beyond face a serious obstacle as Pakistan bars the transit of Indian goods through its territory. By contrast, Pakistan does not restrict the transit of Afghan goods to India.

The Pakistan embargo on the transit of Indian goods, means Indian goods have to be transported by sea to Iran before they can reach the Middle East or Central Asia.

The Indian government has complained bitterly that its efforts to help "rebuild" Afghanistan are being hampered by Pakistan and has called upon the Musharraf regime to reconsider this restriction. But Pakistan has rejected India's request, linking the issue to progress in their peace negotiations, and especially the dispute over Kashmir.

While eager to enlist New Delhi's support to prop up his unstable regime, Karzai is well aware that he cannot afford to antagonise Pakistan. The Afghan president acknowledged the centrality of the relations between New Delhi and Islamabad for his country when he told journalists in Kabul that "Afghanistan is directly affected by the India-Pakistan peace process and I believe that it is the destiny of the people of the region that there is peace and prosperity."

Karzai's hopes notwithstanding, New Delhi's attempt to forge stronger economic and political ties with Afghanistan may well lead to increased rivalry and tensions in the region rather than "peace." Not only is there the continuing rivalry between India and Pakistan for influence in Afghanistan, but also the scramble of India and China for Central Asian energy resources, and above all the push by the United States to gain a strategic stranglehold over the world's oil resources through the projection of its military and geo-political power across Central Asia and the Middle East.



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