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## India's Tripartite Plan for Afghanistan

By Shanthie Mariet D'Souza

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### Delhi is drawing closer to Iran and Russia in anticipation of a U.S. troop drawdown

While the United States seeks to revamp its Afghanistan strategy, India, too, is reassessing its approach to the war-torn country. Its vision, a kind of regional "concert of powers" with Russia and Iran, would not only protect India's interests in Afghanistan in the short term but could help stabilize the country in the long term after U.S. troops leave.

New Delhi is concerned about the ramifications of that possible U.S. troop drawdown, announced by President Barack Obama last year. That decision accelerated the Afghan government's efforts to reconcile with the Taliban and America's hurry to hand over responsibility for running the country to the Hamid Karzai administration. India worries that Washington is moving too fast and leaving the door open for Pakistan to increase its influence in the country.

The latter is a real concern. The Pakistani military appears to have convinced Mr. Karzai that it holds the key to reconciliation with the Taliban. This is an easy argument to make, given Islamabad's intelligence services funded the Taliban in the group's early days. Foreign and local Indian media reported in June that Islamabad has facilitated meetings between Mr. Karzai and Taliban factional leader Sirajuddin Haqqani in Kabul. Both countries signed a series of pacts seeking enhanced political, strategic and trade cooperation last month.

In response, India is hedging its bets by drawing closer to Russia and Iran, both of which broadly share Delhi's antipathy toward the Taliban. Moscow in particular harbors no love for the Taliban, given its own experience in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and believes that an extremist-led Afghan government would pose significant risks not only to Russia's underbelly in Central Asia but to the larger South Asian region. Last week, Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao visited Moscow to discuss, among other things, ways the two countries could cooperate on Afghanistan.

Delhi is warming ties with Tehran, too, despite voting with the U.S. against Iran's nuclear program development last year. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Ali Fathollahi visited India for three days last week to discuss a wide range of issues, including coordinated efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. This was the second ministerial visit from Iran to India in less than a month and follows a July 9 meeting at which both countries discussed ways to expedite the development and expansion of the Chabahar port in Iran, which could facilitate India's trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia—and bypass Pakistan.

At the moment it's tough to discern what the details of this tripartite cooperation might look like. The overarching goal is to prevent the return of the Taliban to any position of influence in Afghanistan. India would of course welcome any initiative to inhibit the political legitimization of the Taliban and, by extension, Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. One example is the Indian government's construction of the Zaranj Delaram road, which connects landlocked Afghanistan to Central Asia and Iran, reducing the country's dependence on Pakistan for trade.

India's vision shouldn't be surprising. The country has historically been allied with Iran and Russia, so in some respects Delhi is simply reverting to form. But since the Clinton administration, India has drawn closer to the U.S., both economically and militarily, as a response to the rise of China. Given the Obama administration's strained relationship with Russia and Iran, Delhi will have to proceed cautiously to avoid a rift with its U.S. partner.

This isn't an impossible mission. Even Washington must agree that in the long run, Afghanistan will be better off if all of its neighbors have a stake in the country's stability. When President Obama visits Delhi in November, India should present its roadmap for how it can contribute to this vision, either as a direct participant or as a bridge between the U.S., Russia and Iran.

For years, India pursued a "soft power" approach to Afghanistan that focused on economic aid and development. Its reinvigorated regional diplomacy shows how its role in the region is changing. Unlike in the past, India is a key power that needs to be involved, consulted and heard in discussions on Afghanistan. Washington should take note.

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