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Coming Nuclear Flashpoint

By Michael Scheuer

August 30, 2010

India's role in Afghanistan is hailed as a triumph of soft power. In fact, it has simply made conflict with Pakistan more likely.

If the West has had any success in Afghanistan, it has been in encouraging India to make a massive investment there of economic aid, infrastructure projects and national prestige. New Delhi is the largest regional investor in the country, and ranks second among all donors. With the West's looming defeat in Afghanistan, however, India's success will prove Pyrrhic, and may well set the stage for another, perhaps nuclear, confrontation between Pakistan and India.

In their usual ahistorical manner, Washington and its NATO allies believed their 2001 occupation of the major Afghan cities signified not only the complete defeat of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, but also an erasure of two millennia of Afghan history and religion that afforded an opportunity to start the country anew. In this context, they looked for other countries to share the enormous cost of nation-building, and India stepped up to the task without having to be asked twice.

And what has India been up to? Mostly infrastructure projects, such as a 250-kilometre highway from Zaranj near the Iran-Afghanistan border to the town of Delaram on the road that connects Kabul, Kandahar and Herat. Indian firms and Indian-government funding are also rebuilding the Salma Dam power project in Herat Province; building the

new Afghan parliament house in Kabul; and constructing a power line that will use 600 transmission towers to bring electricity from Uzbekistan, over the Hindu Kush, to Pol-i-Khumri, and thence to Kabul. These and other projects now employ up to 4000 Indian nationals in Afghanistan. In addition, Indian firms are investing in Afghan agriculture and mining, and New Delhi is providing student scholarships, medical aid programs and training for Afghan police and civil servants.

Clearly, Afghanistan's battered infrastructure needs this help and much more. Like all foreign aid, however, India's aid has come with accompaniments the Hamid Karzai regime fully accepts, but which tend to drive Pakistan's government—and especially its general officers—to distraction and deep strategic worry. New Delhi, for example, has built one of its biggest embassies in the world in Kabul, and with it has built four consulates—some media reports say as many as seven—two of which, in Jalalabad and Kandahar, face Afghanistan's border with Pakistan. In addition, New Delhi has deployed nearly 500 men from the Indian Army's Border Roads Organization to assist in highway construction, and as many or more paramilitary soldiers from its Indo-Tibetan Police force to guard Indian diplomatic facilities and construction projects.

Why should the Pakistanis be worried? Well, you must first accept that you've not experienced severe and durable paranoia until you've experienced that of Pakistani officials and generals toward India, and vice versa. Indeed, in the midst of a nearly decade-long war in Afghanistan and a 5-year-old civil war in the country's tribal agencies, Pew Research reported in July 2010 that its polling found 53 percent of Pakistanis view India as their number one enemy, with 27 percent naming the Taliban and 3 percent al-Qaeda. With this mindset, then, the Pakistani government and military believe that India's expensive, extensive and growing Afghan presence is a direct and even existential strategic threat to their country.

In their one-sided confrontation with India's overwhelming military power, Pakistan's political leaders and generals have long prized Afghan territory as an area where Pakistani forces can retreat and regroup if India invades from the east. This idea has long been ridiculed by Western strategists, but it's a central tenet of Pakistan's strategic doctrine. And now, in less than a decade, this area of limitless strategic depth has been transformed into a second military frontier with India, one that puts Pakistan in a strategic vice with Indian forces on each side.

The seriousness with which Islamabad views this issue is seen in the fact that, per the media, up to 30 percent of Pakistan's ground forces are now stationed on the country's western border. This redeployment degrades the country's strength on its border with India and has been made to fight what Islamabad believes are rebellious, India-supported militants in its tribal agencies and Balochistan Province.

Pakistan's military considers India's embassy and consulates as intelligence centres that are running covert operations into Pakistan's Pashtun agencies and—with the help of Indian army engineers and border police—are training, arming, funding and picking targets for Balochistan's tribal insurgents in their low-level war against Islamabad. (NB:

It's likely that Islamabad is even now responding to its perception of India's intervention by stepping up the tempo of the Kashmir insurgency.)

Pakistani generals also worry that India's growing and deliberately flamboyant military ties with Israel—that the Pakistani media call the 'Indo-Israeli nexus'—means the two countries are working together to neutralize Pakistan's nuclear capability, and will use Afghanistan as a base from which to do so. 'We have strong evidence,' a Pakistani foreign ministry official said in March, 2010, '[that India] is using Afghanistan against Pakistan's interests and do destabilize Pakistan.' Now none of this need be true, of course. But it clearly is how the Pakistanis perceive the intent of India's presence in Afghanistan. And perception is always reality.

Pakistan's perception has been encouraged—perhaps unwisely—by Indian officials and pundits. Granting that there's Good Samaritan-ism in India's activities in Afghanistan, New Delhi is far from blind to the strategic advantages accruing from its Afghan involvement. Indeed, the advantages are continuously outlined in the Indian media. The Zaranj-Delaram road mentioned above, for example, has been identified as a means to hurt Pakistan's economy by giving Afghan exports access to the sea through Iran without transiting Pakistani territory and ports.

Indian officials also have talked of their intention to use Afghanistan as a springboard for exploiting economic opportunities and accessing energy resources in Central Asia. Military-oriented Indian publications like the *Indian Defense Review*, moreover, haven't been shy about crowing over how the growing Indian presence in Afghanistan is making the Pakistan Army more 'worried with each passing day [that] its so-called strategic depth is becoming shallower by the minute.'

All this sets the stage for tragedy, even though Western and Indian commentators are trumpeting India's performance in Afghanistan as the triumph of 'soft power' over military operations. This is nonsense. The success of India's soft power has depended utterly on the presence of 100,000-plus US-NATO bayonets, and even those haven't been enough to stop lethal attacks on Indian military personnel, construction crews and New Delhi's embassy in Kabul.

A good deal of the Indian media portrays India's activities in Afghanistan as successfully winning Afghan hearts and minds and building a long-term welcome for India. This is unlikely. If the Afghans have little materially, they do possess a prodigious historical memory and recall that India fully backed the murderous Soviet occupation (1979-1989) and then the Afghan communist regime until it fell in April 1992. This knowledge will be especially fresh among all mujahedin who fought the Soviets—and believed Indian pilots flew combat missions against them—but most intense among the Taliban-led Afghan Pashtuns whose war against Ahmed Shah Masood and his Northern Alliance was prolonged and made more costly by generous Indian aid to Masood. The idea that India's money-backed soft power is enough to negate such recollections and the vengefulness they fuel could only be believed by those trained at Harvard.

The real rub, of course, will come when NATO withdraws in defeat and leaves India high and dry in a country that dislikes foreigners, and especially non-Muslim polytheists like the Indians.

When NATO goes, India's personnel and interests will face attack by Afghan mujahedin, Pakistan-backed Islamist militants and probably Pakistani Special Forces. To repeat, Pakistan can't strategically tolerate a growing and solidifying Indian presence in Afghanistan and will risk war to end it. New Delhi will then face the excruciating decision all nations rightfully dread—'How best to save face?' Will New Delhi decide to deploy large numbers of troops to protect its nationals and investments by defeating the fresh-from-victory Taliban and its allies, among whom will be Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the other Gulf states? Or will it decide not to throw good money and lives after bad and draw down its presence to a Kabul embassy, if the Taliban will permit one?

At that point, cool heads in New Delhi probably will see that India's rapid move into Afghanistan was based on the wrong but understandable conclusion that Washington meant to defeat its 9/11 attackers. Undone by US-NATO fecklessness, they will also see that what once was a glittering economic and diplomatic opportunity has been transformed into a potentially war-causing question of national honor, willpower and prestige.

If India leaves Afghanistan, there's no way to avoid having the Taliban, Pakistan and all the Muslim world perceive the common-sense Indian departure as anything but a victory for Islam over Allah's polytheist enemies. Unavoidably, India's Afghan withdrawal will be seen as a triumph for Pakistan that restores its strategic depth; as an act that puts a huge dent in New Delhi's oft-stated ambition to be a regional superpower; as a signal to India's growing Islamist militant movement and its foreign backers that Hindu power is not invincible; and, by Beijing, as a sign of India's lack of resolve at a time of rising Indo-Chinese tensions.

It's nice to think that when this no-win situation becomes clear, New Delhi and its generals will have the thick-skin and toughness to decide the Afghan game is not worth the candle. (And that their counterparts in Islamabad are adult enough to forego public gloating.) For New Delhi, realism dictates that a major military effort in Afghanistan is not sustainable, and that it isn't worth introducing the massive Indian force needed to try to protect India's Afghan investment only to fail and perhaps set in motion events that could potentially lead to a nuclear confrontation with Pakistan.

Sadly, few governments in history have ever had the courage to get out of quagmires while the going was good. The US surged in Iraq and Afghanistan and still lost both wars, for example, and Russia is now losing its second war in the North Caucasus. At day's end, the need of both New Delhi and Islamabad to save face and protect their strategic interests may well lead to the brink of a nuclear disaster over Afghanistan, which, to paraphrase Bismarck, probably isn't worth the bones of one Indian grenadier.