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## Afghanistan-India pact doesn't concern just Pakistanis; Afghans wonder, too

By SHASHANK BENGALI  
10/26/2011

The wide-ranging "strategic partnership" that Afghanistan signed with India this month would seem only logical: South Asia's economic heavyweight cementing its long-standing political, cultural and trade ties with the region's neediest nation.

But this is Afghanistan, and nothing is that simple.

The deal, which included Indian training of Afghan security forces, immediately angered neighboring Pakistan, India's blood enemy. But many Afghans also were left concerned, wondering whether Afghan President Hamid Karzai, in agreeing to the accord, wasn't merely provoking Pakistan - the country with which Afghanistan shares its longest border, the source of some 80 percent of Afghan consumer goods, the main supply line for U.S.-led NATO forces and the linchpin of efforts to negotiate peace with the Taliban and other Afghan insurgents.

Fears about the India-Afghanistan agreement illustrate the challenges facing Afghanistan and the United States as they seek to end a decade-long war and enlist other countries in the region to help shoulder the burden of Afghan reconstruction and security.

Landlocked not just by Pakistan but also Iran, China and three former Soviet republics, seemingly every diplomatic move carries major potential costs for Afghanistan and the Obama administration, which is drawing down U.S. troops in the hope of ceding full responsibility for security to Afghan forces by 2014.

In a sign of the administration's growing outreach to regional players, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's trip through the region last week included stops in two of the ex-Soviet republics, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

To some Afghan analysts and former officials, Karzai's pact with India, while a good idea on paper, is freighted with risk.

"Afghanistan should not be part of the regional competition between India and Pakistan, the United States and Iran," said Ahmad Saeedi, a former Afghan diplomat in both India and Pakistan. "But after signing this agreement, we've become part of the game. ... The contents are very important and very significant. But it is definitely going to create some problems."

Indian officials say the deal formalizes an increasingly close relationship under which India has contributed \$2 billion in aid to Afghanistan over the past decade, mostly for infrastructure projects such as roads, a hydroelectric dam and a new parliament building. The bond annoys Pakistan, particularly when India, which has been the target of several deadly insurgent attacks in Afghanistan, sent paramilitary forces to guard Indian construction workers.

For India, the stakes are huge. It doesn't want Afghanistan to revert to a haven for Muslim extremists who would target Kashmir, the border region disputed by India and Pakistan. As a fast-growing economy, India's also hungry for access via Afghanistan to the vast natural gas reserves of Central Asia.

And experts say New Delhi - which has rarely projected itself on the world stage - wants to bring Afghanistan into its sphere of influence to counteract Pakistan.

"India can't claim to be a regional power, much less a global power, if it can't manage to achieve some modicum of its strategic goals in Afghanistan," said Christine Fair, a South Asia expert at Georgetown University.

"But in terms of its investment, it has the same problems as other countries," she said. "Namely, when the U.S. security umbrella withdraws, how will it be able to continue what it's doing?"

Approximately 20 Indian nationals have died in terrorist attacks in Afghanistan. India's embassy in Kabul has been hit twice, including a suicide attack in 2008 that killed two senior diplomats. In May, Afghan intelligence officials accused Pakistan's powerful military-run spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, of hiring hit men to kill the Indian consul general in Jalalabad, near the Pakistani border.

The six-page pact between India and Afghanistan includes a provision about India helping to train and equip Afghan security forces. But Indian officials said that's unlikely to mean Indian soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan - a red line for Pakistan. Training likely would occur in India and involve Afghan police, not soldiers. Still, the effort could founder over language barriers and high levels of illiteracy among the Afghans - problems that also have plagued the U.S.-led effort to build up Afghan forces.

What's more, India's assistance is hampered by its lack of a land border with Afghanistan; currently it sends the bulk of its aid via Iran. And while its aid, Bollywood films and thrice-daily flights between Kabul and New Delhi have bolstered India's standing in the eyes of many Afghans, analysts say that with Karzai increasingly isolated politically, India lacks the deep -

some would say insidious - connections to Afghan political groups that Pakistan and Iran have assiduously cultivated.

"What are the political forces in this country that India could rely on?" said Haroun Mir, director of the Afghanistan Center for Research and Policy Studies, an independent think tank in Kabul.

"We know that if tomorrow Pakistanis will block the border and stop the supplies, we will face a humanitarian crisis, especially at the start of winter. How would the U.S. or India be able to support us?" Mir asked.

Indian and Afghan officials said that the agreement - post-Taliban Afghanistan's first such deal with any nation - had been in the works for about a year. But its timing raised eyebrows.

Two weeks before Karzai was to make an official visit to New Delhi, former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani, the government's chief envoy to Taliban insurgents, was assassinated in Kabul by a man claiming to carry a peace message from the Taliban leadership based in Quetta, Pakistan. Suspicion immediately fell on Pakistan's ISI spy agency, which is accused of supporting Afghan insurgents, but NATO and Afghan officials have since said they haven't found a direct link to the group.

Still, the killing plunged Afghan-Pakistani relations to a new low. When Karzai and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh sealed the pact in New Delhi on Oct. 4, Pakistani officials warned Afghanistan against "grandstanding."

Even a senior Indian diplomat, who wasn't authorized to be quoted by name, acknowledged that the agreement had "bad timing" and brought some "negative consequences."

Janan Mosazai, spokesman for Afghanistan's foreign ministry, played down the concerns, saying the deal was about "allowing Afghanistan to benefit from the strength of India, and nothing more than that."

But a senior Western official said that the message to Pakistan, at a time when it's under mounting pressure from the Obama administration to crack down on Afghan insurgents inside its borders, was unmistakable.

"It reminds Pakistan that if Afghanistan and Pakistan cannot have a relationship which works for both parties, then it's a signal that Pakistan is not the only regional power who may have an interest in Afghanistan," said the official, who requested anonymity to avoid antagonizing Pakistan. "And we will see whether that encourages Pakistan to do the right things to get the relationship on the right track."

Some see an even more fundamental reason for the agreement, one that has little to do with U.S. goals in Afghanistan.

"This is about India trying to step up its regional position," said Fair, of Georgetown. "I don't see it as much more than that."