

## The War in India's Backyard

By Subhash Agrawal and Leah Sarson

The visit yesterday of Afghan President Hamid Karzai to New Delhi is drawing fresh attention to India's role in a conflict that has been fought largely by Western powers, including Canada. With Canadian and American troops scheduled to begin leaving Afghanistan in 2011, Indian leaders are pondering the mess that will be left in their "backyard". Delhi is eschewing a military role, but will likely step up reconstruction and development efforts in Afghanistan, as discussed by President Karzai and Prime Minister Singh.

Canada and its NATO allies are stuck between a rock and a hard place. Speculation is mounting as to what Canada's future role in the region might be. Limited resources and domestic politics mandate that Canada and the US bring home their military forces. Yet leaving Afghanistan without at least having contained the Taliban to isolated pockets, if not having substantially contained them, would be seen as defeat and would embolden jihadis everywhere. The sheer intractability and violence of the Afghan reality is making it difficult for NATO to define an end-point.

Whereas Canada and NATO can simply leave the neighbourhood, India has no such option. From an Indian perspective, the geopolitical relevance of Afghanistan arises from its security concerns vis-à-vis Pakistan. New Delhi considers it crucial that Islamabad not be allowed to gain a free hand in Afghanistan again, as it did after the Soviet departure in 1989. For India, it is imperative that a fundamentalist Taliban regime not be allowed to take root again. Pakistan, for its part, remains highly resentful of any enhanced Indian footprint there, even "soft" Indian help in village-level economic development.

India is aware that its strategic options are shrinking fast. Talk in Western capitals of "good" versus "bad" Taliban horrifies India and befuddles its defence experts. India's government also firmly believes that Afghanistan will remain a threat for the West as long as Pakistan remains a safe haven for Islamic jihadis groups. The mood in Delhi is therefore resigned to drafting its own calibrated response to a post-2011 situation without depending on NATO allies for support. An increasing number of Indian analysts are convinced that the US, and by extension Canada, cannot really "exit" Afghanistan by 2011 and that at least 50,000 ISAF forces will stay on in Afghanistan until 2015 to protect major population centres and at the very least prevent all-out civil war.

International attention remains focused on Canada, with many world leaders, including US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and NATO Secretary General Fogh Rasmussen, publicly asking Ottawa to remain. But Prime Minister Harper has categorically said that all Canadian combat forces will leave by 2011, with only civilian Canadians remaining in Afghanistan post-2011, working on reconstruction projects. A continued Canadian presence in Afghanistan is therefore not in doubt and Kabul will likely retain its position as Canada's largest bilateral aid recipient.

Meanwhile, India is one of the largest bilateral donors and the largest regional donor-country to Afghanistan, with its reconstruction assistance totaling \$1.2 billion in the post-9/11 period. Spread over many sectors, India's civilian aid to Afghanistan includes education, health,

transportation, and rural and agricultural development. As many Afghan sources have said repeatedly, India's civilian aid to Afghanistan is direct and impacts everyday lives of Afghans.

However, in recent times these aid projects and their Indian staff are increasingly threatened by the growing violence of the Taliban. The vicious February 26 suicide bombing of a guest house in Kabul that killed nine members of an Indian medical team, among others, triggered an urgent security re-assessment of the massive Indian aid program in Afghanistan. For the first time, the government is seriously re-thinking its aid projects. This is a familiar debate for Canadians who have long been grappling with the challenges of balancing security and development.

While the official position remains that India is steadfast in its commitment to the reconstruction of Afghanistan, the fact is that there is an increasing chorus of senior Indian voices suggesting that India's engagement in civilian reconstruction should be scaled down dramatically, with perhaps even a possibility of complete exit. This is a pity, because India can certainly help Afghanistan in many ways by leveraging its own rich experiences in building social, educational, and political bodies, particularly helping Afghanistan craft its own unique institutions of governance. But all this is possible only if a viable Afghan government not only welcomes but also protects such an Indian role.

There is also an emerging consensus that India's continued presence is highly dependent on NATO success and that an autonomous Indian presence in Afghanistan will be very difficult to sustain after a (substantial) NATO withdrawal in 2011.

Which leads to the question, can Canada and India collaborate on development and reconstruction projects in Afghanistan, particularly in a post-2011 scenario?

As it stands, the prospects are not bright. India has no history of cooperating in overseas aid with other countries, much less in a very uncertain and insecure environment where its own post-2011 civilian footprint is in doubt. Despite good intentions and the sacrifice of Canadian lives in Afghanistan, Ottawa has not made much of an impression on Indian leaders, and there has been virtually no discussion so far on cooperation. It is clear, however, that there is a shared commitment to Afghanistan development and security, and from this perspective, the opportunity to begin a dialogue on bilateral cooperation should not be missed.

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*Subhash Agrawal is the Head of India Focus, a New Delhi based think-tank consultancy. Leah Sarson is a researcher at the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada.*