



CANADA-ASIA AGENDA

India's role in post-2011 Afghanistan Can Canada & India collaborate?

By Subhash Agrawal with contributions from Leah Sarson

With Canada and India both gearing up for the withdrawal of Canadian and some US troops in 2011, Subhash Agrawal explores the strategic dilemmas which face both countries. Ottawa and New Delhi each plan to maintain strong aid programs in Afghanistan post-2011, but are struggling to determine how to balance development aid with security. Despite these shared circumstances, history and geopolitics suggest that opportunities for Canada-India collaboration are few.

With Monday's meeting between Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New Delhi, Indian commentators are ramping up debate on New Delhi's future engagement with Kabul. The worsening situation in Afghanistan coupled with the rapidly approaching military pullout of Canadian and some American forces in 2011 poses difficult decisions for both Canada and India, with each having important interests at stake. Despite their convergent concerns regarding the dangers of extremist elements in the region, their respective geostrategic locations and development strategies are unlikely to lead to New Delhi-Ottawa collaboration.

As the US-led war against the Taliban in Afghanistan enters a new and dangerous phase, with the next big NATO military campaign due to start in June in

Kandahar, there is universal recognition that the US-led alliance is stuck with two equally bad choices: it can neither leave Afghanistan in a hurry in an honourable way, nor can it stay indefinitely without paying a huge human and material cost. Canada is similarly stuck between a rock and a hard place. Leaving Afghanistan without at least having contained the Taliban to isolated pockets, if not substantially degrading their strength and morale, would be universally seen as defeat, and would certainly embolden jihadis everywhere. But despite the huge strategic importance of Afghanistan on the war against terror, the sheer intractability and violence of the Afghan reality on the ground is making it difficult for the US and its allies to define an end-point. In fact, staying on in Afghanistan is likely to confer on the Taliban great legitimacy and resilience as "freedom fighters."



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Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has stated that Canada remains committed to the 2011 Parliament-mandated withdrawal date. Speculation is mounting as to what Canada's future role in Afghanistan might be. Comments made by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reinforced the Obama Administration's desire for Canada's military to stay the course. For President Obama, the key strategic objectives in Afghanistan are to prevent the country from once again becoming a sanctuary for terrorists who could attack Western targets and to hold on until the situation evolves to the point that a political settlement with some Taliban group is possible.

Within the dilemmas and constraints posed by the Afghanistan conflict, one country that perhaps feels the most boxed-in is India.



Source: CIA World Factbook

Afghanistan's geopolitical relevance for India arises primarily from its security concerns vis-à-vis Pakistan.¹ New Delhi considers it crucial that Islamabad not be allowed to get a free hand in Afghanistan again, like

it did after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 when battle-hardened and Pakistan-controlled Afghan mujaheddin fighters were deployed in large numbers against India. For India, it is imperative that a fundamentalist Taliban regime, even one that is willing to make tactical peace with the West, does not take root again. On the other hand, given its Pashtun-ethnic linkage with Afghanistan, Pakistan considers its role to be a privileged one in the affairs of Afghanistan, and it remains highly resentful of any enhanced Indian footprint there, even for "soft" Indian help in village-level economic development.



Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon meets with President Hamid Karzai

Given the fast-moving dynamics in Afghanistan and especially after the January 2010 London conference when it appeared isolated over its insistence that there is no "good" versus "bad" Taliban, India is aware that its strategic options are shrinking fast. Talk in Western capitals about differentiating between the "bad" and "good" Taliban in order to make a deal with the latter not just horrifies India – which, from its experience and close proximity, knows that any Taliban faction, good or bad, will sooner or later revert to its extreme doctrinaire way of looking at the world – but also befuddles its defence experts.

It is a firm belief in India that Afghanistan can never be made secure for the West as long as Pakistan remains a safe haven for Islamic jihadi groups, that no matter who the declared target of these jihadis may be for now, whether India, Israel or the US, unbending fundamentalism which is opposed to any form of secular thought or modernity will inevitably strike Western targets. As long as armed jihadis can be recruited in

large numbers in Pakistan and can move freely across the AfPak border, Afghanistan will continue to have festering militancy that is inimical to US, Canada and Western interests. As Fareed Zakaria wrote in a recent op-ed in the *Washington Post*, "All attacks against Western targets that have emanated from the region in the past eight years have come from Pakistan, not from Afghanistan. Even the most recently foiled plot in the United States, which involved the first Afghan that I know of to be implicated in global terrorism, originated in Pakistan."²

The mood in India is resigned to drafting its own calibrated response to a post-2011 situation without depending on either the US or NATO for support. An increasing number of Indian analysts are convinced that the US, and by extension Canada, cannot really "exit" Afghanistan by 2011, no matter what the stated position of the Obama policy is. There is an emerging consensus in private Indian circles around a most likely Afghan scenario - that at least 50,000 ISAF forces will stay on in Afghanistan until 2015 to protect major population centres; that even if the Western alliance cedes much of the countryside to various Taliban factions, it will prevent all-out civil war by leaving the governance of provinces to local war lords; and that drones and air power will play the role of final arbiter. In this view, any Indian response should be built around a quiet confidence that Pakistan in particular will likely trip over itself trying to engage with both sides of the conflict.

Quite apart from India, many of the current actors in Afghanistan also do not share identical interests either with each other or with the US. While the US and France call it "war", the Germans, reflecting the strong anti-war sensitivity in that country, refer to the Afghan situation in official pronouncements as an 'armed conflict'. The Canadian government tends to refer to it as a "mission". There is public cleavage over resource and manpower commitments between the US on the one hand and its NATO allies on the other, and even though NATO countries have committed to send about 9,000 extra troops, it is still 6,000 short of what is necessary according to US defence experts. Fortifying the international coalition in Afghanistan has become a key tactical aim of Obama. This is why the US has admonished the leaders of Canada, France, UK and even smaller countries like Estonia to beef up

their contribution to Afghan forces. However, this strategy has been marred significantly by increasingly public spats with President Karzai over election fraud, corruption and governance, into which Prime Minister Harper and other leaders have been drawn over the past two years.

Attention remains focused on Canada, with many top world leaders, including US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen publicly asking it to re-consider its 2008 parliamentary resolution and stay engaged in Afghanistan beyond 2011, noting that a failed Afghan state would be destabilizing not just for its neighbourhood but also the wider world. On a recent visit to Canadian troops in Afghanistan, Rasmussen emphasized the oft-repeated point that "At the end of the day it is a question of our own security- we cannot allow Afghanistan to once again become a safe haven to terrorists- and I also think it is in Canada's best interest to ensure a peaceful and stable Afghanistan."³



A Canadian Forces helicopter navigates the mountains near Kandahar Airfield. (Source: Canadian Forces Image Gallery)

But Prime Minister Harper categorically said after a recent meeting with Clinton that all Canadian combat forces will leave by 2011, and that the only Canadians in Afghanistan past 2011 will be civilians

working for peace. Some commentators are pointing out that the 2011 pull-out date seems arbitrary and premature, particularly when contrasted with Canada's decades-long stays in conflict zones such as Cyprus, the Golan Heights, and the Balkans. However, in per capita terms, both as a percentage of population and as a proportion of total troops deployed, Afghan casualties have been particularly heavy for Canada and this summer's planned offensive around Kandahar is shaping up to be Canada's largest infantry action since the Korean War.

Canadian engagement is not in doubt and will be very substantial even after its forces leave, with Afghanistan already becoming Canada's largest bilateral aid recipient. In fiscal year 2007-08, Canada spent approximately \$280 million on aid projects, including major items like the building of the Dhala Dam, the Kandahar Local Initiatives Program and the National Solidarity Program, which is a national flagship program for community development. The 100-member Canadian embassy in Kabul is supervising development projects that range from police and judicial reform to education, women's rights and health care, and has already grown to become Canada's third largest diplomatic mission in the world.

Meanwhile, India is one of the largest bilateral donors and the largest regional donor country to Afghanistan, with its reconstruction assistance totalling \$1.2 billion in the post-9/11 period. India's civilian aid to Afghanistan is spread over many sectors, including education, health, transportation, telecom, civil aviation, power generation and rural development. India has built major highways and schools; it gives scholarships to over 1,000 Afghan students and civil servants every year; its engineers have built the new national parliament and power station in Kabul; and Indian doctors and nurses staff the four largest hospitals in the country. As many Afghan sources have said repeatedly, India's civilian aid to Afghanistan is direct and impacts the everyday lives of Afghans.

However, in recent times, these aid projects and their Indian staff are increasingly threatened by the growing boldness of the Taliban in using violence against foreign aid workers. The vicious February attack on a team of Indian doctors and paramedical staff in Kabul, in which 9 Indians were killed, has triggered an urgent security re-assessment of the massive Indian



Afghan girls practice their reading skills

aid program in Afghanistan, and has for the first time got the government seriously re-thinking about the kinds of projects and associated risks it is willing to take in a post-2011 scenario where the security cover provided by NATO presence sharply decreases. This is a familiar debate for Canadians who have long been grappling with the challenges of balancing security imperatives and development, made all the more meaningful by the shooting deaths of two Canadian aid workers in August 2008 and the killings in roadside bombs of Canadian diplomat Glyn Berry in 2006 and journalist Michelle Lang in late 2009.

While the official Indian position, reiterated at every opportunity, remains that India is steadfast in its commitment to the reconstruction of Afghanistan, the fact is that there is an increasing chorus of senior voices within India's security community that are demanding that in this highly confused and fluid security architecture of Afghanistan, India's engagement in civilian reconstruction should be scaled down dramatically, with perhaps even a possibility of complete exit. In this view, India "should stop frittering its resources on what is for the foreseeable future a hopeless cause – Afghanistan"⁴ and instead spend its resources on building a domestic security architecture that can effectively combat an anticipated increase in terrorism flowing in from Pakistan. As one analyst wrote recently in an op-ed in a leading Indian newspaper, "It takes some strategic innocence to aspire for influence in a country as dangerous, conspiratorial and bloody as Afghanistan, without being willing to muddy our boots."⁵

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 institutions. More specifically, India can assist Afghanistan in crafting its own unique institutions of governance, especially those that combine tribal traditions with some semblance of accountability and democratic pluralism. India can also tap its considerable experience in wasteland and dry-land farming techniques in Afghanistan. But all this is possible only if a viable Afghan government exists beyond 2011 that not only welcomes but also protects such an Indian role.

Even if it is not yet publicly acknowledged, India is already reviewing its future civilian aid program in Afghanistan, with an emerging consensus that its presence there is highly dependent upon the success of Western military strategy in containing the rise of the Taliban, and that an autonomous Indian presence in Afghanistan will be very difficult to sustain after a (substantial) NATO withdrawal in 2011. The Canadian government is also currently struggling to define post-2011 parameters for its engagement, with suggestions that Canada is likely to continue training law enforcement officials and focus on aid initiatives such as education.

Which leads to the question, can Canada and India collaborate in Afghanistan and particularly in a post-

2011 scenario? The question becomes especially pertinent since both have a development-oriented commitment to the country and could probably facilitate fruitful collaboration.

Based on its recent profile as an increasingly large aid donor to Africa, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and even some Southeast Asian nations, India is probably very comfortable with "political consultation and coordination" in a broad multilateral framework, but this multilateralism is a careful strategic choice intended to allow India greater leverage in international forums. In practice, India has absolutely 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. Canada, for all its good intentions, has failed to make enough of an impression on South Asia's powerhouse. Against this background, it might be easier to understand India's likely position on future collaboration with Canada, with aid projects of both countries severely vulnerable once NATO forces leave or are diffused in the countryside. As things stand, it is difficult to see how and in what concrete form this India-Canada collaboration might emerge, except at a policy, ideas, feedback and concept level. However, it is clear that there is a shared commitment to development and security in Afghanistan, and from this perspective, this is an opportunity to begin a dialogue on bilateral cooperation that should not be missed.

¹ Please see Peter Jones' upcoming Canada-Asia Agenda article for further analysis on Pakistan.

² Fareed Zakaria, "What Failure in Afghanistan?" Washington Post, October 12, 2009. Available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/11/AR2009101101552.html>.

³ CBC News, "Canada Should Stay in Afghanistan: NATO Head," August 6, 2009. Available at <http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2009/08/06/afghanistan-rasmussen006.html>.

⁴ Sushant Sareen, "AfPak dialectics can work in India's favour," March 8, 2010. Available at http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/AfPakdialecticscanworkinIndiasfavour_ssareen_080310.

⁵ Raj Shukla, "Af-Pak and India's Strategic Innocence," April 2, 2010. Available at http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/Af-PakandIndiasStrategicInnocence_rshukla_020410

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