

Delhi, Washington Should Build on Progress in Afghanistan

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How can the United States and India work together on a project of clear mutual interest and importance: the future of Afghanistan? Both nations have suffered enormously at the hands of terrorist groups with bases and support networks in this general part of the world. Therefore, neither would wish to see the country again descend into the anarchy and base for extremists, which typified the 1990s. Neither also wishes to see their respective relationships with Pakistan inflamed by the matter—yet neither should want to establish Islamabad hegemony over the former site of the Britain-Russia “great game” of the 19th century.

The Afghan cup can be seen as about 55 percent full. The Taliban is resilient and Afghanistan is still violent. But, by official statistics at least, it is less dangerous than many countries that are supposedly “at peace.” And, on balance, there is progress, and room for hope. The quality of life for citizens has improved dramatically over the last dozen years. Poppy production has not dropped very much, alas, but food production is up and GDP growth rates have usually reached 5 to 10 percent a year.

The progress in Afghanistan, imperfect and fragile as it is, has resulted in part from an important meeting of the minds in Delhi and Washington. India, knowing the views that are prevalent in Pakistan, has wisely restrained itself from doing as much as it might have liked to help Afghanistan develop its economy and improve its army. This is too bad in one sense; Afghanistan could use the help, and India could have

provided even more in theory. But it was wise of Delhi in another sense. Pakistan may finally be restraining, or at least reducing, its support for Pashtun-dominated Taliban forces that it has seen over the years as a counter to Delhi's influence with the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance movement. Islamabad has been wrong to view things in such terms for most of the past decade, but such views are alas real and influential within government circles, and India took them into account in fashioning its broader Afghanistan policy in a way that helped Afghanistan, NATO forces there, and the United States.

The likely successful completion of an Afghan presidential election and transition process this summer, as tough as it has been, is also partly due to India's influence on Afghans. To be sure, that success is hardly foreordained at this point. But it is still likely. India, for all its troubles, has helped lead the way in establishing meaningful democracy in the developing world, in general and South Asia in particular, in the course of its modern history. Afghan leaders take notice and take inspiration from this model.

This assessment leads to a common agenda for India and the United States in the months and years ahead. With continued restraint, Delhi can shore up the new government in Kabul as it takes power, with development aid and some degree of diplomatic and security-assistance support, working through international coalitions to do so. It can also work with Kabul and, one hopes, Islamabad to foster the kind of greater regional economic integration that

can help all parties. For example, faster and more reliable transit of trucks carrying food from Afghanistan to the large populations of South Asia, perhaps employing some kind of E-Z Pass system with biometric validators to speed movement without compromising security, may be sensible—and in keeping with the pro-growth thinking of the Modi government.

Ideally, the United States would revisit the decision to pull all main combat forces out of the country by the end of 2016 and would keep a small residual force in Afghanistan, largely for counterterrorism purposes (to be used against possible extremist targets in Afghanistan and/or western Pakistan). Importantly, it will lead an international coalition, ideally with Indian support, to help fund an Afghan

government, including its army and police, that will not be able to fund itself anytime soon.

Admittedly, not everyone in the U.S. shares this view of Afghanistan or this prescription. Yet it is possible that the contenders for the presidency in America's 2016 election will propose such a course of action on the grounds that keeping a couple thousand U.S. troops in the region indefinitely will actually make the country safer—and also help avoid a meltdown in Afghanistan similar to what we have recently witnessed in Iraq this year, after the complete departure of U.S. combat forces there in 2011.

Much is still to be done in Afghanistan. But there is much to build on.