

The Af-Pak Mandate

C. Raja Mohan

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In helping the US Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke succeed in his diplomatic mission, India can help itself in containing the growing security challenges from the north-western marches of the subcontinent. What Washington now calls "Af-Pak", shorthand for Holbrooke's mandate on Afghanistan and Pakistan, is quite familiar to India as the turbulent territory between the Indus and the Hindu Kush, which for millennia has been the principal source of India's external security threats. New Delhi's initial wariness about the Holbrooke mission appears to have turned into recognition of the rare strategic opportunity that it presents, for three good reasons. One, Holbrooke was quick to sense that including the Kashmir dispute in his mandate would constrain his room for diplomatic manoeuvre.

That Holbrooke got Washington to see the paradox A- New Delhi's exclusion from the formal mandate is necessary to make it Washington's partner A- suggests the special envoy might be adding subtlety to his awesome reputation as a diplomatic bulldozer. Two, New Delhi knows that Holbrooke has been ordered by President Barack Obama to end Washington's tribal warfare on making the Af-Pak policy. The notorious power of his bureaucratic elbows means, Holbrooke would have a big role in shaping the Obama administration's South Asia policy. New Delhi will therefore find in Holbrooke a powerful and influential interlocutor during the Obama years. Three, Holbrooke has already demonstrated the clout to force major changes on the ground. Few in New Delhi doubt that last week's dramatic turn-around in Pakistan's position on the Mumbai attacks everything had to do with the pressure that Holbrooke had begun to mount on Islamabad. There is no doubt in New Delhi that India and the United States have shared political interests in stabilising Afghanistan and Pakistan, preventing the further growth of the Taliban across the Durand Line, and promoting economic prosperity and political modernity in the trans-Indus territories. Common interests do not necessarily lead to coordinated policies among nations. New Delhi, then, must find ways to work with Holbrooke in the coming months and years in expanding areas of agreement and cooperation while minimising the inevitable tensions. As New Delhi begins a dialogue with Holbrooke this week, there is no under-estimating its historic significance. Never in the past six decades have New Delhi and Washington had an honest conversation on Pakistan A- a source of enduring contention in the bilateral relations between India and the US rather than a theatre for political and security cooperation. As Holbrooke's first trip to the region draws the inputs for a comprehensive restructuring of the US strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the outlines of which will be known by April, India must be unreserved in its offer to help Holbrooke win. India's potential cooperation with the US could be wide-ranging. It could extend, for example, strong support to President Obama's effort to craft a new regional approach to the problems in Afghanistan. New Delhi should also welcome Washington's efforts to mend fences with Moscow and begin negotiations with Tehran. The easing of US tensions with Russia and Iran A- neither would want to see the triumph of the Taliban in Afghanistan A- would generate new options for Washington and New Delhi. India must offer money and men to build new transportation corridors into Afghanistan, of the kind it has already developed through Iran, in order to reduce the US dependence on the Pakistan army for supplies to its troops in Afghanistan. Although the Bush administration welcomed India's economic involvement, it actively discouraged India from embarking on security cooperation with Afghanistan by citing Pakistan's concerns. New Delhi would want to know if Holbrooke has a different view. Short of sending troops, New Delhi can contribute in a variety of other ways to stabilise Afghanistan A- from large- scale training of armed forces to assistance in the creation of an Afghan air force, from supplying non-lethal military equipment to sending volunteers for

local reconstruction in Afghan provinces. Instead of begging its feckless European allies for small, symbolic and ineffective contributions, the US could find in India a valuable partner to devising credible security structures for Afghanistan. For his part, Holbrooke would surely want to know what New Delhi could do to make it easier for the US and the international community to pacify the Af-Pak region. The Indian answers are likely to be less complicated than most analysts might imagine. Over the last few years, India has engaged Pakistan in an intensive negotiation on resolving the Kashmir conflict. That dialogue has stalled because Pakistan's military establishment has not only gone back on its promise to end anti-India terror but also chosen to step up the sophistication of cross-border violence as we saw in Mumbai. Holbrooke should have no difficulty seeing the simple Indo-Pak bargain that awaits closure A- a verifiable end to the terror infrastructure in Pakistan leading to conflict resolution and normalisation of relations with India. The strategic trick in the subcontinent is no longer about reconciling the national interests of Kabul, Islamabad and New Delhi. The elected leaders in the three countries see their main security threats coming from the same source: jihadi terrorism. The most difficult regional task is about ending the army's power to define Pakistan's national security objectives towards Afghanistan and India and its more than three decade old alliance with extremist groups to achieve its aims. If Holbrooke is prepared walk the American policy in that direction, he might find India an enthusiastic partner in changing Pakistan's civil-military relations, helping Washington redirect Islamabad's energies against the Taliban and the al-Qaeda, and restoring the strategic unity of the north-western subcontinent.