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Indo-Afghan Strategic Treaty: Implications for Pakistan

By Bibhu Prasad Routray

Synopsis

The Indo-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement signed on 4 October, unveils the congruence of US, Afghan and Indian end goals in the war torn country. It also has implications for Pakistani-Afghan relations.

Commentary

ON 4 OCTOBER, India and Afghanistan signed an Agreement of Strategic Partnership, promising a deepening of bilateral relations in politics, security, trade and economics. The agreement, which also covers Indian assistance in Afghanistan's capacity development and education, signals India's intent to stay engaged in the reconstruction of the war-torn country despite the challenges it faces from several quarters.

With a commitment of US \$1.2 billion through 2013 India is the sixth largest donor of Afghanistan. It has earned enormous goodwill from the Afghan population with an array of developmental projects - from a strategic highway to Kabul's Parliament building to cold storages and medical missions - which have enlarged the reach of the government to the country's provinces.

Link to US Intentions

The Indo-Afghan Agreement, in fact, goes beyond the development and humanitarian assistance. India is to also assist in the training, equipping and capacity building programmes for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSFs). Both countries will hold regular strategic dialogues to intensify "mutual efforts towards strengthening regional peace and security." Two Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) were also signed for the development of minerals and natural gas; Afghanistan is said to hold mineral deposits worth \$1 trillion.

For years India has been accused of riding on the military efforts of the United States and the NATO countries to pursue its development agenda in Afghanistan. In spite of developmental aid and projects, India's influence in that country remains extremely fragile and is tied to the presence of the international forces which guarantee the continuation of a democratic government. That fragility will continue even with the 4 October Agreement unless it is supported by an Afghan-US strategic partnership.

That partnership would guarantee an American force presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014, thereby precluding the possibility of a return of a Taliban regime to Kabul. Discussions on this agreement have been stalled by differences between both parties and also by domestic opposition within Afghanistan.

But as US-Pakistan relations continue to deteriorate and the insurgents continue their violence, an Afghan-US understanding towards that effect is bound to be concluded sooner than later. The Obama administration will have to find a way to overcome domestic opposition to continued US engagement in Afghanistan.

The ANSFs have taken up some security responsibilities in a few Afghan provinces. But they are unlikely to be relied upon to guarantee the country's security against the insurgent blitzkrieg, certainly not by 2014, when the US force withdrawal is to be completed. To that extent, the Indo-Afghan Strategic partnership represents the broad convergence of Indian and American end goals in Afghanistan.

India remains opposed to an arbitrary pullout of international forces from Afghanistan; it would welcome any institutionalised mechanism that guarantees a protracted stay of American forces beyond 2014.

Pakistan's Reactions

A Pakistani journalist, Murtaza Razvi recently wrote: "The new nexus is now complete: while the US, Afghanistan and India will fight the Taliban, Pakistan would look for making peace with the Islamist militants." In this context, it would have been almost inconceivable for Pakistan not to react negatively to the Indo-Afghan treaty, even though the Agreement mentioned specifically that it is not directed at any country or group of countries. Afghan President Hamid Karzai also made it a point to refer to Pakistan as a "twin brother" while calling India a "great friend".

A day after the signing Pakistan Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani averred that both India and Afghanistan "have the right to maintain bilateral relations as sovereign nations". The spokesperson of its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) called upon all states "in position of authority in Afghanistan" to "demonstrate requisite maturity and responsibility". Nevertheless the 4 October Agreement has heightened Pakistan's insecurities about being encircled by India from the east and west.

Growing Congruence

For India, Pakistan would always remain a challenge -- a neighbour which has been out to prevent India from realising its ambitions in Afghanistan and Central Asia while also being a source of terrorism in India. In that context, the 4 October Agreement represents a will to go forward and not allow Pakistan to hold its strategic ambitions hostage. The progress, or the lack of it, in the continuing peace process with Pakistan can be delinked from the Indo-Afghan partnership.

Similarly, for Afghanistan, the safe haven that the insurgents have in Pakistan's tribal areas remains a major source of instability. Karzai has periodically displayed his willingness to negotiate with Pakistan to rein in the insurgents and also to start a process of reconciliation with the Taliban. But there are indications that Kabul might be getting tired of pursuing an unfruitful policy of placating Pakistan.

The assassination of former President Burhanuddin Rabbani, which Kabul alleged was planned in Pakistan, might have been the turning point. Kabul has already dumped its attempt of reconciliation with the Taliban by calling the process thus far "a joke".

For its part the Obama administration, still struggling to find ways to bring Pakistan on board, can use the Indo-Afghan Agreement as an additional pressure point on Islamabad -- to be part of the Afghan stabilisation project or be left out in the cold as a trouble maker.

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