

The Way Ahead for India-Afghanistan Relations

ABSTRACT Afghanistan and India have a close and longstanding relationship, but how can they shape their shared future amid rapidly evolving regional dynamics? As Afghanistan struggles with a renewed insurgency and international efforts for a peace process appear to be falling through, how can India continue to exercise a steadying and constructive influence? This paper examines the details of the India-Afghanistan bilateral relationship as well its wider regional context, and articulates a vision for a peaceful Afghanistan. Its observations reflect the insights and suggestions shared during an India-Afghanistan dialogue hosted in March 2016 by the Observer Research Foundation and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in New Delhi.

INTRODUCTION

India and Afghanistan share considerable mutual respect and goodwill, stemming from their economic and political ties, India's reconstruction and humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan, and old civilisational and cultural connections. At the same time, the bilateral relationship does not exist in a vacuum. Afghanistan's geographic location as a meeting point between South, Central and West Asia makes it a strategic centre of gravity in regional affairs. Attempts to assess the way forward must therefore take into account the matrix of regional players and their motivations.

For both countries, the primary question is how to manage their bilateral relationship while responding to dynamics shaped by other players, especially Pakistan, who hold greater primacy in Afghanistan. Also crucial are the changing

internal dynamics in Afghanistan, given that the country is facing a decade of transformation after the withdrawal of Western forces and is struggling to maintain political stability amid the resurgence of the Taliban, who remain undeterred by the recent death of their leader, Mullah Akhtar Mansour. Now led by Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban are pressing on with their spring offensive for 2016, seeking to dominate Afghanistan's geographic space in an effort to hegemonise its political space. Afghan security forces face an uphill challenge in their efforts to contain them, and efforts by the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) – Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the United States – to organise peace negotiations appear to have all but failed, with the Taliban refusing to join in and the Afghan government boycotting

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discussions.

Amid these fraught circumstances, there is an urgent need for a Plan B in case the moribund peace process completely fails. This paper examines Indo-Afghan relations in the light of these conditions and proposes steps for the future.

AREAS OF BILATERAL ENGAGEMENT

India and Afghanistan's bilateral engagements fall into three broad areas: economic, political and security. In the economic sphere, India's pledge of \$2 billion makes it Afghanistan's largest regional donor and Afghanistan the second-largest recipient of Indian aid.¹ Over the years, India has made significant investments in Afghan infrastructure and reconstruction projects, and has provided generous humanitarian assistance, too. Large-scale Indian projects have resulted in the creation of several national assets for Afghanistan. They include the Zaranj-Delaram highway, which connects south-western Afghanistan to the town of Delaram near the Iranian border; the Salma Dam which will supply electricity to Herat province; the Phul e-Khumri transmission line which supplies electricity to Kabul; and the Afghan parliament building. Many of these projects were completed over the last decade despite security challenges. However, in view of rising insecurity in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of Western forces in December 2014, India is now likely to channel its investments into smaller development projects for at least the next few years. In terms of humanitarian assistance, India has supplied food aid to primary school children and helped build and rehabilitate schools.² It has also supplied 250,000 tonnes of wheat, and provides 1,000 annual scholarships for Afghan students in India. This use of soft power has won India significant goodwill among Afghans.

In political terms, Indian-Afghan relations are marked by respect for each other's sovereignty, and this principle lies at the heart of India's

approach to issues around the Afghan peace process, socioeconomic development, democracy, and Kabul's foreign relations. India seeks to contribute in response to requests articulated by Afghans themselves. India is also the first country with which Afghanistan forged a bilateral agreement. Called the Agreement on Strategic Partnership (ASP), the pact was signed in 2011 and reflects New Delhi's commitment to Afghanistan as it pledges assistance without seeking reciprocal benefits. Among the provisions of the agreement are mechanisms to expand India's training of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) personnel and build Afghan police capacity. However, India has yet to decisively move forward on these promises.

Indeed, India has pursued low-key engagement as far as hard power in the form of security assistance is concerned. For one, India has ruled out the deployment of its troops on Afghan soil, and future prospects for that remain unlikely. There are three factors behind this: India's desire to not dilute its soft image; the provision of security over the past decade by Western forces; and, most importantly, Pakistani sensitivities about a full-blown Indian security role in Afghanistan. At the same time, India has helped Afghanistan strengthen its security forces by training ANSF officers and personnel, with promises for expansion. Having committed itself in the ASP to "training, equipping and capacity-building programmes" for the ANSF, India has trained a few thousand Afghan security personnel over the last few years, with 107 Afghan army cadets currently being trained at the Indian Military Academy in Dehradun.³

At the same time, there has been a mismatch between Afghan expectations and an Indian contribution in the matter of transferring military equipment. The ANSF stands in dire need of more equipment, particularly in terms of air power. Since January 2015, following the withdrawal of Western troops from Afghan soil, insecurity has been on the rise in the country, with the Taliban

launching frequent attacks. The year 2015 saw an all-time high of over 11,000 casualties.⁴ Moreover, the militant group Islamic State (IS) has struck roots in the country. The ANSF therefore requires foreign help. Kabul has repeatedly presented an equipment wish-list to New Delhi, but the response has been limited, despite voices within both countries calling for a more active contribution from India. New Delhi's seeming reluctance is motivated by its aim to normalise relations with Pakistan. This wish was evident at the Heart of Asia conference in Islamabad in December 2015, where Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj not only called for greater connectivity and regional trade with Afghanistan, but also displayed a cooperative approach towards Pakistan. India will extend its cooperation to Afghanistan "at a pace Pakistan is comfortable with," Swaraj had said.⁵

Another reason for India's reticence in providing equipment to Afghanistan is its doubts over the ANSF's cohesiveness following the drawdown of Western troops. Defections and a heavy casualty rate form a stiff challenge for the ANSF, while the Taliban remain strong.⁶

These factors combined with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's initial efforts to reach out to Pakistan as soon as he came to power in September 2014—which meant that, for a while, Afghanistan turned to Pakistan for help. However, recent months have seen Afghanistan look once again to India, which has responded by donating four attack helicopters. Clearly, however, Afghanistan will need more.

THE AF-PAK-INDIA TRIANGLE

Pakistan remains the key player to consider in India-Afghanistan relations, an important reason being its geographic position. Afghanistan is once removed from India: it does not share a border with India but it does share a frontier with Pakistan. This is simultaneously a strength and weakness for both Pakistan and India.⁷ As an immediate neighbour, Pakistan enjoys greater

primacy in Afghanistan, but far less popularity. India, on the other hand, enjoys immense popularity but is not a primary player. A recent BBG-Gallup survey⁸ identified India as the most popular stakeholder in Afghanistan with a rating of around 62 percent, while Pakistan came at the bottom of the list at around 3.7 percent, with even fewer points than IS, which had a rating of 5.8. Further, Pakistan's pursuit of strategic depth⁹ and India's development efforts reinforce their respective reputations in Afghanistan.

It would be worthwhile to examine what appear to be Pakistan's motivations. These may be classified into strategic and tactical concerns. Strategically speaking, military considerations regarding India, epitomised in the doctrine of strategic depth, shape Pakistani foreign policy towards Afghanistan. By extension, this requires the presence of a friendly government in Kabul which would take sides with Islamabad and provide the use of its territory for regrouping purposes in the event of a Pakistan-India conflict. Conversely, Pakistan fears that in the event of a war on its eastern front with India, a strong pro-Indian government in Kabul could exert military pressure on it from the west – leading it into an unwelcome two-front war which Pakistan wishes to avoid. It is widely believed that such considerations have led Pakistan to support militant proxies in Afghanistan and exercise political influence there, including backing the Taliban government which ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. Unsurprisingly, the policy has not won it much popularity among Afghans, who see it as interference in their sovereign affairs.

In tactical terms, Pakistan alleges that India uses its diplomatic consulates in Afghanistan to support a separatist insurgency in the Pakistani province of Balochistan, and to encourage the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan which has a presence in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas. These allegations have yet to be proven, and Pakistan has been unable to provide any evidence that might convince the international community.

Instead, Indian diplomatic assets in Afghanistan have repeatedly come under attack from militants, and various analysts have noted how the timing of such attacks suggests that they were carried out at the behest of the Pakistani security establishment.

Given this context, Pakistan is extremely sensitive about India playing any sort of security role in Afghanistan. India, which for its own reasons wishes to improve relations with its immediate neighbour Pakistan, has therefore largely refrained from supplying military equipment to Kabul. Any future moves that India makes in this direction will need to factor in Pakistani concerns.

For its part, India respects any choices that Afghanistan makes regarding which other countries it should seek friendly relations with, including Pakistan. India acknowledges that due to compulsions of geography, Afghanistan needs to improve its ties with Pakistan. For this reason, India displayed an understanding approach towards President Ashraf Ghani's early overtures towards Pakistan. However, India would be unhappy if Afghanistan were compelled to make any concessions to Pakistan that dilute its sovereignty. Accordingly, India favours an Afghan peace process that is defined and conducted by Afghans themselves. India itself does not seek a role in the process unless Afghanistan desires it. Indian and Afghan analysts have been prepared to give the QCG a chance at finding peace. However, they believe that despite the process being branded as "Afghan-owned and Afghan-led", it has greatly been controlled by Pakistan, and more specifically by Rawalpindi. This is reflected in the fact that what are essentially intra-Afghan peace talks have often been held in Pakistan.¹⁰ It is also unclear whether Pakistan is sincere about seeking an Afghan peace, and the extent to which it can control or influence the Taliban to accept a peace deal.

Indeed, recent developments have cast a dark

cloud on the future of the QCG's peace efforts. The May 2016 killing of the former Taliban chief Mullah Akhtar Mansour in a US drone strike in Pakistan is one such development. The view has been expressed that the strike, which reportedly took place in Pakistan's Balochistan province, was a sign of growing US frustration with Pakistan's unwillingness or inability to bring the Taliban into peace negotiations. Another possibility is that the Pakistani establishment may have been complicit in the killing by either being aware of it in advance or having sanctioned it themselves. Such a line of reasoning suggests that by sacrificing Mansour as a pawn and throwing the peace process into jeopardy, Pakistan would be prolonging its own primacy in a conflict-ridden Afghanistan. Regardless of which of these theories is correct, there are deep international misgivings over Pakistani intentions regarding the Afghan peace process.

Meanwhile, other developments have played a role in leading the QCG-led process towards imminent failure, leading some analysts to wonder whether a peace process even exists at all. The Taliban have refused to join peace talks, and the conflict appears to be escalating. Mansour's death has not slowed down the Taliban spring offensive, codenamed "Operation Omari" after their founder, Mullah Mohammad Omar. Under their new leader, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban continue to make gains on the battlefield. The Afghan government has responded by announcing that it is boycotting future QCG talks. In a separate development, Washington has re-authorized US troops to carry out air strikes against the Taliban and join Afghan forces in ground combat operations. This is with a view to weakening the Taliban before US troops leave the country by 2017, but it signals the fading prospects for the QCG-led process.

There are also larger questions surrounding the nature of the process, if it yet undergoes a miraculous revival. The extent of Pakistani involvement in the process cannot be separated

from Rawalpindi's broader policy of seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan, which in itself is an undesirable factor. In Indian eyes, the Pakistani military's pursuit of this policy without checking for Afghan consent is not only aimed against India, it also runs contrary to Afghan sovereignty. Equally, in Afghan eyes, there is a need to consider the cost of a QCG-brokered peace in terms of concessions that Pakistan might expect in return.¹¹ Afghan analysts fear that the cost could be prohibitive, involving conditions such as Kabul accepting the Durand Line as the Afghan-Pakistani border, handing over Afghan foreign policy to Rawalpindi, and adopting a hostile posture towards its old friend, India. Whether or not such fears prove justified, mistrust regarding Pakistani intentions is an undeniable factor in any multilateral calculus.

THE ROLE OF OTHER KEY PLAYERS

The US has been the dominant power in Afghanistan since 2001, when it invaded the country in the aftermath of 9/11. Despite its dominance, the US faces a strategic dilemma. On one hand, the long-drawn conflict of the last 15 years has left the US battle-weary and keen to militarily exit from Afghanistan. US President Barack Obama has pledged to end the war and announced a timetable for the phased withdrawal of troops, which has been underway since early 2015 and is due to get over by 2017. On the other hand, the US continues to have enduring stakes in Afghanistan which it cannot afford to abandon. It does not want Afghan territory to be used as a base for launching attacks against the US. Further, a recent report by the US Special Inspector-General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR)¹² warns that the Taliban's resurgence threatens the destruction of Afghan infrastructure built with billions of dollars of US funding. US decisions regarding the role of its troops in Afghanistan reflect this American dilemma. Obama's initial announcement of a surge in troop levels signalled a recognition of security concerns, but his accompanying decision for a phased withdrawal

was more consistent with the US desire for an exit. Since 2015, security responsibilities have been handed over to the ANSF, and residual US forces in the country, assisted by troops from NATO member-states, have been asked to provide training and support but not engage in combat operations. However, following SIGAR's recent report, Washington has once again announced an expansion in the role of its troops in Afghanistan. US fighters can now launch "occasional" air strikes and accompany Afghan troops during ground operations. Still, the timetable for their withdrawal from the country remains in place. This latest decision—widening the remit of numerically decreasing troops with a finite withdrawal deadline—does not inspire much hope of success against the Taliban, who have survived a full-blown Western military operation over the last decade and a half. However, it underlines the continuing US dilemma towards Afghanistan, and time will tell how Washington resolves this.

Separately, as far as India is concerned, the US has welcomed New Delhi's role in Afghanistan's development and reconstruction. However, it has been sensitive to Pakistani objections, especially in security-related matters. In view of the failing QCG-led process, it is possible that the US may be more open to a larger Indian role in Afghanistan, even though India may not replace Pakistan in the American calculus.

Meanwhile, China has emerged as an important player in Afghanistan over the last year. Its motivations appear to be threefold: preventing the use of Afghan territory as a safe haven for Islamist militants from its Xinjiang region; expanding its access to Afghanistan's mineral wealth; and furthering its great-power aspirations. Its key relevance for Afghanistan and India is the consideration that it is perhaps the only stakeholder with any measure of influence over the Pakistani military. Unlike the US, which Rawalpindi sees as an unreliable long-term ally, China is an immediate neighbour to Pakistan and

could exercise greater influence over Rawalpindi in the long run. Further, in order to promote its One Belt One Road initiative, China would consider a stable Afghanistan in its interests,¹³ which presents a potential area of convergence for Beijing, Delhi and Kabul.

Russia is another important regional player, and is currently adopting a wait-and-watch approach towards the QCG's efforts. Given its rivalry with the US over events in Syria and Ukraine, Afghanistan is an area where Russia could seek greater influence.¹⁴ Russia is also concerned about Islamist militancy and narcotics-trafficking reaching its own territory via Central Asia. However, the Soviet and American experiences in Afghanistan have so far prevented it from getting too closely involved. Despite its caution, Russia may eventually seek an expanded presence in the country, possibly in collaboration with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. The three Central Asian states border Afghanistan, and share Russia's concerns over militancy and drug trafficking. A stable Afghanistan would also enable these countries to access markets in South and West Asia. From New Delhi's point of view, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline would serve its energy needs and also help normalise relations with Pakistan.

Iran, as another immediate neighbour of Afghanistan, also has an interest in Afghan stability.¹⁵ Two significant developments over the last year have greatly increased its relevance to India-Afghanistan relations. The first is Tehran's signing of a nuclear deal with Western countries and the following lifting of sanctions, which have expanded the scope for regional cooperation on Afghanistan. India, which has consistently maintained good relations with Iran, can now work more closely with it on the issue without incurring America's displeasure. The second key development is an illustration of how promptly India, Iran and Afghanistan have taken advantage of these improved circumstances. India's recent

signing of a deal with Iran to develop the latter's Chabahar port, along with a trilateral transit agreement that includes Afghanistan, are a huge step forward. These agreements will go a long way in developing regional trade and connectivity that will benefit all three countries economically. They will greatly enhance mutual trade access between India and Afghanistan via Iran, while bypassing Pakistan, which has so far blocked such access via land routes in its territory. They also place the ball in Pakistan's court as to whether it wishes to partake of the prosperity of an interconnected region or get left out by insisting on blocking trade access for neighbouring countries. As one Indian analyst recently noted, closer relations between Afghanistan and India, as facilitated by increased connectivity, could also help normalise India-Pakistan relations.

Finally, no discussion about the future of Afghanistan can be complete without taking into account the wishes of ordinary Afghan people. From a normative point of view, the peace process should not simply be "Afghan-owned and Afghan-led" – which in practice is a euphemism for Pakistani control – it should be Afghan-defined and Afghan-run, taking into account what peace would mean to an average Afghan. Naturally, the opinions of Afghans vary, but field¹⁶ research shows that certain concerns are widely shared. Most Afghans want to live their daily lives without fear of violence. The year 2015 was especially bloody and 2016 is proving no different. The Afghan security forces are seen as struggling, and the daily reality of violence has led to mass emigrations. Those who remain in Afghanistan hope for a functional and transparent administration which is not entangled in its internal differences or in corruption, and instead delivers essential services. They also hope for a unified governmental approach towards the Taliban, and one which does not make too many concessions to outside players. Advocates of ordinary Afghans' aspirations therefore feel that involving too many external stakeholders in the peace process will only be counterproductive, as

that would dilute the Afghan component in the conversation. It is worth noting, however, that India does not seek any role in the current peace process unless invited by Afghans themselves. It is also worth considering that while the wishes of the Afghan people must be the guiding principle for Afghanistan's future, the presence of external stakeholders cannot simply be eliminated. The solution should thus be consistent with Afghan aspirations while accommodating external players without compromising the country's sovereignty.

A VISION FOR PEACE

A vital question for Afghan and international policymakers concerns the shape and content of any future Afghan peace. If peace merely involves an absence of violence in exchange for the prohibitive costs discussed earlier, can there be no better options? What should an ideal Afghan peace look like? Articulating a vision that answers these questions is a matter of not just idealism but also practical urgency, especially in view of calls for a Plan-B as the current peace process appears to be failing.¹⁷

Formulating a definitive Plan B is an urgent task. Fortunately, a more positive prescription for Afghanistan's long-term future exists, and this paper proposes that any Plan B could build upon it. That vision is captured in evocative descriptions of Afghanistan as a potential "crossroads" or "land-bridge"¹⁸ – or more imaginatively, as a "roundabout"¹⁹ – linking South, Central and West Asia. These descriptions of a possible future stand out in stark contrast with the popular Western description of the country as a "graveyard of empires". On the Indian side, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has memorably evoked the prospect of "breakfast in Delhi, lunch in Peshawar and dinner in Kabul." The central concept in these descriptions is the emergence of Afghanistan as a trade, transit and energy hub for the entire region. According to this vision, trucks carrying Indian or Chinese consumer goods would travel all the way to Afghanistan and bring back

Afghan metals, minerals and other raw materials to factories in their own countries. Afghanistan would benefit economically, as would Pakistan, by charging for transit rights. The long-awaited TAPI gas pipeline would become a reality, benefiting all the countries along its route. Afghanistan's enmeshment at the heart of a regional trade network would create a powerful incentive for its warring factions to abandon violence, since prosperity would follow trade, which in turn can only arise if stable conditions exist. Though it might require an initial ceasefire, once the scenario came into play it would create the incentives for maintaining it permanently. All regional countries, including India, Pakistan, China, Iran, Russia and the Central Asian Republics, would reap significant economic benefits.

Such a vision can be dismissed as simply wishful optimism, and is therefore incomplete without any thought on how to translate it into practice. Without discounting the challenges involved, it is worth noting that India has taken some practical steps that are consistent with such a vision, and that there are further specific measures that Indian and Afghan policymakers could take. These measures could help create the conditions for any future Plan B for Afghanistan that involves other regional players. It is also worth noting that this vision will require short- and long-term measures, detailed in the final section of this paper, and that no quick or easy resolution is possible.

India's practical measures so far include its extensive efforts in rebuilding Afghanistan's infrastructure and its socioeconomic engagements there, as well as its signing of a trilateral transit deal with Iran and Afghanistan, all of which have been detailed earlier. Moreover, India has emphasised regional confidence-building, development, governance, and trade and investment, rather than focusing on an exclusively security-centric view. India has successfully advocated for Afghan membership

of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and held an investment summit in Delhi in 2012 to showcase Afghanistan's economic potential. On the Afghan side, there has been a move to include India, along with Iran and Russia, in a 6+1 consultative grouping that also includes the members of the current QCG.²⁰

Such efforts from both sides will prepare the conditions for Afghan peace, and is aligned with India's soft-power approach. It would also be consistent with India's (and, for that matter, Pakistan's) longstanding civilisational and cultural links with Afghanistan, which allow India a fuller understanding of the country, as compared to a Western approach which interprets it via the historical associations of the Anglo-Afghan wars, Cold War, and 9/11.

This alternative approach need not exclude the transfer of more defence equipment from India to Afghanistan, provided such contributions are articulated as part of the larger, more holistic vision. Indeed, an initial ceasefire could come within sight if Afghan security capacity is strengthened to a point where the Afghan government can negotiate from a position of strength. That would set the ball rolling for developing this holistic vision more fully in practice. In the meantime, Pakistan may object to any Indian moves to transfer defence equipment to Afghanistan, but it is worth considering that Pakistani sensitivities are a central factor only as long as insecurity and instability continue in Afghanistan. As Afghan security becomes stronger and as Kabul gains in autonomy and stability, Pakistani objections will dwindle in salience, especially in comparison with the potential economic benefits for Pakistan itself. It would therefore be essential for India to promote a narrative that emphasises the gains to Pakistan from such a vision.

Meanwhile, at the Afghan end, an essential component of the process would be to take on

board the views of ordinary Afghans on what peace would mean to them in progressive socioeconomic terms, beyond being simply the absence of violence. If requested, India can help by engaging Afghan civil society more comprehensively and passing on skills born out of its democratic and civil experience. It can contribute what money cannot buy and what no other regional country – Pakistan, China, Russia or Iran – can provide: experience in building democratic institutions. If this vision is taken forward, it would require significant efforts at building a positive regional narrative, as included in the recommendations below.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper identifies two broad objectives in the way forward for India-Afghanistan relations:

- Bilaterally, there is a need to put down roots for the future. The current goodwill between Afghanistan and India is the result of the latter's development efforts over the years, but most of India's big projects in Afghanistan have now ended. There is therefore a need to plan ahead.
- Multilaterally, there must be a strategic regional approach towards shaping Afghanistan's decade of transformation, guided by the holistic vision described earlier. The first step in this should be to formulate a Plan B as a matter of urgency, given that the current peace process appears to have all but failed.

Accordingly, the following actions are proposed.

Bilateral Steps

- India must continue making financial investments in Afghanistan, but should introduce a more systematic approach towards evaluating the purpose and scope of individual projects. With rising insecurity in Afghanistan, big infrastructure projects may be less feasible in the short term, but India must continue its help

for Afghanistan's socioeconomic sector.

- India must significantly step up military equipment transfers to Afghanistan, especially to strengthen its air power. It must also expand its training and capacity-building support for the ANSF. Towards this end, it must actively implement the relevant provisions of the Agreement on Strategic Partnership. However, the public diplomacy around such measures should emphasise that they are a means to a civilian end: a stable, plural, and progressive Afghanistan.

- India must continue to exercise patience and must not expect Afghanistan's National Unity Government to take any significant bilateral steps, as it is distracted by its challenges. India must also continue to respect Afghanistan's wish to give Pakistan a chance to achieve peace, whether through the current moribund peace process as well as any future peace processes.

- Kabul should engage amenable stakeholders within Afghanistan to discuss the political cost of a Pakistan-backed peace and determine whether Afghanistan is willing to pay it. It should also promote a dialogue within Afghanistan on what elements of a Plan B would be acceptable to various stakeholders. In addition, it should make greater efforts to take on board the perspective of the Afghan population, and to articulate it in international negotiations.

- India should explore the prospects for supplying Afghanistan with affordable and reliable pharmaceutical products. This is an area that requires urgent intervention, since Afghanistan currently gets cheap medicines from Pakistan with poor quality control. As an immediate measure, India can provide Afghan hospitals and clinics with low-cost kits to conduct medical tests.

- India can also help school-level education in

Afghanistan by printing and supplying textbooks, or helping set up facilities in Afghanistan to carry this out.

- India should engage with Afghan civil society and help build institutions to foster democratic youth leaders for Afghanistan's future.

Multilateral steps

- A Plan B must be devised as a matter of urgency. India's official establishment and Indian think tanks should promote a regional dialogue and champion the holistic vision described earlier. Efforts should be made via this dialogue to evolve a Plan B for Afghanistan.

- India should use the platform of SAARC to pressure Pakistan into providing overland trade access – a step that will also help open Pakistani markets to Indian trade. In order to achieve this, India and Afghanistan should use their recently signed transit agreement with Iran as leverage, as the deal places the onus on Pakistan to participate in regional trade or be left out.


- Keeping in mind that a war of ideas will form a critical aspect of Afghanistan's future over the next decade, India should proactively engage in narrative-building. Several steps can be taken to achieve this. Highlighting the positive aspects of Afghanistan rather than simply its security challenges is important, and there is a need to more actively contest the Pakistani doctrine of strategic depth. India must also engage in public diplomacy to respond to allegations that it is using its consulates in Afghanistan to destabilise Pakistan. This is necessary in view of advice from Afghan analysts who say that such allegations are finding a willing audience among some circles in Afghanistan.

- India should act as a voice for Afghan security interests in Washington, rather than leave this task to Pakistan. It must present these interests in the context of a holistic view of the country, rather than reinforce the prevailing

security-centric view.

■ Trilateral cooperation among India, Afghanistan and China should be explored. China has influence over the Pakistani military and has an interest in a stable Afghanistan, while India can take advantage of China's One Belt One Road project in promoting Afghanistan as a trade

and transit hub. Multilateral cooperation with Russia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Iran can also be explored. Promoting the TAPI gas pipeline should be prioritised.

■ India should continue to host Afghan students, and can also approach other countries such as Germany to finance their education. 

ENDNOTES

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policy of seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan against India. In view of Pakistan's narrow geographical territory, its military reportedly fears that an Indian invasion could divide the country into two. By this reasoning, the Pakistani military requires Afghan territory to be available for a retreat in the event of an Indian attack, from where it can regroup and organise a counter-attack. For a more detailed explanation, see the following article by Aziz Hakimi on the website Open Democracy: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/aziz-hakimi/af-pak-what-strategic-depth>

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-43520020, 30220020. Fax : +91-11-43520003, 23210773
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org