

Center for American Progress



Toward Convergence: An Agenda for U.S.-India Cooperation in Afghanistan

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Daniel Rubin, and Peter Juul May 2013

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Introduction and summary

As the United States reduces its military presence in Afghanistan and transfers security control to the Afghan government in 2014, the governments in New Delhi and Washington should find ways to strengthen their partnership in Afghanistan. At the same time, they should embed it in a sustainable structure of regional cooperation in order to ensure the future stability of Afghanistan. The United States and India share a number of objectives in Afghanistan and the wider region, including:

- A unified and territorially integrated Afghanistan
- A sovereign, independent, and functional Afghan government based on the principles underlying the current constitution, including democracy, nonviolent political competition, and basic human rights for both women and men
- An Afghanistan that prevents terrorist groups from using its territory to train and mount attacks both in the region and around the world
- An Afghanistan that serves as a central trade and transit hub connecting South and Central Asia
- A stable and responsible Pakistan that prevents militant groups from operating within its territory and seeks economic and political cooperation with its neighbors

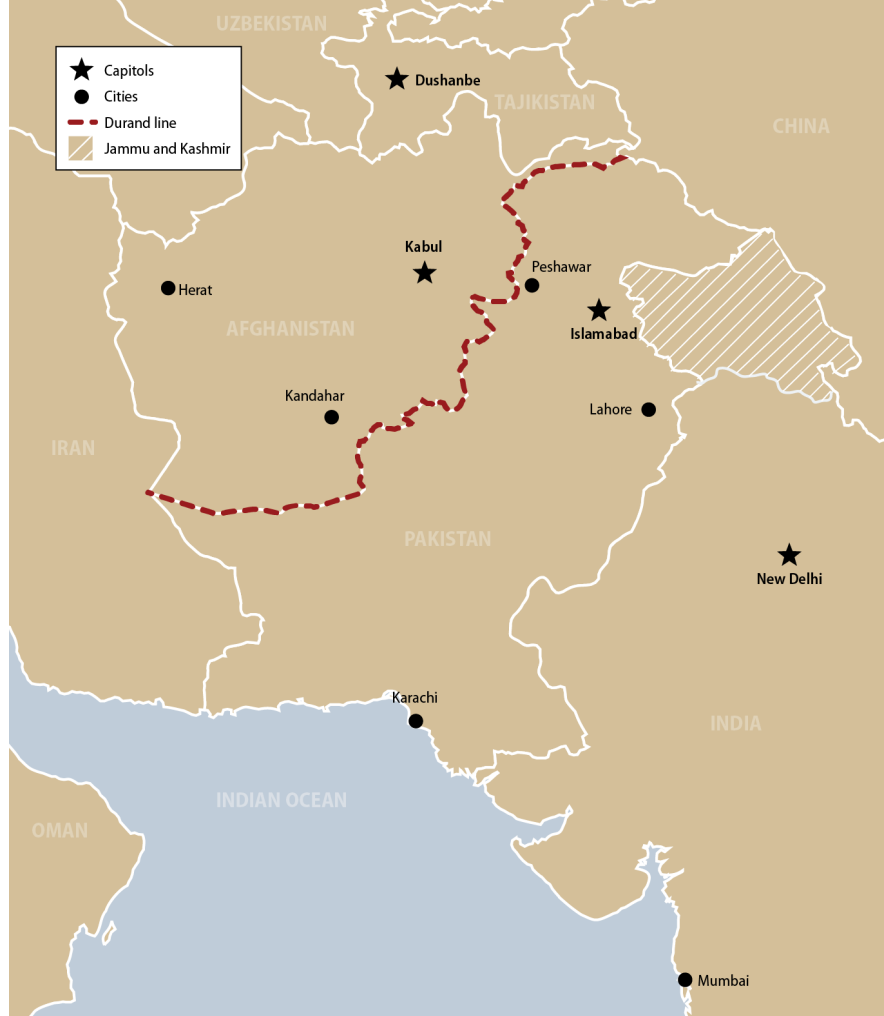
Until recently the United States discouraged active Indian military involvement in Afghanistan due to sensitivities toward Pakistani fears of encirclement by India.¹ New Delhi's own instinct was to move cautiously in Afghanistan, focusing on economic development, building infrastructure, and social-sector projects despite its larger security interests. But as the relationship between India and the United States has deepened over the last decade—combined with plans for the transfer of security responsibility to the Afghan government in 2014—U.S. and Indian policymakers have an opportunity for an enhanced partnership in Afghanistan. As U.S. Deputy Secretary of State William Burns stated during his visit to India in

October 2012, “there has never been a moment when India and America mattered more to one another. And there has never been a moment when partnership between us mattered more to the rest of the globe.”²

While shared objectives provide a foundation for U.S.-India collaboration in Afghanistan, deeper cooperation is not inevitable. U.S. and Indian policies have often worked in parallel rather than in concert and have been further impeded by differing policy approaches in Afghanistan, as well as in the region. The United States has been directly involved in Afghanistan, deploying thousands of troops and billions of dollars of economic assistance, while India has sought to build up diplomatic and economic ties with the country.

Differences between the two countries remain. While the United States and India share many of the same concerns over negotiations with the Taliban, the reliability of Pakistan as a partner in supporting peace in Afghanistan, and the need for Afghan ownership of any political settlement, the Indian and U.S. assessments of the risks involved and the best path forward do not always coincide. Such differences are understandable given the two countries’ differing locations, rivalries, political pressures, foreign-policy priorities, and capacities for addressing challenges in Afghanistan and around the world.

Both the United States and India share the goal of a negotiated political settlement in Afghanistan. To this end, the United States has fitfully pursued talks with the Taliban and other Afghan militants since 2010 while maintaining a realistic view of the potential for success. While India is more agreeable now to the overall goal of a negotiated settlement, policymakers in New Delhi say that they are more suspicious than their Washington counterparts of the Taliban and other militants.³ As a result the path forward for both countries will be in finding common ground on the course and substance of future efforts to negotiate a political settlement in Afghanistan.



Both the United States and India similarly believe that Afghan stability requires Pakistani support and that accommodation of Pakistan's legitimate security interests will be necessary. The challenge for the United States and India is to determine a mutually acceptable understanding of Pakistan's "legitimate" interests. India, similar to the United States, is wary of the Pakistani military defining these interests, and New Delhi believes that the Pakistani military has not given up its longstanding goal of a weak and pliable Afghanistan aligned with Islamabad. Because the government in New Delhi feels more directly vulnerable to Pakistani actions or inactions, many Indian policymakers fear that the United States will be too quick to trust the Pakistani military leadership and cede it an outsized influence over Afghanistan's future.⁴

At the same time, Indian and U.S. policymakers view Iran and its potential role in Afghanistan differently. U.S. policymakers are much more adverse to Iranian involvement given Tehran's malign international behavior—from its failure to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency over its nuclear program to Tehran's direct support for terrorism groups. Indian policymakers, on the other hand, aim to maintain an amicable relationship with Iran in order to ensure access to Afghanistan if instability worsens or tensions with Pakistan rise, as well as to satisfy growing domestic energy demands.

Concerning the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, the Obama administration argues that the United States needs to draw down the vast majority of its forces in order to be able to better align its military posture and resources with a changed strategic environment—one in which Afghanistan is not a central priority—as well as to reduce the negative consequences of a large U.S. military presence and force Afghan leaders to take greater responsibility for their own security and future. U.S. policymakers ultimately believe that the United States can protect its interests and contain the instability in Afghanistan through a small reserve force post-2014, performing counterterrorism operations and training of the Afghanistan National Security Forces, or ANSF.⁵ India, however, worries that the United States is withdrawing too quickly and that it will leave behind an unstable environment in which Pakistan wields excessive influence and terrorist groups can find sanctuary.

The United States and India should address these differences over the next year and beyond to prevent a divergence in policy approaches. India and the United States must seek better coordination of their policies or risk deepening instability in Afghanistan. Washington and New Delhi can complement each other's efforts

by utilizing their strengths, unique relationships with countries in the region, and relationships with Afghan actors to further mutual goals related to security, economic integration, and political stability. The trilateral diplomatic framework between Afghanistan, India, and the United States, for example, offers one such forum for the pursuit of these discussions and should be bolstered.

The following recommendations offer a way to move toward a common regional strategy between the United States and India. The United States and India should undertake the following:

- **Support a strengthened political consensus in Afghanistan.**
 - Support Afghanistan’s upcoming presidential elections in 2014 through greater encouragement and emphasis on the creation of an Independent Election Commission, an electoral complaints mechanism, and clear rules surrounding the elections.
 - Encourage the political consensus building among Afghan elites and civil society that is occurring alongside the formal election process in order to foster a more legitimate electoral outcome.
 - Strengthen Afghan government institutions and advance broader Afghan political reforms through training Afghan government officials at all levels and allocating more assistance through the Afghan government while leveraging these funds to push for good governance reforms as committed to in the Tokyo Framework.
 - Consult more extensively on negotiations with the insurgent groups while recognizing that the United States will play a more central role in those negotiations than India.
 - Facilitate a larger reconciliation effort among a diverse set of Afghan stakeholders and countries in the region. The United States and India should use their unique relationships with Afghans and membership in organizations to advance political agreements among Afghans while nesting them within a larger regional framework.

- **Encourage political and economic regional integration through U.S. and Indian collaboration to bolster regional trade and dialogue.**

- Consult more closely on U.S. and Indian approaches to Pakistan. The United States should attempt to facilitate dialogue between India and Pakistan, and between India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan in a quadrilateral forum.
- Maintain focus on economic integration through sustained engagement with the private sector, multilateral forums and organizations, and other countries to ensure sustained financial support for Afghanistan’s economic integration into the South and Central Asia regions.
- Extend dialogue to additional countries by leveraging the respective regional partnerships and alliances of the United States and India to advance shared goals in Afghanistan. This includes India’s relationships with Iran and Russia, and the United States’ relationship with Pakistan.

- **Strengthen Afghan National Security Forces, with India providing more financial assistance, training, and support.**

- Allocate Indian government funding for the ANSF in consultation with existing NATO and U.N. security force trust funds, including the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan, in order to best coordinate with other international donors in line with the needs of the Afghan forces.
- India should respond positively to the requests from Kabul for greater material assistance to the Afghan National Security Forces.
- Increase Indian training of the Afghan National Police and continue training the Afghan National Army.
- Support the development of military infrastructure in Afghanistan based on the needs of the Afghan government.
- Create a mechanism for consultation between the government of India and the NATO International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, to increase the effectiveness of their security assistance programs to Afghanistan.