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The New York Times

Indian and Afghan Leaders Forge Deeper Ties in Meeting

By Alissa J. Rubin - Sangar Rahimi

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Afghanistan and India agreed to move ahead on a strategic partnership framework during a visit to the Afghan capital by India's prime minister on Thursday, just weeks after a visit from the prime minister of Pakistan, India's archrival.

The agreement, which is still in the drafting stages, would center on economic development but would also include an educational component. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also announced that India would invest an additional \$500 million on projects here, bringing its total investment in Afghanistan to \$2 billion.

Coming on the heels of a visit by much of Pakistan's civilian and military leadership, including Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani, the Indians' trip was a reminder of how much Pakistan and India are competing for geopolitical advantage in Afghanistan, and it underscored President Hamid Karzai's efforts to court the two countries. It has been a difficult balancing act because they are so fiercely antagonistic toward each other.

Mr. Karzai took care to nod to Pakistan on Thursday even as he was thanking Mr. Singh. "Afghanistan wants a good relationship with Pakistan, a friendly and brotherly relationship with Pakistan," he said. "And His Excellency, the prime minister of India, had the same view about the region. And our goal is to bring a peaceful and prosperous life for the people of the region."

India has focused on helping Afghanistan with economic investment and development, including the construction of a new Parliament building, and road and electrical projects. Several Indian companies are bidding for the right to develop the vast iron ore deposits in the Hajigak area of Bamian Province. The Pakistanis, however, suspect that India uses its presence here to spy on Pakistan.

Mr. Gilani had suggested during his visit that Pakistan and Afghanistan could help each other on a number of unspecified economic development projects and in the fight against terrorism. It subsequently emerged that Pakistani officials had also suggested to the Afghan officials that they move closer to China, implicitly lessening their reliance on the United States, and turn more to Pakistan for military support like training the Afghan Army.

At almost the same time as the leaders were meeting, British soldiers in Helmand Province were playing soccer with Afghan federal police officers in a game that turned deadly after a dispute, said the Helmand police chief, Mohammed Hakim Angaar. One of the officers picked up a gun and shot at the soldiers, killing at least one of them and wounding three, General Angaar said. A spokesman for the British in Helmand confirmed the casualties to Afghan journalists.