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India, US now disagree on Afghanistan crisis

By Jyoti Malhotra

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The crisis in Afghanistan is the latest source of disagreement between India and the US, with External Affairs Minister SM Krishna rejecting US top commander in Afghanistan, Stanley McChrystal's remarks that Indian influence in that country was likely "to exacerbate regional tensions and encourage Pakistani counter-measures."

"This is a baseless allegation," Krishna said in New York, adding, "India's role in Afghanistan is to help them to stabilise on their infrastructure development...That's our immediate concern. That is the reason why we were asked to come to Afghanistan. We are building roads, we are building school buildings and we are building transmission lines," he said.

Indian officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said they were surprised and angered at the US general's remarks, describing it as "entrenched Pentagon thinking," but pointed out that the Obama administration itself seemed divided on its Afghan policy and India's role in it.

Krishna also called for a "political settlement" of the Afghan crisis, indicating that Delhi would favour a government of national unity in Afghanistan after the disputed elections, in which people from Abdullah Abdullah's camp could join a government led by President Hamid Karzai.

While India issued a statement welcoming the victory of the "democratic forces," signaling it was ready to do business with Karzai who had won 54.62 per cent of the vote, US officials openly complained of fraud and rigging by Karzai and his men.

"Karzai is a friend of India, as is Abdullah Abdullah. But if the Afghans have elected him, then his victory is good for Afghanistan and good for India," a senior official said on condition of anonymity.

Meanwhile, Peter Galbraith, the UN deputy representative in Kabul and a close friend of “AfPak” envoy Richard Holbrooke, asked for at least 1,000 booths to be re-pollled, alleging that they had been rigged by Karzai’s people.

The divergence of assessment between India and the US on Afghanistan comes in the wake of differences on climate change and non-proliferation issues. Both sides are now hoping that President Barack Obama will reset the tone for America’s India policy when he receives Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on a state visit to Washington DC from November 22-25.

The prime minister is the first foreign visitor who is being given the honour of a state visit by the Obama administration, but on the ground several differences seem to be widening the perception gap.

What has really upset India is McChrystal’s refusal to identify the prime motivators behind the insurgency, although he has admitted that the three key groups — the Quetta Shura Taliban, headed by Mullah Omar, who live and direct their operations from the Pakistani city of Quetta, the Haqqani network and the Hezb-i-Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar — are supported “from Pakistan”.

“In Helmand, which is the size of Switzerland, the insurgents carry out strikes in Afghanistan and then slip back into Pakistan. But is anyone going after the Quetta Shura?” asked a government official.