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India promises to prop up Karzai

By M K Bhadrakumar

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President Hamid Karzai's two-day visit to India presages a major realignment of regional powers over the Afghan problem. India has taken a carefully thought-out decision to pitch for a key role in the so-called "endgame" in Afghanistan, commensurate with its aspirations as a regional power and in defense of what it considers to be its vital interests against the backdrop of a developing situation about which it is genuinely concerned.

India, however, will not get away unchallenged in its newfound "pro-activism" and how the ensuing regional rivalries will play out in the coming period remains far from clear. The cloudy horizons may have got just a bit darker as Karzai's presidential jet takes off from the Indian capital on Wednesday.

Karzai, too, had a mission on his mind as he headed for Delhi. Late on Monday evening, on the eve of his departure for India, he spoke candidly about his political predicament. His much-touted reconciliation policy toward the Taliban is at a dead-end and for crafting a way forward he needs to get a fresh mandate from a loya jirga (tribal assembly) that will be convened for the purpose.

He blamed Pakistan for being uncooperative in the peace process and yet he acknowledged that he needed to talk to Islamabad, being mindful that it also is what the United States and the international community want him to do - despite the wave of "anti-Pakistan" sentiments sweeping large sections of Afghan society and notwithstanding the deep and entrenched aversion to any truck with Pakistan over the Taliban that many figures within his own coalition harbor.

The leadership in Kabul has traditionally reached out to India as a counterweight to Pakistan. Karzai's visit to Delhi (his second visit in seven months) falls within that classic mould, but what gives added dimension to his mission is that his principal political allies at home - groups belonging to the erstwhile Northern Alliance (NA) - also happen to be forces closely associated with India for the past several years.

His two vice presidents, Mohammed Fahim and Karim Khalili, were leading figures in the anti-Taliban resistance, which India promoted, and Fahim, in particular, is the inheritor of the war machine of the late Ahmad Shah Massoud who was substantially supported by the Indian security establishment during the anti-Taliban resistance of the late 1990s.

If Delhi has decided to take the plunge and stand overtly behind the Karzai-Fahim-Khalili axis of power that is taking shape in Kabul, it is because the Indian political leadership is acceding to certain compelling reasons given by the country's security establishment.

First and foremost, there is deep disillusionment over United States policies and a resultant feeling that India must pursue an independent course in Afghanistan to safeguard its security interests. The US's pattern of intermittently quarreling and depending on Pakistan to advance its regional strategy in Afghanistan exasperates the Indian establishment.

Just as Indian pundits concluded that the recent rift in US-Pakistan ties was far too advanced to lend itself to repair, Washington has once again kissed and made up with Islamabad. New details have begun emerging that the US Central Intelligence Agency might have taken the help of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence in contacting the Haqqani network and that the US would have offered the Haqqanis a place in the Afghan government.

The fact that the US and Pakistan may be working together to finesse the Haqqani network (which India holds responsible for the two murderous attacks on its embassy in Kabul) and bring it into the peace process horrifies Delhi and it runs contrary to repeated American assurances to Indian officials.

Besides, Delhi is convinced that Pakistan masterminded the assassination of the head of the Afghan High Peace Council, Burhanuddin Rabbani, who was close to India, as part of a calculated plan to systematically remove from the political chessboard all figures who may challenge Taliban supremacy in the coming period, especially as the drawdown of US troops accelerates.

Three-pronged strategy

Within the framework of the dialogue with Pakistan, the Indian leadership had somewhat exercised self-restraint in robustly advancing its interests in Afghanistan in the recent period, but the Indian security establishment seems to have concluded that Islamabad is pushing the envelope nonetheless, aimed at exterminating all Indian influence in Kabul in a future set-up dominated by its Taliban proxies.

Equally, Delhi is not convinced about the efficacy of the troop drawdown plan of President Barack Obama. Ironically, India shares the skepticism recently voiced by Pakistani army chief Pervez Kiani as to whether the 2014 timeline to hand over responsibility to the Afghan security forces is realistic under the prevailing circumstances.

Thus, India is taking matters in its own hands, so to speak, to do what it can to ensure that the present power structure in Kabul (which is very well-disposed toward India) gains resilience in the near future.

The concrete outcome of Karzai's visit to India is three-fold and it reveals the range of Indian thinking. First, India is poised to step in for the first time in the post-Taliban era to fulfill a role that it used to perform before the mujahideen takeover in 1992 when Afghanistan was under the communist regime - namely, a commitment to be a mentor of the Afghan security forces.

Second, Delhi is making a strong pitch for a major role in the exploitation of the multi-trillion dollar mineral resources in Afghanistan. Third, India and Afghanistan have decided to work on their respective bilateral cooperation grids with Iran with a view to developing a trade and transit route through Iranian territory, bypassing Pakistan.

Clearly, India visualizes the non-Pashtun groups in central and northern Afghanistan as a bulwark against a Taliban takeover in the country. Yet, India will insistently maintain that its dealings with these groups will be strictly within the framework of a state-to-state relationship, given the alchemy of the political structure in Kabul supporting Karzai.

The point is, Tajik officer corps practically dominate Afghan forces and Delhi can be confident that they can be trusted to resist a return to power of forces such as the Haqqanis supported by Pakistan. In short, Delhi is virtually falling back on the *raison d'etre* of its policy to support the NA in the late 1990s.

Delhi doesn't rule out the possibility of another outbreak of civil war in Afghanistan. It is reviving its interest in "operationalizing" an airstrip it built in Tajikistan out of its own funds and has sought permission from Dushanbe to reopen a military hospital it built in the late 1990s at Farkhor on the Afghan border to provide medical treatment to the NA warriors fighting the Taliban.

Pakistan is sure to perceive the forthcoming Indian role as mentor of the Afghan forces and Delhi's decision to resuscitate its infrastructure in Tajikistan that used to provide underpinnings for the erstwhile NA's militia as moves directed against its "legitimate interests" in Afghanistan. The stage is getting set for a rather vicious eruption of Pakistan-India animosities. Pakistan's "asymmetrical" response in the past typically took the form of terrorist strikes at targeted Indian interests.

Indian restraint was commendable in the past when faced with the challenge of terrorism, but there is a school of thinking in the Indian strategic community that it is about time that India calls the Pakistani bluff. At any rate, India seems to anticipate troubled times ahead and has just begun a massive two-month military exercise on its desert border with Pakistan in Rajasthan sector,

involving some 20,000 troops belonging to its strike corps and its air force, with an ambitious agenda to test its offensive plans to capture and hold enemy territory deep inside.

Second, Delhi is encouraging Indian business to invest in Afghanistan's mineral resources by way of emerging as a "stakeholder" in that country. Delhi is currently pushing a policy of acquiring strategic "assets" abroad and Afghanistan's vast mineral resources offer big scope for Indian investment.

Indian corporate giants are getting interested in the proposition, too. An Indian consortium is preparing to participate in the tender for the Hajigak iron ores in Afghanistan, which is estimated to hold reserves of 1.8 billion tonnes. The two memoranda of understanding signed during Karzai's visit to Delhi - relating to the field of mineral exploitation and the development of hydrocarbon - signal the shared interest of the two countries in facilitating large-scale Indian investments in Afghanistan.

To be sure, India's moves in this regard will be keenly watched by other countries, especially China and the US, which are already neck-deep in the scramble for resources in Central Asia. For the first time in the post-Soviet era, India is spreading its wings in the region and is scouting for "assets". While it lags far behind China, it seems to estimate that the game is far from over.

Third, India's main challenge with regard to a trade and transit route to Afghanistan needs to be addressed in priority terms and Karzai's visit provided a timely opportunity to have consultations. Delhi has vaguely spoken for over a decade regarding the importance of a Silk Route via Iran, but a new criticality has arisen. The point is, India cannot hope to have an effective Central Asia policy in the absence of a viable and dependable access route to the region.

Delhi views Iran as the obvious choice as a partner in this regard. Despite the improved climate in India-Pakistan relations and notwithstanding the stirrings of a more relaxed trade regime between the two countries, no one in his senses in Delhi quite expects that Islamabad would facilitate an access route for India's trade and investment ties with Afghanistan where the two countries are locked in rivalry.

Pakistan is dragging its feet with regard to the implementation of the trade and transit treaty it signed with Afghanistan under sustained American prodding. India does not see any prospect of Pakistan agreeing to include it in this treaty, as propagated by US officials. Equally, India is far from optimistic about the US's grandiose Silk Road project connecting the Central Asian and South Asian regions, which is likely to be presented as a major regional initiative at a forthcoming conference in Istanbul on November 2.

Iran gets two suitors

Thus, finally, after some five years of neglect, Delhi has begun dusting up the framework of India-Iran strategic cooperation. This is no easy task, as Tehran harbors a deep sense of hurt that Delhi succumbed to US (and Israeli) pressures to atrophy India's ties with Tehran. But a beginning has been made in a dramatic manner recently with Delhi seeking a bilateral meeting

with Tehran at the highest level of leadership and the latter promptly agreeing.

The fact that last month's meeting between Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad took place in New York - on American soil - was in itself invested with great political symbolism. Clearly, Delhi was preparing the ground for Karzai's forthcoming visit.

At any rate, Manmohan seems to have taken a personal interest in breathing life into the India-Iran strategic partnership, which many hold him as responsible for stifling in recent years in deference to American wishes.

India's rapprochement with Iran coincides with an upswing in the latter's ties with Pakistan. Iran is going to be assiduously courted by the two South Asian rivals. Pakistan's efforts will be to forge a matrix of commonality of interests with Iran over the Afghan situation and India's attempt will also be orientated in the same direction. How Iran balances its multiple choices will form an absorbing template of regional politics.

Pakistan will strive its utmost to avoid a replay of the 1990s when Iran shared common interests with India to resist the Taliban regime. This can only be done by Islamabad accommodating Iran's interests in Afghanistan, while, on the other hand, Delhi will strive to reinforce its shared concerns with Tehran over the prospect of the ascendancy of Islamist forces with a Wahhabi slant in Kabul who enjoyed established links with al-Qaeda in the past.

Pakistan will factor in that the key to keeping India out of Afghanistan and the Central Asian chessboard will depend on its ability to "neutralize" Iran. On the contrary, India will view Iran's cooperation as integral to its strategy toward Afghanistan and Central Asia.

This curious turn to regional politics gives Iran much strategic space to maneuver vis-a-vis the US. Washington's "containment" strategy toward Iran will be virtually rendered ineffectual if India and Pakistan ignore it and forge strategic links with Tehran.

The US will inevitably come to view Indian "proactivism" in Afghanistan with a sense of disquiet, just as it hopes to work with Pakistan to reconcile the Taliban and to bring on board the intransigent Haqqanis. Again, India is identifying itself as, arguably, the strongest supporter of Karzai in the region at a time when the US is patently disillusioned with the Afghan leader and is counting on the remaining part of his second term in office to somehow get over so that by 2014 a new leadership can take over in Kabul.

The US and its Western allies and the Afghan opposition have openly welcomed Karzai's hints that he may not seek a third term (which the Afghan constitution also forbids) but they would know that the doughty Afghan leader possesses acute political instincts and they may not have heard the last word on the matter. India's seamless support for Karzai could become a headache for the US and its allies to dethrone him.

Delhi, on the other hand, will assess that its interests are best served in an alliance between Karzai and his erstwhile NA allies perpetuating their hold on power. The bottom line is that

Karzai's coalition comprising powerful NA satraps serves Indian interests. The strong expression of support to Karzai by Manmohan leaves no one in doubt as to the thinking in the security establishment in Delhi that India should go the whole hog to prop up anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan.

At a press conference with Karzai on Tuesday, Manmohan said meaningfully, "India will stand by the people of Afghanistan as they prepare to assume the responsibility for their governance and security after the withdrawal of international forces in 2014."

Karzai echoed his trust in the Indian commitment by pointing out that the strategic agreement with India that was signed during his visit was the first such agreement Afghanistan had ever concluded. He seems to have implied that he was prepared to accord India the pride of place as one of his most valuable partners. (The US-Afghan strategic agreement is due to be signed by the time of the Bonn conference in December.)

Again, the US will have misgivings about the decision by Afghanistan and India to rev up a trade and transit route via Iran. The very purpose of the US's Silk Road project with Afghanistan as a regional hub, which it is pushing with its European allies, aims at sidelining Iran (and Russia) in the "new great game". Whereas, Delhi now is showing preference to Iran for providing it with an access route that connects it with Central Asia (and Russia).

In overall terms, Washington is not going to be enthused by these Indian moves in Afghanistan, even if it doesn't pour cold water on Delhi's high enthusiasm for the Karzai regime. The US special representative on Afghanistan, Marc Grossman, is scheduled to visit India this week and will patiently search for rational explanations by his Indian interlocutors, while keeping his counsel to himself.

The big question, therefore, remains to be answered: Will it prove to be within Delhi's capacity to advance on its own such an ambitious agenda of all-round strategic partnership with Afghanistan? High hopes have been raised during Karzai's visit, but the pitfalls of Indian policies cannot escape notice, either.

India's record of fulfilling its commitments to its "allies" (not only Afghan) has been patchy. India repeatedly failed at critical points to bolster the NA despite its pleas when the Taliban juggernaut began rolling into the Amu Darya region. Meanwhile, Karzai would also know Pakistan's centrality in any Afghan peace process and India can never be a substitute for Pakistan.

The situation around Iran is central to the US's Middle East policies and the present government in Delhi may lack the grit to indulge in an act of strategic defiance of Washington. The Indian elites are not inclined to allow any serious contradiction to arise in the US-India strategic partnership in relation to the region - although they view with extreme distaste Washington's overtures to Beijing to step in as a provider of security for Afghanistan and as a "stakeholder" in the regional stability of South Asia.

All that can be said for certain for the present is that the Indian military and security establishment may have scored a huge propaganda point over its rivals in Rawalpindi and Islamabad by succeeding after six years of persistent effort to gain the status of a mentor of the Afghan armed forces. There is a heady feeling among the strategic community that India has at long last become a player in the "great game".

Will Indian military advisors be stationed in Afghanistan? If that happens, the Indian political leadership cannot overlook the grim prospect of the nascent dialogue process with Pakistan disintegrating in no time. It is highly unlikely that Islamabad (or Washington) would countenance an Indian military presence in the Hindu Kush.

At the end of it all, Delhi would do well to remember as well that all its support to the regime of Mohammad Najibullah - political, military, security and economic - still did not prevent the regime from collapsing in 1992 when the mujahideen came knocking on the doors of Kabul.

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