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The Associated Press

Karzai says India, US deals no threat to region

By KRISHAN FRANCIS

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ADDU, Maldives – Afghan President Hamid Karzai attempted to ease tensions with Pakistan, asserting Thursday that a strategic partnership with India and talks for a similar U.S. deal do not threaten his country's neighbors.

Pakistan had reacted angrily to the India deal announced last month that many in Islamabad fear would increase its archenemy's influence in Afghanistan.

The pact, the first Afghanistan has signed with any country, included provisions for India to help train and equip Afghan security forces.

Some feared Pakistan could respond by ramping up its alleged support for Afghan insurgents to ensure that its own influence in its neighboring country did not wane.

Karzai told leaders of South Asian nations at a regional summit in the Maldives that the India agreement, along with talks it was holding with the United States for another strategic partnership, was intended to promote peace.

"I wish to reassure our neighbors ... that none of our partnerships we forge now or in the future shall pose a threat to our neighbors or to our region," he said.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since they became independent from Britain in 1947, and Pakistan is sensitive to any signs India could be gaining an upper hand in the region.

Pakistan is also under increasing U.S. pressure to cut ties with militants who could be potential allies against Indian influence in Afghanistan once Washington withdraws its combat troops in 2014.

The relations between India and Pakistan have shown signs of improvement recently. Pakistan granted Most Favored Nation status to India to normalize trade while India had supported Pakistan gain non-permanent member status in the United Nations Security Council.

Also Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his Pakistani counterpart Yousuf Raza Gilani met at the sidelines of SAARC on Thursday after which Singh declared that both countries should stop wasting time exchanging barbs and open a new chapter in their relations.

Praising the developments Karzai said "I hope such examples of goodwill and confidence building will become the norm rather than the exception in South Asia."

Karzai said there was a need for a collective regional action against terrorism and such action would require "overcoming trust deficit" between countries, in indirect reference to India and Pakistan.