

ISAS Brief

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India and Afghanistan: A Deepening Defence Engagement

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In a clear message to the incoming Afghan Government, India has decided to step up its defence engagement with Afghanistan. According to media reports, the Indian Government recently reached a long-term agreement with Russia to supply arms to the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF).² Under the terms of the agreement, the military equipment will be sourced from Russia and will be paid for by New Delhi. Initial military supplies will include small arms and ammunition but could eventually lead to the transfer of heavy artillery, tanks and even combat helicopters.

In October 2011, India and Afghanistan signed a strategic partnership agreement, emphasising enhanced security and defence cooperation. Following the agreement, there was hope amongst Afghan officials that New Delhi would intensify civilian and military aid to Afghanistan. During

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² Pranab Dhal Samanta, 'India to pay Russia for arms, ammo it sells to Afghanistan', *Indian Express*, 18 April 2014. Available at: <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/india-to-pay-russia-for-arms-ammo-it-sells-to-afghanistan/>

official visits to India, Afghan President Hamid Karzai formally requested his Indian counterparts for sophisticated military hardware to equip Afghanistan's armed forces.³ Yet, despite what India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) calls an "abiding commitment to peace, stability and prosperity in Afghanistan", the issue of sharing military equipment failed to progress.

Current bilateral security cooperation between India and Afghanistan is limited to the training and higher military education of Afghan soldiers and police forces in India. The number of Afghan National Army (ANA) personnel being trained at various Indian Army establishments has gone up from 574 in 2012 to "well over 1000" by July 2013. While such capacity-building efforts will prove beneficial in the long-run, ANSF requirements in the short-term relate to military equipment without which it is at a disadvantage when dealing with the ongoing insurgency. Even though it is an important stakeholder in the region, India has taken a restrained and less-direct approach to Afghan stability. New Delhi has firmly opposed sending troops into Afghanistan and is wary of supplying military equipment to Kabul.

Policy makers at South Block – headquarters of India's Ministry of External Affairs – have heretofore worked under the assumption that India can best contribute to Afghanistan's stability through economic development assistance.⁴ A more proactive security policy where India transfers military equipment to Afghanistan is fraught with complications and generates significant discomfiture within the Indian Government. Foremost is the threat of retaliatory action from Pakistan. For decades, Afghanistan has been the theatre where foreign rivalries play out. During the 19th century, Britain sparred with France and then Russia for influence in the region. Present-day Afghanistan bears witness to the complexities of the India-Pakistan relationship. Islamabad considers Afghanistan to be a strategic neighbourhood and is wary of India's expanding influence in the region. That India might outflank Pakistan or deny it 'strategic depth' by strengthening pro-Indian quarters in Afghanistan ranks high in Islamabad's national

³ President Karzai visited India in May and December of 2013. His visits generated significant media attention owing to the 'wish list' of military hardware that he brought with him. According to reports circulating in the Indian media, the list of military hardware contained orders for 105 millimetre artillery, An.32 medium-lift aircraft, bridge-laying equipment, trucks and helicopter gunships.

⁴ In conversation with Karl F. Inderfurth, India's current ambassador to Afghanistan, Amar Sinha, offers that India is best positioned to assist with the economic transition in Afghanistan. See 'India Looks to Afghanistan's "Year of Transition"' CSIS US-India Insight, Vol. 3, Issue 12 (Dec. 2013).

security matrix. Should Pakistan choose to view recent developments as inimical to its security interests, that could exacerbate tensions leading to an escalation of regional rivalries with dangerous implications for Afghanistan's stability. It could force the Pakistani establishment to recalibrate its strategic calculus into expanding support for the Afghan Taliban and the more extremist Haqqani Network as a check against Indian influence in the region.

Material support for the ANSF could also upset the balance of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. The porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan – otherwise known as the Durand Line – has been a major source of tension between the two countries. The 2,640-km long border runs directly through the homeland of Pashtuns – Afghanistan's largest ethnic community – and splits it in two. Kabul has consistently rejected the legitimacy of the 1893 border agreement signed between the erstwhile governments of British India and Afghanistan. For Pakistan, a demarcation contest could encourage Pashtun ethnic loyalty resulting in the renewed demand for a united 'Pashtunistan'. The stand-off has continued to escalate and has led to numerous border clashes between Afghan and Pakistani armed forces with casualties on both sides. A two-hour skirmish on 2 May 2013 in the Goshta Area along the disputed border led to an exchange of artillery and mortar rounds.⁵ Both nations tread a delicate tightrope; should the stand-off continue, such skirmishes could transform into a full-scale border conflict that either side can ill-afford.

Factor in Indian-sponsored military equipment for the ANSF, and the situation along the Af-Pak border becomes even more volatile. According to the noted Pakistani author and journalist Ahmed Rashid, the United States ensured that it rebuilt the ANSF as a "lightly armed force".⁶ This has placed a glass ceiling over the border dispute, preventing it from gradually escalating. Should India follow through with this new agreement, it could act as a catalyst and change the rules of engagement. The ANSF, if so armed with offensive and heavy weaponry, could intensify its response along the Af-Pak border thereby letting the conflict grow in severity.

⁵ Sayed Salahuddin, 'Afghan, Pakistani forces again clash on disputed border; NATO troops broker truce', *The Washington Post*, 6 May 2013. Available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghan-pakistani-forces-again-clash-on-disputed-border-nato-troops-broker-truce/2013/05/06/748d0d8c-b64c-11e2-aa9e-a02b765ff0ea_story.html

⁶ Ahmed Rashid, 'Viewpoint: India risks destabilising Afghanistan', *BBC News Asia*, 6 May 2014. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27258566>

Of course, New Delhi could argue that it is helping Afghanistan prepare for the security transition ahead. As US-led coalition troops withdraw from Afghanistan, regional neighbours like India and Pakistan would do well to supplement Afghan efforts to ensure a successful transition. With US\$ 2 billion in development aid (India is the sixth largest donor) and approximately 100 companies having invested in Afghanistan since 2001, it is fair to say that New Delhi is an important stakeholder in the region. The latest issue of transferring military supplies through Russia signals that India is ready to increase its share of responsibility in keeping Afghanistan stable. New Delhi has enhanced security cooperation with Afghanistan, yet in doing so it has also risked setting off Pakistani suspicions. It is clear that as the situation evolves it will have wide-ranging consequences not just for Afghanistan but rather for much of South Asia.

In many ways this latest development comes at an opportune time for Afghanistan. The consistent downward trend in US-Afghan relations has threatened the Bilateral Security Agreement for the continued presence of US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) troops following the drawdown. In the past, the US has linked Western patronage of Afghan forces to the signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement. Given that Kabul is not remotely capable of financing a security force of 300,000 troops on its own, the impasse in negotiations is of huge consequence when calculating the future of Afghan stability. In the absence of US-led counter-terrorism force and guaranteed financing for the ANSF, the agreement between India and Russia comes as a welcome reprieve for the incoming Afghan Government. It is important, however, that Pakistan does not misinterpret India's actions and react, seeking in its view to even the score. Such an event could bring the parties to the precipice of an even deeper crisis.

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