

# India and the U.S. moving closer on Afghanistan?

The U.S. and India are getting more interested in negotiations with the Afghan Taliban. Their evolving policies could benefit from closer U.S.-India consultations, and from backchannel India-Pakistan talks on Afghanistan.

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In the weeks since the dramatic U.S. raid on Abbottabad that killed Osama bin Laden, the signs point to a subtle shift in the way both India and the United States are looking at Afghanistan's future. The U.S. interest in negotiations that include the Afghan Taliban grows steadily stronger; India's willingness to work with an Afghanistan where Taliban share in power has also grown. The Afghan dance India has initiated cannot be completed without some additional Pakistan steps.

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U.S. interest in negotiations with the Taliban has been taking shape for the past six months at least. The late Richard Holbrooke championed a "reintegration" programme to bring Taliban foot soldiers into the government's tent. He spoke of the U.S. preference for "Afghan-led reconciliation," focussing on Taliban figures who were prepared to eschew violence and break with al-Qaeda. His successor, Marc Grossman, a less flamboyant but more systematic diplomat, has made creating a real negotiating option his priority. The first crisis of his tenure, the Ray Davis affair that convulsed U.S.-Pakistan relations from January through March 2011, nearly closed down communications between the United States and Pakistan. The U.S. administration has long believed that it cannot achieve a satisfactory outcome in Afghanistan without Pakistani cooperation. The poisonous relations between the U.S. and Pakistani security establishments over the Davis affair made that goal much harder to achieve — but arguably more important.

The adjustments in India's policy toward Afghanistan were on public display when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Kabul on May 12-13. Two key points stood out. One struck a familiar note: his commitment to an additional \$500 million in civilian aid, with a broad portfolio of humanitarian, infrastructure, and institutional development projects. He also renewed India's commitment to provide training for Afghanistan's police, an important potential contribution to security.

The new feature of Manmohan Singh's visit to Kabul lay in his good wishes for Afghanistan's "process of national rec-



**INDIA'S 'AFGHAN DANCE':** A promising beginning, though there will be difficult passages ahead. A 2005 photograph of Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai (left) with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the inauguration of the Habibia High School in Kabul, where New Delhi reaffirmed its commitment to help rebuilding the war-torn nation. — PHOTO: REUTERS

onciliation," code for negotiations with the Taliban. He stressed India's commitment to seeing Afghanistan at peace with its neighbours. This is the most authoritative and explicit statement to date that India will accept a negotiating process in which Taliban participate. The Prime Minister's declaration that Osama's death created a "new situation" further evidenced India's interest in

helping shape a peaceful future with Afghanistan.

The United States, trying to rescue a working relationship with Pakistan from the wreckage of the Davis and Osama episodes, received Manmohan Singh's Kabul message warmly. Washington has long supported India's economic contribution to Afghanistan. Now, Washington is looking more warmly on India's broad-

er training offers — not just for new parliamentarians and the Afghan election commission, but also in the more sensitive area of policing. The U.S. is gingerly moving toward a greater consciousness of the regional dimension in shaping Afghanistan's future.

But the most difficult piece of this regional puzzle is Pakistan. Like it or not, geography and history make it an essential participant in working out the future *modus vivendi* among the major Afghan players. Pakistan's goal is to freeze India out. India's new message treats Pakistan with more care and subtlety than the old one: Manmohan Singh's Kabul speeches referred repeatedly to the importance of peace with all Afghanistan's neighbours, and the latest statements come against the background of some modest progress in economic talks between India and Pakistan. But the Pakistani press, especially its more nationalist members, zeroed in on Indian statements in Kabul that appeared to be code words for keeping Pakistan at arm's length.

India's Afghan dance has had a promising beginning, though there will be difficult passages ahead. Two moves could improve its chances of success over the long term. The first is a significant deepening of U.S.-Indian dialogue on Afghanistan, including not just economics but also politics and security. This is especially important at a time when the U.S. and Pakistan are trying to recalibrate their relationship, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's just-concluded visit to Islamabad.

The second would be to add Afghanistan to the agenda for backchannel talks with Pakistan, should that channel reopen. This is a tough assignment. Pakistanis, deeply suspicious about Indian activities in Afghanistan, question the value of such talks without a general improvement in Indo-Pakistan relations. They spurned the suggestion the Indian Foreign Secretary made earlier this year that the issue be added to the resumed India-Pakistan dialogue. But a backchannel effort, out of public view, might in time strengthen prospects for peace among all three countries.

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