Bijli Hindustani: Why India matters in Afghanistan

Whether it is in the bazaar in Kabul or in the lobby of the upmarket Serena Hotel, introducing yourself as an Indian is straightaway met with two words: Bijli Hindustani. It’s not that every Afghan adores Indians, but rather, what India means to them. That India spent a $100 million on a 220 KV double circuit transmission line to electrify Kabul has lit the hearts of Afghan men and women in the capital city. India may be liable for not having a “grand strategy” for its part in Afghanistan, a matter of much debate within the National Security Council, but it certainly has a feel for assisting a war-torn nation. Indeed, India’s sustained efforts at engaging the leadership in Kabul have won the vote of both local politicians, and curiously, a number of Western experts and officials striving to work through the politics of development.

The difference between India and the many other contributing nations is one of intent. For the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), development goes hand-in-hand with what is famously called counter-insurgency (COIN) contracting. Development monies, some-surency (COIN) contracts, and offcial strg to work hand-in-hand with what is development.

Afghanistan’s Bijli Hindustani has every potential to become a little too accustomed to betrayal. In terms of realpolitik, avoiding another “Kandahar” is best served by the existing policy of developing trust the Indian way by continuing to be remembered as Afghanistan’s Bijli Hindustani.

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Rather than looking to support projects and endeavours that sweeten the palate of important elites, India’s aid programme has done well to invest in projects that others don’t want, or are politically unimportant to demand attention. India’s aid programme has done well to invest in projects that others don’t want, or are politically unimportant to demand attention. As one Indian official tells me, delivering development is so much more important than talking about it. The COIN archetype of “hearts and minds” matter little to those who are robbed of the vision things, who have absorbed power as it evaporated in the early days of the US-led invasion.

India’s advantage rests on the fact that in Afghanistan it has refused to work with, or even engage, either the ISAF or the United States. Despite the many meetings and seminars with US and British officials in Washington, India has invested in women’s self-employment schemes, telecommunications, supplied everything from minibuses to aircraft, revamped a number of key transmission lines connecting Kabul and other major cities, engaged in a large rural electrification programme, and even embedded civil servants with various Afghan Line Ministries to mentor an emerging class of Afghan bureaucrats.

To be sure, both India’s ability to build capacity and its sheer presence on Afghan soil has rattled the Pakistani military leadership, and as a result, their American counterparts. Ludicrous claims that India has 16-17 consulates in Afghanistan, when it has four plus the US Embassy in Kabul, are made with little concern for fact. To an extent, the embedded paranoia is understandable. After all, since the days of Zia the Pakistani military has done well to oversell the idea of “strategic depth” and what might be called the need for hard influence west of the Durand Line.

In the coming months, as talk of a Western withdrawal gains steam, the tango between Pakistani aspirations and Indian assistance is likely to reach its nadir. As part of a political deal, Pakistan’s military tarea are likely to request the American’s to marginalise India’s role within in Afghanistan. This, of course, was the chosen strategy in the early days of the intervention. The then US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld did not hesitate to argue that “India was a complicating factor because of Pakistan”.

T hat Indian officials in Kabul have worked autonomously to invest in a reputation for their country is no mean feat. The key will be to maintain this standing amongst local people despite the machinations of the many policy wonks in the Washington beltway. Indeed, the key to India’s growing popularity in an ever important landscape lies in Delhi. Backing under US pressure will not only damage the idea of India for many Afghans, but as importantly, will go some way in undermining the narrative of a rising India bolstered by this very Government.

In the end, notwithstanding the pressures of international politics, increasing assistance to Afghanistan, much like India did in Bhutan, has every potential to further win over the admiration of a population that has become a little too accustomed to betrayal. In terms of realpolitik, avoiding another “Kandahar” is best served by the existing policy of developing trust the Indian way by continuing to be remembered as Afghanistan’s Bijli Hindustani.