

# 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, sometimes hundreds of millions of dollars, are distributed depending on whether the receiving party can alter political dynamics. For instance, certain tribal groupings are preferred to others if they are seen to increase stability in a particular locale. Contracts in exchange for stability are a commonly held dogma for most Nato nations, doing little by way of encouragement for those living under the shadows of empowered powerbrokers. For the less fortunate, the Taliban have been replaced by local thugs with serious connections in Kabul. In many ways, these are political

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thugs, 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 Washing-

ton, London, and New Delhi, in Afghanistan, India is steering its own course. Its contributions are not — or at least less — tainted by politics.



Afghans protest the planned burning of the Quran by a US pastor, in Kabul on Monday. AP/PTI

India's approach in Afghanistan might best be referred to as a "strategy of response". Rather than looking to support projects and endeavours that sweeten the palate of important elites,

for their future. India's entire \$1.3 billion aid package has been premised on the ability of the Government to demonstrate results that are visible to local Afghans. In 2008, India completed a 219 km highway connecting the Iranian port of Chabahar to landlocked Afghanistan. For local "jingli" truck drivers, the Zaranj-Delaram highway has

reduced the travel time between the two points from 14 hours to three hours.

As a result, larger volumes of trade have transformed Zaranj into a central customs depot that accounts for 10% of all of Afghanistan's customs duty. More importantly, the road has done well to cement the idea of India on the "street", the only audience that really matters.

East of Herat, the Afghan metropolis bordering Iran, India is currently building the Salma Dam. Expected to provide 42 MW of electricity and irrigate some 75,000 hectares of land, the project is marvelled by almost every Western agency in the country. As one Canadian official posted in Kandahar told me, "No matter how small the investment, that India builds things is embedded in the local narrative."

Further, apart from large infrastructural projects, 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 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" or 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 tsars are likely to request the American's to marginalise India's role within 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".

That 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. Buckling 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.

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