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SADF COMMENT

## More Cooperation, More Terror? Enhanced Kabul-New Delhi Military Ties, Increasing Taliban Attacks, and the Role of Pakistan

Afghanistan is once again facing a deteriorating security situation. In Helmand, the country's largest province, the Taliban were able to make [significant inroads and seriously](#) challenge Afghan security forces. To make the situation even worse, the military successes of the Jihadist insurgent groups come at a time when the national government suffers from internal conflicts, [deepening the existing rift](#) between Afghanistan's leading political figures, President Abdullah Abdullah and the Chief Executive of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani. Considering the resurgence of the Jihadist insurgents and the fragile domestic political structure, [New Delhi offered Kabul](#) "full support for boosting Afghanistan's defence capabilities to preserve its unity and territorial integrity". During a [four-day visit](#), Afghan Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qadam Shah Shahim and other senior officers discussed potential support with Indian military leaders', ranging from strengthening military ties to intensifying defence cooperation between the countries. At the moment, India trains nearly [800 Afghan soldiers](#) in various military facilities every year, and delivered four Mi25 attack

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helicopters to Afghanistan in December 2015. However, it is obvious that the '[wish list](#)' of Afghan's COAS is longer and it would most likely include "attack helicopters, utility helicopters, tanks, artillery and ammunition, as well as training for more Afghan forces". Taking into account the genesis of terrorism in the country, it should be no surprise that it coincides with enhanced military and defense cooperation between New Delhi and Kabul. Afghanistan is witnessing an extraordinary response by the Taliban in the form of large-scale terror attacks. Nevertheless, this phenomenon raises important questions:

*Firstly, can one state that the recent series of Jihadist attacks in the country's capital city is a reply by the Taliban to the announcement of further military cooperation between the Afghan government and India?*

When analyzing this conundrum, it appears that the timing of the latest attacks is definitely pointing to a correlation between the recent increase of Taliban activities and the military cooperation between Kabul and New Delhi. However, this is only one of at least four factors influencing Taliban activity. The terror attacks also have to be seen in the context of the growing presence of the Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan which is increasingly challenging the position of the Taliban. In this context, one should mention that IS was able to capitalize on the emerging factionalism and internal power struggles within the Taliban after the death of Mullah Omar -the spiritual leader of the movement- was officially acknowledged. IS presence is certainly also a cause for the ongoing terror attacks, since the internal power struggle continues. The ongoing militant activities are a way for the new Taliban leadership to show strength and capabilities and assert its position within the country's insurgency sector. Last but not least, taking recent Taliban statements into account - [warning India](#) against offering military support to the Afghan government- it is clear that the Jihadists consider India not only as a partner of US interests in Afghanistan but also as its potential successor in the region and is therefore a primary target. As such, the last Taliban attacks in Kabul are not only directed against the Afghan government but are also a signal to New Delhi to stay out of the country, and that India like US (and other NATO forces) are identified as a hostile foreign influence.

*Secondly, assessing the precarious relations between India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, the following question appears: Is there a need for Kabul to balance its ties with India and Pakistan?*

Taking the developments of the past 15 years into account, there is not much room to maneuver for Kabul, as long as Pakistan's conservative security circles seek to influence Afghan's domestic policy via militant proxies. Pakistan's double game, officially supporting the international "war on terror" and its covert state-sponsorship of Jihadists is an obvious contradiction in Islamabad's public rhetoric that it wants a stable, peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan. In consequence, closer ties between Kabul and New Delhi is not only the result of a decades-long friendship between the countries but also logical consequence of Pakistan's Afghanistan approach. However, considering the lacking economic performance of Afghanistan and Pakistan and virtually non-existent regional cooperation, both countries must work towards a normalization of their bilateral relations. The bloody border tensions over the [construction of a fence and a gate at Torkham](#) during the summer, shows that there is a high probability that an armed conflict could take place and focus attention on the disastrous economic losses that occur due to this to non-cooperation.

*Thirdly, what are the main causes of the growing Jihadist insurgency in Afghanistan?*

Basically, one can identify two main rationales behind the increased Jihadist militancy in the country: In domestic terms, there is the unwillingness of the Taliban to enter severe and sustainable peace negotiations. Having said this, one has to be aware that the Taliban movement, at its core, is a deeply anti-democratic force and it considers any consensus based decision-making structure as dangerous for the survival of the movement. In other words, a regular, formal participation in the current political-administrative system is perceived as a threat for the Taliban coherence since it would undermine its leadership structure. In this context, one has also to state that the current Afghan constitution is incompatible with the ideology of the Taliban and must be rejected from their radicalized Islamist point of view. Subsequently, Taliban identify military resistance against the contemporary institutional setup as the only way forward. The fact that the Taliban is primarily a military organization build on

mercenary structures supports their belief that violence as the only mechanism of conflict solution.

The second reason for the increase in terrorist attacks is the ‘international dimension which becomes clear in the following indicators: Firstly, the unrealistic Taliban demand to withdraw of all foreign troops from Afghan soil as a precondition for peace negotiation. Secondly, Pakistan interference in Afghan politics, especially its ongoing sponsorship of groups carrying out terror activities in neighboring countries. Despite Pakistan’s efforts to fight militant groups within its own borders, one must state that these campaigns mainly target elements that pose a threat to the Pakistani state and society. Pakistan based terrorists operating in Afghanistan or India are largely spared from any actions by Pakistan’s security forces. As such, one must state that Pakistan continues its traditional politics of using proxies to ensure its security- and foreign policy (power) orientated interests in the region.

#### *Final thoughts*

Pakistan perceives any Indian activity in Afghanistan as a challenge to its own interests and security. Against this backdrop, an increase in defence cooperation between New Delhi and Kabul will most likely provoke harsh reaction among Pakistan’s security circles. In the eyes of the Pakistanis, Indian support for the build-up of Afghan armed forces will not only directly improve New Delhi’s leverage within Afghan’s security sector –an upgrade from the previous soft-power approach- but also indirectly since more sophisticated weapons and training for the Afghan military might contribute to weakening the Taliban and other pro-Pakistani militant forces like the Haqqani Network.

To conclude, one must mention that Pakistan perceives India’s activities in Afghanistan as a cover for anti-Pakistan operations, it especially links these measures with the proclaimed Indian goal to destabilize Balochistan province and other areas, and to sabotage major development projects on Pakistani soil. Against this backdrop, as long as Islamabad regards New Delhi’s engagement in Afghanistan as an attempt to weaken Pakistan instead of a serious effort to rebuild its western neighbour, more and more terror will be the norm rather than the exception.