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INDO-EUROPEAN UNION STRATEGIC COOPERATION IN AFGHANISTAN

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ABSTRACT

India and EU have to expand the working-level, low-frequency contacts on counterterrorism between EU and Indian domestic security institutions with a substantive and even more regular track between external security actors. This should include the sharing of intelligence and exchange of assessments between Indian and European security agencies in Brussels and Delhi as well as on the ground on the dynamic situation in Afghanistan. The EU and India should also not shy away from a frank dialogue on how best to leverage incentives and disincentives to ensure Pakistani cooperation to pressure the Taliban, facilitate reconciliation and strengthen the legitimate Afghan government. India and EU have to create high-level exchanges between EU and Indian military establishments on the evolving situation in Afghanistan and coordinating their training and assistance missions. This requires joint EU-India training for Afghan military and police forces. Political cooperation: Increase political and diplomatic cooperation between the European Union and the Indian Foreign Ministry to heighten pressure on Pakistan to close the sanctuaries for the Taliban. Based on the US-India-Afghanistan trilateral, create a similar EU-India-Afghanistan trilateral consultative mechanism.

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INTRODUCTION

With the US seeking to limit its international role amidst domestic political resistance, India and Europe are facing increased pressure to take on greater international responsibilities. Delhi and Brussels are both pursuing a more ambitious role in international security affairs, and the imperative for strategic cooperation between them is growing. After 15 years of limited cooperation, India and the EU have the opportunity to join forces on promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan. Despite extraordinary international attention paid to Afghanistan since the turn of the millennium, prospects for the current regime's failure have increased. A Taliban victory in Afghanistan would impose severe costs on India and Europe in terms of refugee inflows and terrorist threats. To prevent this, cooperation between India and the EU should be directed towards improving Kabul's odds of defeating the Taliban offensive and enhancing its leverage in the negotiations on regional reconciliation. This will require greater trilateral coordination between Kabul, Brussels and New Delhi, in conjunction with a dual track approach that demands short-term emphasis on political and military consultations on the changing ground conditions, along with a long-term focus on continued economic assistance to strengthen a moderate and stable Afghan regime.

India and EU as Security Actors

While most international attention has focused on the US-China rivalry in Asia, India and Europe have also shown signs of stepping up as security actors in third spaces between Eastern Europe and South Asia. This shift has been driven by the growing capabilities of emerging powers and the United States' scaling back of its costly international military commitments in response to declining domestic support. As a result, the call for emerging powers to take on a larger international security role has gained traction within the last few years.

But the notion of burden-sharing is far from a novel idea: among the Western allies it goes back to the 1970s, not only in Europe but also in Asia, where President Nixon unveiled the 'Guam Doctrine' in 1969. Long before Donald Trump's arrival as the nominee of the Republican Party for the 2016 presidential elections and his questioning of NATO's relevance, Washington had been pressing its allies in Europe and Asia to take a greater share of the burden in maintaining global order. Even at the peak of US power in the 2000s, Washington was eager to draw in allies and mobilize non-allies to join ad-hoc 'coalitions of the willing.' From the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan to the more-recent international

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mobilization against ISIS, the US has long sought the participation of as many countries as possible.

Notwithstanding the US effort to build international coalitions, there is no denying that the United States continues to bear the lion's share of the security burden. But political developments in the United States – including the intensive questioning of US military commitments from both the political left and the right – now suggest the current framework for distributing that burden needs to be reworked. This new assessment, slowly but surely, has begun to have an effect on both Europe and India. In the articulation of a new Global Strategy in the summer of 2016, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini affirmed: “a fragile world calls for a more confident and responsible European Union, it calls for an outward- and forward-looking European foreign and security policy.”¹ The new doctrine dispels the notion that Europe can be an exclusively civilian power. Rather, it emphasizes the importance of creating indigenous capabilities and institutions to act in the region and beyond while strengthening NATO. While the European contributions to security in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, have been substantive, they were largely seen – from Delhi, but also by many European experts – as adjuncts to American foreign policy. But today, amidst the prospects of US retrenchment, the EU talks of ‘strategic autonomy’ that demands sharing more burdens with the US where possible and taking more independent responsibility where necessary. As Mogherini put it, “the EU will continue to deepen the transatlantic bond and our partnership with NATO, while also connecting to new players and exploring new formats to advance our Strategy.”² Following in the footsteps of the EU, India has also moved toward ‘strategic autonomy,’ thus radically reinterpreting its own traditional notion of non-alignment. The move marks a decisive redefinition: if an independent Indian foreign policy in the past was about staying away from global conflicts, now it is about taking larger responsibility in the international arena. In the words of its top diplomat, India is no longer content to be a balancing power; it wants to be a “leading power.”³ This newly ambitious outlook can be attributed in part to the expansion of India's material capabilities in the reform era. Emerging as the third largest economy in the world, with accelerating growth and significant military capabilities, India is building on this momentum to expand its international identity and responsibility.⁴ While India has traditionally taken action in matters of regional security, as reflected in its commitment to Afghanistan since 2001, the idea of India as a net security provider is gaining traction within India's strategic discourse.⁵ Moreover, unlike in the past, Delhi has shown an eagerness to work with other powers. Abandoning its lone-ranger identity, India now seems willing to act in coalitions and share the burden of maintaining international peace and security.

In effect, both India and Europe are moving away from idealist notions of their international role and towards ‘principled pragmatism,’ which emphasizes hard power as much as soft power. With shifts in the international security landscape putting real pressures on both, Delhi and Brussels now seem more determined than ever before to cooperate and advance the so-far stagnant strategic partnership unveiled at the turn of the century. Regional cooperation between two forces, especially in Afghanistan, drew attention during Prime Minister Narendra

Modi's visit to the European Union in March 2016. The joint statement issued at the end of the visit affirmed the commitment of India and the EU “for a sustainable, democratic, prosperous and peaceful Afghanistan. They supported the ongoing efforts towards an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process of peace and reconciliation, leading to an environment free of violence and terror. They welcomed the long-term commitment of the international community to Afghanistan in the Transformation Decade (2015 to 2024), and looked forward to the Brussels Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan of October 5, 2016 with an eye toward renewing the framework for international partnership and cooperation until 2020.”⁶

Avoiding Failure in Afghanistan

Despite their shared commitment to maintaining the present order in Afghanistan, Delhi and Brussels are aware of the very real prospect for failure in Afghanistan. Recent history provides little encouragement: the international community's objectives of stabilizing the post-Taliban regime in Afghanistan and defeating the forces of extremism have not been realized over the last decade and a half. The Taliban, secure in its sanctuaries across the Durand Line, has stepped up its offensive in Afghanistan. Even after internal leadership transitions – including Mullah Omar's death in 2013, followed by the killing of his successor, Mullah Mohammed Mansour by a US drone attack in May 2016 – the Taliban has maintained its ability to destabilize Afghanistan. With secure sanctuaries in Pakistan, it will not be easy to defeat the Taliban through the traditional means of counter insurgency. The Taliban has never fought conventional wars, and its focus has long been on preventing effective governance by the state through local terror. Meanwhile, the continued threat to its survival has begun to generate serious stress on the internal coherence of the regime in Kabul.

As the Taliban continues to wield significant power in the region, robust international support remains critical for the survival of the post-Taliban regime. But it is by no means clear that the international community's current level of economic and military commitments will be unaffected by the present mood of retrenchment in the United States and the West. The military presence of NATO and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, peaking at 130,000 troops from 51 NATO and partner nations from 2012 to 2013, is down to 13,079 troops from 39 contributing nations as of July 2016. The ISAF forces have ended their combat role and are now focused on training and assistance under the Resolute Support Mission. For almost a decade, the EU invested tremendous resources in the European Union Police Mission in Afghanistan and in the Afghanistan National Army Trust Fund to train Afghanistan's military, police and judicial forces, but has now largely scaled back or discontinued these contributions. Although the Obama administration, the European Union and NATO have repeatedly affirmed their commitment to sustain international economic and military assistance to Kabul into the next decade, there is considerable anxiety in the region that a change in political mood within the Western democracies could change these commitments. The situation of the late 1980s, when the West turned its back on Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal, remains fresh in the memory of many in the region.

There is a risk that India, like the West, could also fail to sustain its substantial and longstanding commitment to Afghanistan. Since 2002, Delhi has offered significant resources for the economic development of Afghanistan. Its aid program, amounting to more than US\$2 billion, is one of the largest India has ever undertaken with the exception of programs in Bhutan and Nepal, which have been beneficiaries of Indian assistance since the middle of the last century. India's military assistance, in contrast, has been rather limited despite its commitment under the Strategic Partnership Agreement of 2011. As the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated in recent years, India has scaled down its aid program and has focused on completing the projects at hand rather than taking on additional ones. The Afghan government, on the other hand, has been putting pressure on India for more military assistance to cope with the challenge from the Taliban. While Delhi has traditionally tended to be cautious in responding to these requests from Kabul, there is hope for a renewed commitment to Afghan sustainability instead of scaling back, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has recently signaled a commitment to step up and expand its economic and military support.

Strategy

Preventing the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan requires more than an assessment of the size and quality of international commitment—both military and economic—to Kabul. It might also demand a fundamental change in the political premises of the international community's strategy in Afghanistan. The first premise relates to the Taliban: in the immediate aftermath of the removal of the Taliban, the international community focused on al Qaeda and had little interest in preventing the Taliban from regrouping and regenerating, either within or across Afghanistan's borders. Half a decade later, NATO tried and failed to root out the Taliban inside the country—not only because the Kabul government did not manage to deliver better governance on the local level, but also because the Taliban's sanctuaries across the border were not effectively addressed. Realizing this strategic oversight, NATO switched to "fight-and-talk," in the vain hope that it could kill the "bad Taliban" to force the "good Taliban" to the negotiating table. That strategy did not work, either.

The targeted killing of the Taliban chief Mullah Mohammed Mansour in May 2016 showed the international community that it was possible to disrupt—if not altogether¹³ defeat—the Taliban and decapitate its leadership if it chose to. But Washington has suggested that the drone strike against Mansour might be an exception rather than the rule; thus the hope remains that the Taliban can be persuaded to share power with Kabul through the good offices of Pakistan and now China. There was little support to this view within the administration of Hamid Karzai. However, his successor, President Ashraf Ghani, bet on the prospect for a reconciliation, though he largely gave up after two years of fruitless effort. It is no secret that the Taliban's vision for Afghanistan is not one that can be reconciled with the views of either Kabul or the international community. Betting on that hope will only delay the difficult but unavoidable imperative to defeat the Taliban.

The second problem is with the premise that Pakistan will help bring the Taliban to the negotiating table and support the stabilization of Afghanistan. It took a while for the international community to come to terms with the fact that the Pakistani army saw the Taliban and the Haqqani network as "veritable instruments" of its foreign policy in Afghanistan. After nearly a decade of failed efforts to stabilize Afghanistan, there is a growing sense that the gap between the interests of Pakistan's security elite and those of the Afghan state are too large to be bridged, and the US needs to learn that its own influence over Islamabad is worth far less than what Washington had invested into that relationship. While the international community would like to see a sovereign and united Afghanistan, Islamabad would like to see Kabul presiding over a loose confederation that is locked in a special, deferential relationship with Pakistan. Islamabad's commitment to such an outcome is deeply rooted in its geopolitical calculus and the historic evolution of the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Although the United States and the West have been unable to persuade Pakistan to change its approach to the Taliban and Kabul, there is hope that the entry of China into the Afghan strategic theater could produce different outcomes. That China has enjoyed excellent relations with Pakistan for more than five decades, with their ties strengthening in recent years, would seem to support that proposition. It might also be reasonable to assume that China's economic and diplomatic clout, coupled with Pakistan's influence with the Taliban, might do the trick in stabilizing Afghanistan. But for the moment these are hopes rather than fact-based judgments. While China's involvement in Afghanistan would be welcome, its ability to definitively shape outcomes in the region remains to be demonstrated.

Towards Convergence

Despite common interests and extraordinary efforts deployed in Afghanistan, the EU and India have rarely engaged each other in a frank security dialogue due to a number of strategic divergences. The scope of these differences is now rapidly narrowing, leading to a dynamic of convergence, which is particularly apparent in five areas.

Role of Pakistan

Under ISAF, the EU and its member states' initiatives in Afghanistan depended on supply routes and support from the Pakistani military and intelligence establishments, especially after the post-2009 surge. This often forced Western states to go soft on Islamabad and neglect New Delhi's concerns about Pakistan as a safe haven for terrorist organizations, with links to the Taliban and targeting India. Brussels also regularly towed the Washington line, asking India to limit its assistance to Afghanistan to avoid upsetting the Pakistani Army.

Circumstances have now changed, facilitating a more frank EU-India dialogue on Pakistan's role in Afghanistan. As ISAF forces are down to a minimum, and several terror attacks in the West have been traced back to Pakistan, European governments are under rising public pressure to take a harder line on Islamabad. Billions of US dollars and Euros in assistance to Pakistan have ceased to make an impact, if they were ever effective at all. The EU cannot hide behind its supposed security irrelevance; rather, it can collaborate with

India on effectively leveraging its role as Pakistan's largest trade partner, and a major source of development assistance, to compel its army to cease support for terrorist organizations, isolate the Taliban, and engage the democratic government in Kabul.

India's Engagement

The EU's past dependence on Pakistan often sent mixed signals: for example, while the EU invited India to support state-building efforts in Afghanistan, it reproached many of its economic projects – such as road infrastructure in the South – for being driven by security interests and stirring a proxy conflict with Islamabad. As the US it reduces its presence in Afghanistan, voices in Washington have begun to reassess the Indian role, and are even encouraging New Delhi to “fill the vacuum” by bolstering Kabul with military assistance.⁷ This has paved the way for New Delhi to adopt a bolder posture: in a first, it supplied attack helicopters and expanded its training programs for Afghan security officials.

With India taking a stronger stance, Brussels and New Delhi are finally on a converging route on how best to bolster Kabul against the Taliban offensive, which opens avenues for trilateral cooperation in the police and intelligence sectors. By building on and sharing their respective experiences in recent years, the EU and India can pool efforts to strengthen the Afghan state's capacity.

Talking to the Taliban

Since it provided support to the Northern Alliance in the 1990s, India has been consistently opposed to any negotiation with the Taliban, which it sees as either a proxy Pakistani force or as a security threat to regional stability. After President Ghani's outreach to India, starting in 2015, New Delhi's incentives to engage in talks have been further reduced. The EU, on the other hand, has in past years played an active role through the Quadrilateral Coordination Group to engage the Taliban.

However, after the October 2016 ministerial conference in Brussels, there are now growing signs of convergence, as the EU revives its commitment and attempts to, at the very least, keep the Indian government in the loop about reconciliation efforts.⁸ In India, some voices have also argued for some form of outreach to the Taliban.⁹ Brussels and New Delhi can now develop a frank political dialogue on the potential and dangers of engaging the Taliban.

Roping in Regional Powers

In the recent past, the EU and India often found themselves on diverging geopolitical tracks in Afghanistan's regional context. Brussels played hardball on Iran, supporting tough sanctions; after the crises in the Ukraine and in Syria, its relations with Russia deteriorated; the EU also engaged China on the One Belt, One Road initiative, which New Delhi is apprehensive about. India, on the other hand, has privileged engagement with, and has relied on Teheran and Moscow to circumvent Pakistan and develop alternative access routes into Afghanistan.

Following the Iran deal and a timid rapprochement between Brussels and Moscow, there is now scope for greater EU-India convergence on the regional environment and strategic connectivity plans. For example, the International North- South

Transport Corridor, first announced in 2002, is being revived as an alternative to OBOR; moreover, India's related plans for the Chabahar port would benefit from the EU lifting sanctions on its banks operating in Iran. Brussels will need to realize that putting all its eggs into the OBOR basket may have long-term strategic and security implications, and that courting India via Russia and Iran will increase its own leverage over China.

Joint Assistance Projects

For more than a decade, India and the EU talked past each other and executed their development assistance projects in isolation. New Delhi was wary of aligning itself with NATO and other Western powers, and concentrated most of its projects in the East. In order not to provoke Pakistan and its “strategic depth” narrative, Brussels stayed away and European countries mostly focused on other areas.

With India committing to another US\$1 billion to Afghanistan and the EU recognizing the need for a more sustained presence to stabilize the country, there is an unprecedented scope for Indo-European convergence. Now India is willing to work with other “like-minded” powers in its extended neighborhood, opening up the possibility for joint development assistance projects. New Delhi has also moved away from the reactive hostility to “democracy promotion” and is keen on providing “democracy assistance” to Afghanistan, whether by constructing its parliament or providing training for electoral and parliamentary officials. By pooling their respective support programs, the EU and India can jointly play a crucial role in supporting Afghanistan's nascent democracy.

CONCLUSION

If the international community is unable to prevent a possible return of the Taliban to power in Kabul, there will be significant and far-reaching consequences – stretching well beyond international relations in South Asia and India. A Western defeat and retreat from Afghanistan will significantly boost jihadi terrorism across the world. Already, Pakistan's permissive environment for extremism is proving fertile ground for a breakdown of state and society in one of the world's largest Muslim nations equipped with a large nuclear arsenal. Certainly, India and Europe both have a vested interest in Afghanistan's political stability and economic reconstruction. Yet it is important to come to terms with the fact that the two sides have acted independent of each other rather than in concert for more than a decade. This is partly due to the divergent assessments on how to achieve the goals of stability and reconstruction in Afghanistan. Until now, India and the European Union (and its key member states) have had major differences in their respective approaches to internal reconciliation in Afghanistan and between Kabul and Islamabad. Meaningful cooperation between India and the EU in Afghanistan will only be made possible by reducing differences and building on commonalities. As the United States' geopolitical focus moves elsewhere, there will be no other option but to develop trilateral consultation and coordination mechanisms between Delhi, Brussels and Kabul.

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