

## **Afghan leader signs deal to deepen ties with India**

**Reuters**

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NEW DELHI, Oct 5 — Afghan President Hamid Karzai signed a wide-ranging agreement with India on Tuesday to deepen ties between the two countries, including to help train Afghan security forces, in a deal likely to irk Pakistan as tension grows in the region.

India is one of Afghanistan's biggest bilateral donors, having pledged about US\$2 billion (RM6.38 billion) since the 2001 US led-invasion for projects from the construction of highways to the building of the Afghan parliament.

On a two-day visit to New Delhi, Karzai and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh sealed a strategic partnership that spanned closer political ties to fighting terrorism. It signals a formal tightening of links that may spark Pakistani concerns India is increasingly competing for leverage in Afghanistan.

The agreement is one of several being negotiated by Kabul, including one with the United States, that are part of an Afghan bid for greater security as Nato troops head home.

"India will stand by the people of Afghanistan as they prepare to assume the responsibility for their governance and security after the withdrawal of international forces in 2014," Singh said in a joint press conference on Monday evening.

India wants to ensure that a withdrawal of US troops does not lead to a civil war that spreads Islamist militancy across borders. At the same time it is closely watching Pakistan's own efforts to secure its interests in Afghanistan.

Karzai's visit has been planned for months, but it comes as Afghanistan appears increasingly frustrated with Pakistan.

Many senior Afghan officials accuse Pakistan's intelligence agency of masterminding the assassination last month of Burhanuddin Rabbani, Kabul's chief peace negotiator with the Taliban, a killing that Singh condemned in his speech on Monday.

Karzai himself has said there is a Pakistani link to the killing, and investigators he appointed believe the assassin was Pakistani, and that the suicide bombing was plotted in the Pakistani city of Quetta.

"At this juncture, the visit will cause great heartburn in Islamabad," said Saeed Naqvi, a fellow at the Observer Research Foundation think-tank in New Delhi.

"That is unfortunate from the Indian perspective because anything achieved in the visit will be seen by Pakistan as an insult."

Wary of Pakistan, Indian officials have always said they want to focus on what they like to call "soft power" — economic aid and trade.

The two leaders also agreed to closer cooperation in the strategically key sectors of oil and gas exploration, mining and infrastructure development, pledging to use India's growing economic clout to foster trade and investment flows.

But India offering more security training to Afghanistan is almost certain to annoy Pakistan.

India has already trained a small number of officers from the Afghan National Army.

Economic focus

Still, India treads carefully. It suspects Pakistan of involvement in several major attacks, including two bombings of its embassy in Kabul in 2008 and 2009, seen as warnings from Islamabad to stay away from its traditional "backyard."

Without a land border with Afghanistan and dependent on Pakistan for any overland trade, India knows its influence is limited.

"India will want to play its part in keeping Afghanistan stable, but it is focussing mainly on economic ties," said C. Raja Mohan, senior fellow at New Delhi's Centre for Policy Research. "It does not see itself as a counterbalance to Pakistan. It knows that Pakistan is setting the terms there."

India does have historical ties to former Northern Alliance leaders who battled the Pakistan-backed Taliban in the 1990s. Some believe that India could increase its influence with these leaders if Afghanistan moves back towards civil war.

For the moment, trade appears to be what matters.

A consortium led by state-run Steel Authority of India (SAIL) could invest up to US\$6 billion in mines, railroads and a steel plant in a race with China to lock in raw materials for two of the world's fastest-growing economies.

The contract for the Hajigak iron ore mines in Bamiyan province is potentially the single biggest foreign investment project in Afghanistan. — Reuters

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