

The Afghanistan Conflict

India's Changing Role

by Harsh V. Pant

As the Afghan war enters its final and most decisive phase, India's strategic position in the country has turned a full circle. Having maintained a close relationship with the post-Taliban government for years, New Delhi suffered a humiliating setback last January when its warning against the folly of making a distinction "between good Taliban and bad Taliban" was summarily ignored by the Afghanistan Conference in London.¹

At a stroke, Pakistan squeezed its nemesis from the evolving security architecture by persuading the West that the time had come to incorporate the "moderate" faction of the Taliban into Afghanistan's future state structure and to give Islamabad a key role in mediating this process.² Meanwhile, despite its best attempts to keep a low profile, India and its nationals have been increasingly targeted by extremist forces in Afghanistan. The Indian embassy in Kabul was struck twice over the past two years, and guest houses frequented by Indians were attacked with nine Indian nationals killed.³

Viewing these strikes as a blatant attempt to drive it out of Afghanistan, something New Delhi has explicitly ruled out despite the recent setbacks, the Indian government has embarked on a major rethink of its Afghanistan-Pakistan policy; and while this process has yet to be completed, it might eventually culminate in a new regional alignment—between India, Iran, and Russia—that will only complicate Washington's exit strategy from Afghanistan.

INDIA'S AFGHAN POLICY

India's approach toward Afghanistan has largely been a function of the desire to prevent Pakistan from dominating that country, something Islamabad views as a vital counterweight to India's preponderance in South Asia.⁴ The two countries have been stuck in a classic security dilemma in so far as their Afghan policies are concerned, in that any measure by either side to

increase its security is liable to trigger a reaction thus causing a deterioration in the overall regional balance.

India's relations with Afghanistan have improved steadily since the fall of the Taliban for a number of reasons. To begin, unlike relations

1 *Times of India* (New Delhi), Jan. 29, 2010; Gen. Stanley McChrystal, interview, *The Financial Times* (London), Jan. 19, 2010.

2 *The New York Times*, Jan. 28, 2010.

3 *Times of India*, Feb. 26, 2010.

4 Marvin G. Weinbaum, "Pakistan and Afghanistan: The Strategic Relationship," *Asian Survey*, June 1991, pp. 498-9; Rifaat Hussain, "Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan: Continuity and Change," *Strategic Studies*, Winter 2002, pp. 43-75.

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between Afghanistan and Pakistan, this bilateral relationship is not hampered by the existence of a contiguous and contested border. For another, India's support for the Northern Alliance against the Pakistan-backed Taliban in the 1990s strengthened its position in Kabul after 2001 as many Alliance members have come to hold key governmental or provincial posts.

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New Delhi has pledged some US\$1.3 billion on various projects, emerging as the sixth largest bilateral donor to Afghanistan. Important infrastructural projects undertaken by Indians include the construction of electricity transmission lines, the Salma Dam power project in

the Herat province, construction of the Afghan parliament building, helping in the expansion of the Afghan national television network, and several smaller projects in agriculture, rural development, education, health, energy, and vocational training. The 218-kilometer Zaraj-Delaram highway, enabling Afghanistan to have access to the sea via Iran and providing a shorter route for Indian goods to Afghanistan, was completed by India’s Border Roads Organization in 2008 despite stiff resistance from the Taliban. A 300-strong paramilitary force provided by India ensured the safety of the Indian workers and allowed the project to beat construction and monetary deadlines.⁶

As a consequence, New Delhi has come to enjoy considerable influence in Afghanistan. Ordinary Afghans have welcomed Indian involvement in development projects in their country; Indian films and television programs are extremely popular among the local Afghan populace, and India remains the favorite destination for Afghans with its embassy and four other missions issuing around 350 visas daily. The Indian government has a fundamental interest in ensuring that Afghanistan emerges as a stable and economically integrated state in the region. Though the Afghan economy has recovered significantly since the fall of the Taliban with real gross domestic product growth rate exceeding 7 percent in 2008 and exceeding 22 percent in 2009, it remains highly dependent on foreign aid and trade with neighboring countries.⁷ The only way in which the flailing Karzai government can retain and enhance its legitimacy is by bringing the Afghan economy back on track. For this, it largely depends on other states, and New Delhi is playing an important role by laying the foundations for sustainable economic development in the country. A preferential Afghan-Indian trade agreement gives substantial duty concessions to certain categories of Afghan dry fruits when entering India with Afghanistan

⁵ Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions (Bonn agreement), United Nations, Bonn, Ger., Dec. 5, 2001.

⁶ *The Indian Express* (New Delhi), Jan. 23, 2009.

⁷ “Afghanistan,” *The World Factbook*, Central Intelligence Agency, McLean, Va., Dec. 28, 2010.

allowing reciprocal concessions to Indian products such as sugar, tea, and pharmaceuticals. Kabul wants Indian businesses to take advantage of the low tax regime to help develop a manufacturing hub in areas such as cement, oil and gas, electricity, and in services including hotels, banking, and communications.

The Indian government also piloted the move to make Afghanistan a member of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in the hope that this move will expedite the country's economic development by facilitating transit and free flow of goods across borders in the region. Moreover, Afghanistan's SAARC membership could also enable South Asia to reach out to Central and West Asia more meaningfully. It has been estimated that given Afghanistan's low trade linkages with other states in the region, its participation in the South Asian Free Trade Area would result in trade gains of \$2 billion to the region with as much as \$606 million accruing to Afghanistan.⁸

THE LIMITS OF SOFT POWER

These gains notwithstanding, there is a growing consensus in New Delhi that the soft power approach has yielded no real strategic gains and that, despite being the only country that has been relatively successful in winning Afghan hearts and minds, India has been increasingly sidelined by the West.

From the very beginning, the foremost objective of India's policy has been to preempt the return of Pakistan's embedment in Afghanistan's

Indian foreign minister S.M. Krishna (right, here with Secretary of State Clinton, New Delhi, July 20, 2009) failed to convince Western leaders of the folly of making a distinction between “good Taliban and bad Taliban.”

strategic and political firmament. Ironically, it is India's successes in Afghanistan that have driven Pakistan's security establishment into panic mode with a perception gaining ground that India was taking over Afghanistan. The Obama administration's desire for a rapid disengagement from Afghanistan has given the necessary opening to the Pakistanis to regain their lost influence in Kabul.⁹ In order to keep Islamabad in good humor, Washington insisted on New Delhi limiting its role in Afghanistan, having apparently bought the argument that a substantial Indian presence in the country threatened Pakistan and made it difficult for it to cooperate fully with the international community in the fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In fact, India had a very limited presence in Afghanistan in the 1990s, and it was then that the Pakistanis had a free hand in nurturing the Taliban.

The Indian government's traditional stance that while it is happy to help the Afghan government in its reconstruction efforts, it will not be directly engaged in security operations is be-

8 *The Hindu Business Line* (Chennai, Madras), Mar. 29, 2007.

9 *The New York Times*, Dec. 1, 2009.



As President Karzai began hedging his bets ahead of the impending U.S. departure, he was reported to have held a meeting with Sirajuddin Haqqani (pictured), Taliban ally and head of a prominent Pakistan-propelled terror network, in the presence of Pakistan's army chief of staff and the intelligence chief.

coming harder to sustain. A debate has therefore ensued as to whether the Indians should start backing their humanitarian endeavors in Afghanistan with a stronger military presence. If Afghanistan is the most important frontier in combating anti-Indian terrorism, then how long can New Delhi sustain its present policy trajectory whereby its civilians are being killed in pursuit of developmental objectives?

The Indians have much to consider. The return of the Taliban to Afghanistan would pose a major threat to India's security. In the end, the brunt of escalating terrorism will be borne by India, which has already been described as "the sponge that protects" the West.¹⁰ Indian strategists have warned that a hurried U.S. withdrawal, with the Taliban still posing a threat to Afghanistan, will have grave implications for India, not least the emergence of Pakistan, its rival, as a bigger regional player. As Henry Kissinger has noted, "In many respects, India will be the most

affected country if jihadist Islamism gains impetus in Afghanistan."¹¹

True, India's role in Afghanistan should not be viewed through the eyes of Western observers who have dubbed it provocative, or through the eyes of the Pakistanis, who have long resented their own waning influence. Rather, New Delhi's involvement should be considered through the eyes of the Afghan people who, arguably, are benefitting from the use of its neighbor's soft power, whatever its ultimate motivations.

President Karzai, meanwhile, is grudgingly accepting Islamabad's larger role in his country. The July 2011 deadline was intended to force Karzai to address urgent problems such as corruption and ineffective governance. But it may have had the opposite effect, convincing the Afghan president that in the not too distant future he would be left on his own. Though Washington is at pains to underline that July 2011 "will be the beginning of a conditions-based process,"¹² there are few who believe that the Obama administration has the stomach for a prolonged stay despite the recent NATO decision to hand over security to the Afghans by 2014. Declaring that the war in Afghanistan is "on track" toward achieving its military and political goals but that progress is coming "slowly and at a very high price" for Americans who are fighting there, the most recent review of the Afghanistan war effort suggests that significant progress has been made but that the gains in the country remain fragile. The review concludes that U.S. forces can begin withdrawing in July 2011, despite finding uneven signs of progress in the year since President Obama announced the deployment of an additional 30,000 troops.¹³

Karzai in particular seems convinced that the United States will not be able to stay the course as evidenced by his attempts to craft a

11 Ibid., Sept. 13, 2010.

12 *The New York Times*, June 19, 2010.

13 *The Washington Post*, Dec. 16, 2010.

10 *Indian Express*, Jan. 29, 2009.

more autonomous foreign policy. The Afghan president lost no time in sacking the two closest U.S. allies in his cabinet—the interior minister Hanif Atmar¹⁴ and the chief of intelligence Amrullah Saleh.¹⁵ These were the men Washington had insisted that Karzai include in his cabinet after his 2009 reelection, and they stubbornly resisted his attempts to negotiate with the Taliban and to develop closer ties with Islamabad, which Karzai considered an important player in ending the war whether through negotiations with the Taliban or on the battlefield. The decision to send a contingent of officers for training in Pakistan is of great symbolic value and is the result of talks between the Afghan government and Pakistan's security agencies that began in May 2010.¹⁶ It has even been reported that Karzai had a face-to-face meeting with Sirajuddin Haqqani, head of a prominent Pakistan-propelled terror network, in the presence of Pakistan's army chief of staff and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) chief.¹⁷ The Taliban's growing power and self confidence are also evident in their dismissal of proposed negotiations with Washington, an indication of the conviction that they are winning the war and that public opinion in the West is turning against the war.

Pakistan's security establishment relishes the double game it is playing in Afghanistan. Pakistani support for the Taliban continues to be sanctioned at the highest levels of government, with the ISI even represented on the Quetta Shura—the Taliban's war council—so as to retain influence over the movement's leadership. Taliban fighters continue to be trained in Pakistani camps while the ISI not only provides financial, military, and logistical support to the insurgency but also retains strong strategic and operational control over the Taliban campaign in Afghanistan.¹⁸ Likewise, despite its counterinsurgency offensives in North and South Waziristan, the Pakistani military contin-

ues to view the Taliban as a strategic asset. The conclusion of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Trade and Transit agreement is a major shot in the arm for Islamabad since it explicitly affirms that India will not be allowed to export goods to Afghanistan through the Wagah border.¹⁹

In one of the largest single disclosures of such information in U.S. history, WikiLeaks, a self-described whistleblower organization, released more than 91,000 classified documents in July 2010, largely consisting of low-level field reports.²⁰ These documents merely confirmed the long-held belief that

Pakistan's intelligence agency is guiding the Afghan insurgency even as it continues to receive more than US\$1 billion a year from Washington to combat the extremists. The ISI has been helping Afghan insurgents plan and carry out attacks on U.S. forces and their Afghan government allies in Afghanistan, and its efforts to run the networks of suicide bombers as well as its help in organizing Taliban offensives at crucial periods in the Afghan war have also been underscored.²¹ Washington's frustration at its inability to persuade the Pakistani army and intelligence apparatus to cease supporting the Afghan Taliban and other militants has been growing over the years. It is clear from leaked documents that Washington remains convinced that Pakistan will never cooperate fully in fighting the whole range of extremist groups. It is also well understood by the U.S. administration that Pakistan is preparing for the eventual U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, viewing the militant groups as insurance and as a means of exerting influence inside Afghanistan and against India. The assessment of former U.S. ambassador Anne W. Patterson is blunt: "There is no chance that

The return of the Taliban to Afghanistan would pose a major threat to India's security.

14 One India (Bangalore), June 7, 2010.

15 Reuters, June 8, 2010.

16 The Washington Post, July 1, 2010.

17 Ibid.

18 The Sunday Times (London), June 13, 2010.

19 The Wall Street Journal, July 18, 2010.

20 The Washington Post, July 26, 2010.

21 The New York Times, July 25, 2010.

Pakistan will view enhanced assistance levels in any field as sufficient compensation for abandoning support for these groups, which it sees as an important part of its national security apparatus against India." She noted that burgeoning U.S.-India ties "[feed] Pakistani establishment paranoia and pushes them closer to both Afghan and Kashmir focused terrorist groups."²²

By giving the Pakistanis a leading role in the Afghan state, the West is sowing the seeds of regional turmoil.

These revelations also made it clear that India had been systematically targeted by the Pakistani security services. The bombing of the Indian embassy in 2008 was at the behest of the ISI, which also paid the Haqqani terror network to eliminate Indian workers in Afghanistan

and gave orders to orchestrate attacks on Indian consulates there.²³ That the Pakistani security complex had engendered targeting of Indian interests in Afghanistan was hardly news in New Delhi. But Indian policymakers have been deeply dismayed by Washington's reluctance to counter Pakistan's designs in Afghanistan.

Though New Delhi continues to insist that it will not retreat from Afghanistan, there are clear signs that it is scaling down its presence. Almost half of the Indian personnel working on various projects have returned home; some Indian schemes have been put on hold, and the Indians are not taking on any new projects. Training programs for Afghan personnel are now taking place in India.

INDIA DEBATES ITS OPTIONS

The Indian government is debating its options in Afghanistan in a strategic space that seems to have shrunk over the past few years.

By failing to craft its own narrative on Afghanistan and Pakistan ever since U.S. troops went into Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11, New Delhi has allowed the West, and increasingly Pakistan, to dictate the contours of its policy toward the region.

Two major strands can be discerned in the present debate. On the one hand, there are those who maintain that despite the recent setbacks, New Delhi should continue to rely on Washington to secure its Afghanistan and Pakistan interests.²⁴ In their opinion, there is a fundamental convergence between the Indian government and the Obama administration in viewing Pakistan as the source of Afghanistan's insecurity and in believing that the world must act together to cure Islamabad of its political malaise. In identifying the borderlands between Pakistan and Afghanistan as the single most important threat to global peace and security, arguing that Islamabad is part of the problem rather than the solution, and asking India to join an international concert in managing the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, Washington has made significant departures from its traditional posture toward South Asia. The Indians would, therefore, be best served by coordinating their counterterrorist strategy with the United States and should help Washington by addressing Pakistan's fears of Indian meddling on its western frontiers, unfounded as they might be; it has even been suggested that New Delhi should not hesitate to reach out to the Pakistani army.²⁵

The other side of the debate is becoming impatient with New Delhi's continued reliance on Washington to pull its chestnuts out of the fire. According to this argument, a fundamental schism has emerged between the U.S. and Indian positions as the Obama administration has systematically ignored Indian interests and sensibilities.²⁶ While actively discouraging a higher Indian profile in Afghanistan for fear of offending Pakistan, the administration has failed

22 *The Guardian* (London), Nov. 30, 2010.

23 *The Indian Express*, July 27, 2010.

24 *Ibid.*, Mar. 3, 2010.

25 *Ibid.*, Jan. 27, 2010.

26 *The Tribune* (Chandigarh), Aug. 19, 2010.

to persuade Islamabad to take Indian concerns more seriously. Anxious for a semblance of victory, the West has decided to court the “good” Taliban with Pakistan’s help, thus underscoring Islamabad’s centrality in the unfolding strategic dynamic in the region, much to the Indian government’s discomfiture. By pursuing a strategy that will give the Pakistanis the leading role in the nascent Afghan state structures, the West, however, is only sowing the seeds of future regional turmoil. While Washington may have no vital interest in determining who actually governs the country so long as Afghan territory is not used as a springboard for attacks on American soil, New Delhi most certainly does. The Taliban—good or bad—are hostile to India in many fundamental ways. The abandonment of the goal of establishing a functioning Afghan state and a moderate Pakistan is liable to put a greater pressure on Indian security.²⁷

India’s influence in Afghanistan rose significantly as U.S. support for Pakistan waned in the immediate wake of 9/11 and Washington demanded that Islamabad adopt policies long advocated by the Indians. Moreover, India emerged as a major economic actor in Afghanistan trying to bolster that state’s capacity in various measures. But by refusing to use hard power and asserting its profile more forcefully, New Delhi soon made itself irrelevant as the anti-Taliban campaign proved far more intractable than expected, leading to a widening gap between the strategic perceptions of the Indian government and U.S. administrations. The Obama administration, intent on moving out of Afghani-



India’s extensive economic activity and investments in Afghanistan have played an important role in helping the flailing government of President Hamid Karzai (left), with Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh, New Delhi, May 2010, to retain and enhance its legitimacy by bringing the Afghan economy back on track.

stan, has managed to signal to India’s adversaries that they can shape the post-American era to serve their own ends. New Delhi lost the trust of its own allies in Afghanistan: For if it would not stand up for its own interests, few saw the benefit of aligning with it. The Indian presence which looked formidable during the George W. Bush era began unraveling with the advent of the Obama administration, which deepened its security dependence on Pakistan in the hope of achieving rapid success.

Moreover, Pakistan’s weak democracy and powerful military and intelligence apparatus has failed to get a grip on the problem that now threatens to overwhelm the Pakistani state itself. The three-year extension granted to the Pakistani army chief of staff Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani will ensure that a return to meaningful democracy will continue to elude Pakistan and that the army’s inflexible India-centric security perception will render rapprochement with New Delhi a nonstarter. Kayani is also clear about his determination to call the shots in Kabul. He remains wedded to the notion of “strategic depth”—that is, to making Afghanistan the kind

²⁷ *The Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), Mar. 2010; *Business Standard*, Sept. 15, 2010.

of proprietary hinterland for Pakistan, free of Indian or other outside influence, as had been the case from 1992 to 2001.²⁸ Despite the tide of religious fanaticism sweeping across Pakistan, most recently exemplified by the assassination of liberal governor of the Punjab province, Salman Taseer,²⁹ the Pakistani security establishment continues to view religious extremist groups as assets that could be exploited to serve strategic interests during and after the endgame in Afghanistan. The latest Afghan war review has indicated that the Obama administration was setting conditions to begin the “responsible reduction” of U.S. forces in Afghanistan in July 2011. Fearing U.S. withdrawal soon, Hamid Karzai now seems ready to hitch his wagon to Pakistan. He views Pakistan as playing a positive role by helping to deny terrorists sanctuary and by using its leverage over some elements of the Afghan Taliban. Facing the collapse of the nation-building project in Afghanistan on the one hand and Pakistan’s rising influence on the other, India’s policy in Afghanistan stands at a crossroads.

FORGING NEW ALIGNMENTS

To preserve its interests in a rapidly evolving strategic milieu, New Delhi is trying to cooperate more closely with states such as Russia and Iran, with which it has convergent interests vis-à-vis Afghanistan and Pakistan. None of these states would accept a fundamentalist Sunni-dominated regime in Kabul or the reemergence of Afghanistan as a base for jihadist terrorism directed at neighboring states. The Indian government has reached out to Moscow at the highest political levels, reiterating the two nations’ shared positions on Afghanistan and institutionalizing cooperation on this issue.³⁰

Moscow, for its part, having kept itself aloof

from Afghanistan and Pakistan for years after the Taliban’s ouster, is refocusing on Afghanistan as Islamist extremism and drug trafficking emanating from Central Asia have reemerged as major threats to its national security. It hosted the presidents of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan in August 2010, promised to invest heavily in developing Afghan infrastructure and natural resources, and repeatedly laid down certain “red lines” for the Taliban’s integration into the political process, notably renunciation of violence, cessation of the armed struggle, acceptance of the Afghan constitution, and a complete break with al-Qaeda.³¹ During Prime Minister Vladimir Putin’s visit to New Delhi in March 2010, the Indian government sought Russian support in countering what it viewed as a U.S.-Pakistan axis in Afghanistan.³²

Iran is the third part of this triangle, and New Delhi’s outreach to Tehran became more serious after signals from the Iranians that the relationship was drifting. The two countries had worked closely when the Taliban was in power in Kabul and continued to cooperate on several infrastructure projects allowing transit facilities for Indian goods, but the Indian decision to vote against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency on the nuclear issue led to a chilling of the bilateral relationship.³³ Now New Delhi is trying to revive its partnership with Tehran in Afghanistan. In the second governmental-level visit in less than a month, Iran’s deputy foreign minister was in India in early August 2010, and the two sides decided to hold “structured and regular consultations”³⁴ on the issue of Afghanistan.

In defiance of the international sanctions, the Indian government is encouraging Indian companies to invest in the Iranian energy sector so that economic interests can underpin the bi-

31 Ibid.

32 RT TV (Moscow), Mar. 12, 2010; *Rediff News* (Mumbai), Mar. 12, 2010.

33 *The Indian Express*, Nov. 27, 2009.

34 *Thaindian News* (Bangkok), Aug. 2, 2010; see, also, Harsh V. Pant, “Delhi’s Tehran Conundrum,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 20, 2010.

28 *Dawn* (Karachi), Feb. 2, 2010.

29 *The Telegraph* (London), Jan. 13, 2011.

30 *The Hindu*, Aug. 3, 2010.

lateral political realignment.³⁵ For its part, Tehran is worried about the potential major role for leaders of the almost exclusively Sunni Taliban in the emerging political order in Afghanistan. It has even encouraged New Delhi to send more assistance to provinces in northern and western Afghanistan that are under the control of those associated with the Northern Alliance. At the Iranians' initiative, India is now part of a trilateral Afghan-Iranian-Indian effort to counter Pakistan's attempts to freeze India out of various regional initiatives.³⁶ India's ties with Iran, however, remain circumscribed by Iranian defiance of the international community on the nuclear issue and India's desire to be viewed as a responsible rising power. New Delhi is also seeking reassurances from Moscow and Tehran that the three states are in unanimity on Afghanistan and Pakistan. It remains to be seen, however, if India's gravitation toward Russia and Iran would be enough to arrest the slide of the situation in Afghanistan-Pakistan to India's detriment.

CONCLUSION

For some members of the Indian strategic community, Afghanistan is a litmus test for their country's ascendance as a regional and global power. India's capacity to deal with instability in its own backyard will in the final analysis determine its rise as a global power of major import, so failure in Afghanistan is not an option.

India has a range of interests in Afghanistan that it would like to preserve and enhance, notably containment of Islamist extremism, the

Viewing Afghanistan as Islamabad's "strategic depth," a proprietary hinterland free of outside influence, Pakistan's chief of staff Gen. Ashfaq Parvez (right), with British chief of General Staff, Gen. Sir Richard Dannatt, in London, March 25, 2009, is determined to call the shots in Kabul and to deny India any foothold in that country.

use of Afghanistan as a gateway to the energy-rich and strategically important Central Asian region, and assertion of its regional preeminence. Yet the most important goal for New Delhi remains the prevention of Pakistan from regaining its central role in Afghan affairs. The last time Pakistan enjoyed such a position was the 1990s, and Indian security interests suffered to an unprecedented degree. But then India was a weaker state, marginal in the strategic equations of the major global powers, and so could be easily ignored. Today, as India considers itself a rising global power with many more cards to play in Afghanistan than ever before, it is highly unlikely that it would give up on Kabul without a fight. Because India has core interests to protect in its periphery, it will continue to play an important role in Afghanistan with or without U.S. approval. Washington, therefore, would do well to take Indian concerns into account as the Afghan endgame looms larger.

³⁵ *South Asia Monitor* (Society for Policy Studies, New Delhi), Sept. 13, 2010; Press TV (Tehran), Nov. 1, 2010.

³⁶ *The Indian Express*, Sept. 21, 2010.

