

Op-ed: Trying To 'Indianise' Afghan Problem

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The Indians have built schools for Afghan children, hospitals for Afghan women, Indian buses ply the hundreds of Kabul's streets and the national airline Ariana is being resurrected by the free gift of three airbuses. India is building roads in western Afghanistan and repairing dams in eastern Afghanistan.

India has developed a highly constructive, imaginative reconstruction strategy for Afghanistan that is designed to please every sector of Afghan society, give India a high profile with the Afghan people, gain the maximum political advantage with the Afghan government, increase its influence with its Northern Alliance friends and turn its image from that of a country that supported the Soviet invasion and the communist regime in the 1980s to an indispensable ally and friend of the Afghan people in the new century.

Clever?

No, not at all, just common sense. Iran, Russia and the Central Asian Republics are doing the same. This is the time to curry favour with the Americans and the international community who place Afghanistan only second to Iraq. By doing good in Afghanistan you do good to the Afghan people, show your worth to the international community and most of all do yourself some good by building close relations with a country that is the strategic heart of the Central Asia region.

And what about Pakistan? We have not built a single hospital, school or road in Afghanistan. There is no Fatima Jinnah hospital for women or Mohammed Iqbal School for children to compete with the Indira Gandhi, Nehru and other signposted Indian monuments to reconstruction. We have given little to the Afghan people of the promised US\$100 million that we had offered at the Tokyo conference except for a US\$10 million grant for the Afghan budget last year. Our promise to build the Torkhum-Jalalabad-Kabul road has not been fulfilled. There is no attempt to carry out high profile projects.

We have no reconstruction strategy and prefer living off our "past sacrifices for the Afghan people" such as providing succour to the refugees and backing the Taliban. To top it all, after adopting this totally negative strategy, President Musharraf, his generals, his agencies and most lately his ministers Shaukat Aziz, Sheikh Rashid and Faisal Saleh Hayat — incredulously claim that its Indian interference that is wounding Afghanistan, damaging our relations with Kabul and supporting terrorism.

Blame it all on India. The easiest thing in the world is to "Indianise" our lack of good relations with Afghanistan and our refusal to build better relations with President Hamid Karzai. However this time round, this worn out agency line doesn't have any reverberations amongst the Pakistani people.

While the army sweeps into FATA to re-conquer Pakistan's historic territory, the agencies allow hundreds of Taliban to regroup in the Quetta-Chaman-Pishin triangle without much interference. While Balochistan is used as a training ground for the Taliban in a replay of 1994-5 when the Taliban emerged from Chaman, in the NWFP we are fighting terrorism, extremism and tribalism.

While the Americans can be taken for a ride because they are blind to the difference and the neo-cons in Washington do not really mind a few of their troops getting shot at by the Taliban, the populations of Balochistan and NWFP are thankfully not so dumb. They see the distortions from the reality on the ground. Most Pakistanis see Afghanistan not as a new arena of tensions with India but as an arena to do business, trade, sell and buy.

General Musharraf has constantly told the Pakistani people that he alone knows, understands and has the authority to carry out what is in the "national security interests" of Pakistan. Is it in our interests to wrap up our failures in Afghanistan in a tissue paper and say it is all India's fault.

Despite the government's best efforts not to have a good relationship with Afghanistan, the Pashtuns from Peshawar are trading like mad in Kabul, 6000 skilled and semi-skilled Balochis are labouring in Kandahar, Pakistani cement is being sold all along the border and Pakistani construction companies are trying to win some of the sub-contracts for road building.

Pulling the wool over everyone's eyes is not going to work this time. Pakistanis know where their best interests lie and they are not likely to listen to the well-tutored ministers or anyone else. They want to do business with Afghanistan, improve relations and help in the reconstruction of that country – in short, prosper and let prosper.