

# KARZAI SEES DELHI AS LONG-TERM PARTNER



Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai (right) with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the inaugural session of the Delhi Sustainable Development Summit 2011, in New Delhi on Thursday. PHOTO: PTI

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**A**fghan President Hamid Karzai stopped off in Delhi today en route to the Munich security conference to brief Prime Minister Manmohan Singh about the continuing political flux at home, in which he has accepted the principle of talks with the Taliban, established a two-tier consultation mechanism with Pakistan, and come to terms with US troop withdrawal in 2014.

On the face of it, all the above developments would signal a significant reduction of India's influence on the Afghan chessboard, especially as America's failure to both militarily and politically contain the Al Qaeda-Taliban combine over the last decade has meant Pakistan has become much closer to the power centres in Kabul.

Only a few months ago, Karzai and his national security advisor, Rangin Dardar Spanta, were bad-mouthing the Pakistani army and its continuing support for Afghan Taliban leaders seeking safe havens in cities like Quetta, Miranshah and Karachi.

But with the US having lost the stomach to prolong the war, with its attendant procession of

body-bags, and Delhi not willing to pitch-fork itself into the frontline, Karzai has had little option but to mend bridges with the Pakistani establishment.

However, conversations with senior sources in the establishment reveal that all may still not be lost. Certainly, a solid groundswell of support remains in favour of India continuing its assistance in Afghanistan, with emphasis on small and medium projects like building schools and electrifying the countryside.

But what was even more significant, the sources said, was Karzai's apparent confidence that peace with the Taliban, being brokered by Pakistan, with Turkey showing itself to be a willing partner, might not last long. Karzai, perhaps, feels there is "no identifiable Taliban leader to talk to," the sources said, which is why the intra-Afghan dialogue would not likely lead anywhere. Under the circumstances, Delhi could be a "long-term partner" with whom Kabul could do business.

The sources told *Business Standard* the meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was "very good and reassuring", indicating Karzai was not only very happy for Indian assistance to continue, but hoped Delhi would ramp up its economic presence.

There are two ways to do

this, the Indian sources stressed : The first is to take advantage of the Afghanistan-Pakistan trade and transit agreement, which allows Afghan trucks to travel overland into India. While the Afghan trucks are not allowed to carry Indian goods on the return journey home, they could easily carry food to the ever-hungry Indian market, and over time, minerals like copper which Indian business now seems to be interested in extracting.

The second is to diversify the Indian presence in the south, so that Delhi is not stereotyped as being only supportive of the northern Tajiks. It is said both issues found space in the long and productive conversation between Karzai and the PM today.

Perhaps that was why Karzai came to Delhi today : If the Afghan High Peace council led by Burhanuddin Rabbani, seconded to talk to the Taliban, made a much-publicised visit to Pakistan last month, followed up with a visit by Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmay Rassoul to Islamabad a few days ago — even as US Vice-President Joe Biden and the acting US AfPak envoy, Frank Ruggiero, arrived in Kabul to take stock of the situation — then Karzai was sending a message that Delhi could not be ruled out of the latest version of the Afghan great game.