



Afghanistan: Evolving an Indo-Pak Strategy Perspectives from India

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The future of Afghanistan is inextricably linked to the future of its neighbour, Pakistan... al Qaeda and its allies have moved across the border into the remote areas of the Pakistani frontier. The government's ability to destroy these safe havens is tied to its own strength and security. To help Pakistan... (we must) lessen tensions between two nuclear armed nations, that too often teeter on the edge of escalation and confrontation, we must pursue constructive diplomacy with both India and Pakistan.

- Barrack Obama

Extracts from his speech on the 'Af-Pak' strategy

The above statement underscores the regional and international implications relating to Afghanistan. It also highlights the vexed nature of the relationship between Kabul and Islamabad, with the former consistently leveling allegations of interference by the latter in its internal affairs. and also the Indo-Pak rivalry over Afghanistan.



Indo-Pak dialogue on Conflict Resolution and Peace Building is an ongoing project of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi.

As a part of this project, the Institute is publishing a series of background papers on various Indo-Pak bilateral issues. Besides, the Institute is also organizing track-II dialogue between the two countries in October 2009. For more information about this project, kindly visit IPCS website.

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Given the seriousness of the situation and the increasingly negative cross border ramifications, which accrue from Afghanistan's 'descent into chaos', it is imperative for its neighbours, especially India and Pakistan, to constructively engage on stabilizing Afghanistan. Considering the troubled nature of Kabul's relationship with Islamabad, and the mutual suspicions and bitter history of Indo-Pak relations, the task of forging cooperation on Afghanistan is extremely tedious. Mounting a sound and viable joint Indo-Pak strategy in stabilizing Afghanistan, through cooperation on areas of mutual interest, would require a recognition and redressal of some of their key problems that hinder cooperation.

I ISSUES/PROBLEMS IN INDO-PAK COOPERATION IN AFGHANISTAN

The following could be identified as major issues/problems for India and Pakistan, towards pursuing a common strategy in Afghanistan.

A. Pakistan's Objectives and Strategies

Obama administration's stance has vindicated Kabul's long standing official position on Pakistan serving as a safe haven for extremist groups responsible for escalating levels of violence in Afghanistan. Islamabad denies this charge; on the other hand, while not entirely at ease with the new realignment in stance and strategy also sees in it an opportunity to extract more concessions from Washington, especially vis-a-vis New Delhi, both in terms of increasing humanitarian and military.

B. The American Dilemma

The above strategy links Pakistan's ability to effectively fight the Taliban on its western frontier with Afghanistan to the de-escalation of its conflict on its eastern frontier with India. This has led to

increased US pressure on India to resume its composite dialogue with Pakistan, which has stalled after the attacks on Mumbai on 26 November 2008, to initiate a unilateral scaling down of its military presence along the border with Pakistan. Such realignments in US policy, have been interpreted as a subtle attempt to re-hyphenate India with Pakistan, which has caused an India unease.

C. Indian Objectives and Strategies

Af-Pak policy also reflects a major convergence of interests between New Delhi and Washington; both wish to see a stable and democratic in Afghanistan and Pakistan to contain the spread of jihadi terrorism. As Obama administration's emphasis on adopting a regional approach to stabilizing Afghanistan, (in contrast to the unilateralism of the Bush administration) provides New Delhi an opportunity to engage more intensely with Washington and play an active and constructive role in shaping Washington's policies in this region. Pakistan is apprehensive of this link.

D. Pakistan's Support to Taliban

A section within the Pakistani establishment, believed in Taliban's ability to provide strategic depth against India on the east, secure a its restive western frontier by installing a client Islamist as opposed to a nationalist regime in Kabul and provide Pakistan exclusive land access to the resource rich Central Asia. Pakistan's past record in this regard is not particularly inspiring. For instance, the Jalalabad Shura was regularly paid by Pakistan to host training camps for the Kashmiri mujahidin, Bin Laden sponsored similar camps at Khost and encouraged Arabs and Afghans to join the puritanical Wahhabi Harkat-ul-Ansar and fight in Kashmir. Mullah Omar confirmed in 1998 that: "We support jihad in Kashmir. It is also true that some Afghans are fighting against Indian occupation forces in Kashmir". (Anwar 1998, 233-234).

Pakistan's insistence on resolving the dispute over Kashmir, which is reflected in Washington's policies towards the region, has caused some discomfort in New Delhi. Undoubtedly a resolution of the Jammu and Kashmir issue will have a positive

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impact on the stability and security of the region; however, premising a solution in Afghanistan to a complex and volatile issue of Kashmir, will only complicate it even further.

However Islamabad's continued support to the Taliban, even after its political demise in Afghanistan stems from a dogmatic belief in certain quarters of the Taliban's ability to provide it with a significant bargaining chip against New Delhi, which in collaboration with Kabul will attempt to fill in a regional power vacuum after a US withdrawal, thus pinning down Islamabad on two fronts.

E. Anti-Indian Activities of Pakistan in Afghanistan

The attacks on the Indian personnel of the Border Roads Organization (BRO), Jalalabad consulate in 2007 and on the Indian Embassy in Kabul in July 2008, highlights Pakistan's deliberate design to undermine Indian security interests and destabilize India's growing presence in Afghanistan. These attacks has prompted India to deploy 400 ITBP (Indo Tibetan Border Police) personnel to guard its workers and installations, some of which adjoin Pakistan's restive NWFP and FATA regions, making Islamabad extremely nervous. The acquisition of an airbase by India at Ayni in Tajikistan has exacerbated Islamabad's fears of encirclement by India.

F. Anti-Pakistan Activities of India in Afghanistan

Pakistan's doubts over India's increased presence in Afghanistan, especially on the role of its consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar which it alleges are fronts for printing fake Pakistani currency and arming separatist rebels of the Baloch Liberation Army in collaboration with the Afghan Ministry of Tribal Affairs and the Afghan intelligence service.

II

THE ROAD AHEAD: OVERCOMING THE PROBLEMS

Growing jihadi terrorism led by Taliban and al Qaeda, sectarian clashes, and terrorist attacks across Pakistani cities demonstrate a grave threat not only to India, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Continued instability in Afghanistan will have a spillover effect on both India and Pakistan. Working towards a stable Afghanistan and freeing it from extremist influences is vital for realization of a stable region, failing which neither India nor Pakistan can realize their full potential.

A. Mechanisms for bridging the trust deficit

India and Pakistan should constitute a mechanism for an Indo-Pak specifically on Afghanistan. India could strive to make its aid programmes in Afghanistan more transparent to alleviate fears regarding the nature and aims of the project

undertaken, by furnishing Pakistan with details of projects undertaken and the personnel involved. India should also engage Pakistani media, inviting them to visit and independently evaluate Indian aided projects in Afghanistan.

B. Establishing Afghanistan as a Neutral State

India and Pakistan could also consider Afghanistan as a permanently neutral country, as done for Switzerland under the Congress of Vienna accord. This position was lucidly expounded by King Nadir Shah of Afghanistan as early as 1931; such an arrangement will offer something to all the key players involved: Pakistan would secure a recognition of its international borders with Afghanistan, extract an assurance from Afghanistan not to allow India to use its territory against Pakistan's security interests, Afghanistan would be able to secure an end to insurgency from Pakistan, India will be free to pursue normal relations and trade with Kabul while Iran would be assured that the US presence in Afghanistan is not permanent (Dobbins 2009, 8).

C. Potential Areas for Indo-Pak Cooperation on Afghanistan

New Delhi and Islamabad could cooperate on the following areas in Afghanistan.

1. Humanitarian Assistance, mainly Health and Education

The grant of overland transit rights to India for the supply of humanitarian aid like food, medicine, and hospital and school equipment would not only help India expedite the process of Afghanistan's reconstruction but also substantially reduce transportation costs. Both countries could also cooperate on building of schools, hospitals and drinking water projects in Afghanistan. Such an exercise provides Pakistan with an opportunity to work towards not only bridging the trust deficit with India but also a chance to recast its public image by demonstrating to the public constituency, both in Afghanistan and in the West, the sincerity of its commitment towards building a stable and functioning Afghan state. The need for Pakistan to undertake such initiatives is strongly reinforced by popular public perception of its role in Afghanistan.

2. Trade

Both countries in conjunction with Afghanistan could work out a tripartite trade agreement. Such an arrangement, apart from building trust, will have several positive ramifications, principal among them being: it will help remove the burdensome restrictions on regional trade and expedite movement towards greater regional economic integration as envisioned under SAARC (to which Afghanistan has been admitted as the

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8th member state); it will help curtail the flourishing illicit economy which is largely run by Afghan Pushtuns, currently estimated to be worth US \$10 billion (Gundu and Schaffer, 2008), along the Pak-Afghan border; it will help rekindle Asia's traditional economic and cultural linkages which were abruptly cut off by the borders redrawn by colonial powers and the ensuing politics; cross border economic linkages will have huge socio-economic spin off' as it will transform the border regions from being economic dead ends to zones for fruitful economic engagement and interaction. The economic rationale that underpins such a trading enterprise will in turn help strengthen constituencies for peace cutting across geographical boundaries. Thus, the three countries concerned should consider setting up of a tripartite commission to explore avenues for opening trade linkages.

Pakistan could grant India overland transit rights to Afghanistan; this will allow Afghanistan to function as South Asia's gateway to Central Asia. India, for its part, can offer Pakistan trade and transit facilities to Bangladesh and Myanmar. (RIS, 2007) The experience of the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) Cross Border Transport Agreement (CBTA), successfully implemented since 2003, which allows for single window customs clearance at all border crossings, is a model worth exploring.

3. Securing Energy Security for South Asia

A stable Afghanistan could serve as a key land bridge for providing access to the rich hydrocarbon and hydel power resources of Central Asia. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan stand to gain immensely from this modality as they will benefit from the revenue generated through transit fee that will provide a much needed impetus to the local economy by catering to the needs of the domestic industries and the rapidly expanding urban centers. The three countries should actively consider setting up a Joint Working Group (JWG), comprising representatives from government but also members from the trade and transport sector to explore avenues for cooperation on these issues.

4. Rekindling Cultural Links

Cultural bond between India, Afghanistan and Pakistan has been the strongest and predates the popularity of Bollywood by a couple of centuries. For example, the common cultural heritage of Sufism shared between the three countries, has given Islam in this region a distinct syncretic flavor, distinguishing it from the Islam practiced in the Middle East, particularly the Wahabism supported by Riyadh and espoused by extremist groups like the Taliban. The Sufi orders of Naqshbandiya, and Chisti of Kabul are popular in all these three countries (US Library of Congress). India and Pakistan could actively promote and strengthen this relatively moderate constituency in the region by supporting scholarship on Sufism and Sufi pilgrimages, which would allow for the movement of people and an exchange and dissemination of culture and ideas.

III RECOMMENDATIONS

Immediate Measures

- Constitute a mechanism for an Indo-Pak bilateral dialogue on Afghanistan. It will provide a forum to discuss and address mutual concerns on Afghanistan, especially security related concerns.
- India should make its aid programmes more transparent by furnishing Pakistan with details of projects undertaken and the personnel involved in it, and engage with the Pakistani media, by inviting them for visiting and independently evaluate Indian aided projects in Afghanistan.

Medium Term Measures

- Bolster cross cultural exchanges and interaction at the popular level, such as promotion of Sufi pilgrimages to strengthen the moderate community within Islam.
- Pakistan should grant overland transit rights to India for the supply of humanitarian aid such as food, medicines, and hospital and school equipment to name a few items. These two countries should collaborate on constructing hospitals, schools and drinking water projects; Pakistan particularly would gain by demonstrating its commitment to seeing a stable order take root in Afghanistan.

Long Term Measures

- Declare Afghanistan as a permanently neutral country, guaranteeing its permanent neutral status as done for Switzerland under the Congress of Vienna accord. .
- India-Pakistan and Afghanistan should ink a

tripartite trade agreement, to allow cross border movement of goods, labour and people. Pakistan should serve as India's overland route to Afghanistan and Central Asia and thus gain in terms of transit fees and economic activity generated by trade. India, on its part, should offer Pakistan transit rights to Bangladesh and Myanmar. The GMS-CBTA provides a good model to draw upon.

- Cooperate on energy issues, to diversify sources of energy supplies which are vital to keep their economic engines in motion. A stable Afghanistan will provide the South Asian markets access to the hydrocarbon rich Central Asian region. India-Pakistan-Afghanistan should consider establishing a JWG to explore avenues for cooperation on trade and energy issues.

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