

## OBAMA'S AFPAK STRATEGY: INDIAN RESPONSE

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### Introduction

The war on terror with its major theatres being Iraq and Afghanistan has been a hot issue in global politics since it was launched by former President George W. Bush. The war in Afghanistan has not only affected Afghanistan, but its spill over effects can be seen across the border in the form of recent terrorist attacks in Pakistan and India. The war severely affected South Asian Region, in general, and Afghanistan and Pakistan, in particular. This is the major reason that when Barack Obama was sworn in as the new President of United States, the countries of this part of the world looked for a new policy for the region that would suit their respective interests.

### Context

Soon after the new President started to make statements about the Afghan situation as a regional problem, the Indian diplomacy became active in making it clear that the K word (Kashmir) should not be a part of any regional solution aimed at Pakistan. This issue was taken up with the United States by the Indian diplomacy and the efforts did not go unfruitful. The appointment of Richard Holbrook as a special envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan was a departure from earlier reports that he would be appointed as a special envoy to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The Indian diplomacy also had serious reservations on the US Government's intentions of giving aid to Pakistan to fight terrorism. The Indian analysts were also concerned about the role of Pakistani military and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Before the announcement of the AfPak strategy, India made this concern public which is clear from the statement of Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon. On February 4, 2009, speaking at the Institut Francais des Relations Internationales (IFRI), a leading French think tank, in Paris, he said: "For instance, arms sales to Pakistan totally unrelated to the fight against terrorism or extremism are like whiskey to an alcoholic, a drug reinforcing an addiction, skewing the internal political balance, and making the consolidation of democracy more difficult,"<sup>1</sup>. With this as a background the new AfPak strategy came to the fore.

### The Strategy

The AfPak strategy was announced by President Barack Obama on March 23, 2009. An increase in troops, new legislation, and increased civilian expertise were some of the major points of the new strategy for Afghanistan. The main points of the strategy regarding Pakistan were:

- Presence of Al-Qaeda in Pakistan: President Barack Obama made it clear that al Qaeda members are also present in Pakistan and Al-Qaeda is actively planning attacks on the U.S. homeland from its safe haven in Pakistan. Obama said it is a key issue that the Americans understand that Pakistan "needs our help" against al Qaeda.

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- Economic assistance: Obama called on Congress to pass a bipartisan bill co-sponsored by Sens. John Kerry, D-Massachusetts, and Richard Lugar, R-Indiana. The legislation authorizes \$1.5 billion in direct support to the Pakistani people every year over the next five years. Moreover, World Bank and International Monetary Fund and others will be encouraged by United States to help Pakistan get out of the economic crunch.
- No blank cheque to Pakistan: The President made it clear that no blank cheque will be provided to Pakistan. He said that Pakistan must demonstrate its commitment to rooting out al Qaeda and the violent extremists within its borders in order to receive increased levels of aid.
- A new contact group for Afghanistan and Pakistan: The President said the United States will develop a new contact group for Afghanistan and Pakistan that would include not only NATO allies and other partners but also Central Asian States, Gulf nations and Iran, Russia, India and China.

### **Indian Concerns**

The AfPak strategy announced by President Barack Obama has received a mixed response in India. Some parts of the strategy were welcomed initially but a number of points have raised serious concerns in Indian media and political community. Most of the analysts in India believe that the strategy announced by President Barack Obama on March 27, 2009, is not very different from the past policy of George W. Bush. But some points of the strategy like talking to moderate Taliban, aid to Pakistan, the emphasis on presence of terror groups in Pakistan and the regional approach in dealing with the threat of terrorism have been received in India with great concern. Many Indians are of the view that there should be more stick and far fewer carrots for Pakistan. Some Indian analysts have also opined that the new policy is extremely Pakistan-centric. They are of the view that it is not the right approach for the new US government. However, some points of the strategy regarding terrorism were actually welcomed by the Indian political and diplomatic circles.

After the announcement of the strategy, Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon on March 30, 2009 said that he welcomed the AfPak policy. Menon, however, raised his concerns about the non-military aid US plans to give Pakistan, over the next five years. Moreover he raised apprehensions regarding the alleged links between extremist elements and the Pakistani establishment. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also expressed his doubts on April 20, 2009 that the aid announced by Barack Obama for Pakistan can be diverted by the Pakistani establishment towards anti-Indian acts. Different parts of the AfPak strategy received different responses from the Indian side. The Indian analysts endorsed some parts of the strategy while strongly criticising others. The major parts of the strategy much debated in India are as follows:

#### ***Terror groups based in Pakistan***

President Barack Obama stated that Al-Qaeda and its allies- the terrorists who planned and supported the 9/11 attacks- are in Pakistan and Afghanistan. President Obama's concerns that al-Qaeda is actively planning attacks on the US homeland from its safe haven in Pakistan, have been received in India with great enthusiasm. The Indians have endorsed this point and are constantly working to declare Pakistan as the

hub of terror activities. Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon praised this part of the strategy and said that the strategy showed the U.S.'s clear will to control terrorism in the region and its roots in Pakistan.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Negotiations with "moderate" Taliban***

Obama's plan of negotiating with moderate Taliban has been highly criticized by Indian analysts. Most of the Indian analysts have raised their objections on the issue. They are of the view that no such 'moderate Taliban' exist. An Indian analyst has clearly echoed this general concern in his article "AfPak: Negotiate from Strength". The writer opined that "dealing with militancy from FATA requires changing the basic attitude of the Pakistani security establishment from one that distinguishes between good and bad jihadis to one that realizes that all these militant groups, operating from Afghanistan to Kashmir, are part of the same broad umbrella of radical Islamic groups."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, some analysts are of the view that: "By peddling the good versus bad Taliban, the policy hinges on Pakistan (Islamic) rather than on Afghanistan (nationalist) to deal with the problem – this is bound to fail."<sup>4</sup> Some Indian policy experts have also opined that there is no proper way of separating good and bad Taliban. Former Indian Ambassador M.K. Bhadrakumar while writing about this separation between the "moderate" and "extremist" Taliban, have quoted Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan that distinguishing between the hardliners and the moderate Taliban will not be acceptable to anybody because it is like telling two brothers that you love one and want to play with him, while you want to kill the other one.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Aid to Pakistan***

The aid announced by President Obama to be given to Pakistan has brought about great concern in India. Indian analysts have raised this fear in articles and interviews that the massive aid will be diverted in anti-India activities by Pakistan. Recently the Prime Minister of India Mr. Manmohan Singh has given voice to these fears by showing apprehensions on the US plan of giving military aid to Pakistan. The PM said: "We do not have problems with economic aid for building schools, roads and hospitals in Pakistan. But our experience has shown that military aid has been used against us in the past."<sup>6</sup> In this regard, the Indian diplomatic efforts were noteworthy even before the announcement of new strategy by Barack Obama. Days before the announcement of the new strategy Indian foreign secretary Shiv Shankar Menon said that giving aid to Pakistan was tantamount to giving alcohol to an alcoholic.

### ***No blank cheque to Pakistan***

The announcement of President Obama that no blank cheque will be provided to Pakistan also received a mix response. Some Indian diplomatic and political circles appreciated this statement but others perceived it differently and apprehended that this might not work. According to them the strategy does not specify any clear benchmarks and goals for Pakistan. In the absence of any such benchmarks and goals it would be hard to determine the sincerity of Pakistani establishment and military in fighting the menace of terrorism wholeheartedly. They also opine that the Pakistani military still sees Taliban as a strategic asset and, therefore, is not sincere in fighting with them.

### ***The Kashmir factor***

It has been a great concern for India that Kashmir should not be a part of any regional solution for the Afghan problem. Barack Obama during his Presidential campaign highlighted the importance of seeking a resolution of the Kashmir issue for establishing lasting peace in South Asia. However, Indian diplomacy has been very affective in ensuring that Kashmir issue is not included in Richard Holbrook's agenda for the region. In the AfPak strategy, President Obama spoke about pursuing constructive diplomacy with both India and Pakistan to lessen tensions between the two nuclear-armed nations, without mentioning the Kashmir issue. Nevertheless, Indian analysts have advocated that linking the issue of Kashmir with the terror related problems in Pakistan will not be a wise step by the new administration in the United States.

## Conclusion

In a nutshell, the Indian manoeuvring of the situation can be gauged from the following facts. India is exploiting Obama's statement that terror groups are based in Pakistan. The Indian policy is very clear in this regard where they are trying their best to prove Pakistan as the hub of terrorism. The major allegations put forward by Indians in this regard are those linking Inter-Services Intelligence, ISI, with the Taliban. Moreover, Indian experts are not in favour of any negotiations with the moderate Taliban. According to Indian analysts no such Taliban exist. Indian analysts have criticised the fact that Obama focused on al-Qaeda and not on Taliban in his speech. India is happy that the aid given to Pakistan is now linked to its performance but the analysts are still raising the issue that no proper bench marks, as well as the modalities for achieving those, are defined for Pakistan. The Indian response to the announced aid for Pakistan was clear that there should be more stick and far fewer carrots for Pakistan. Most importantly, it is clear from the Indian response to the AfPak strategy that India wants US to put pressure on Pakistani military in achieving clear short term goals to show its sincerity in the fight against terror.

## References

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