

## **Pakistan-U.S. relations in the midst of Afghanistan war: options and challenges**

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### **Introduction**

**D**espite the outpouring of millions of dollars after nine years of war, Afghanistan is not turning out to be a success story as envisaged by policymakers in Washington. In fact, Washington's policy for the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan has been haphazard. It remains in constant flux and still lacks a cohesive security strategy. Over time, violence has increased and more than 711 foreign troops, including some 500 American soldiers, have been killed in 2010 alone.<sup>1</sup>

Afghan security forces have proved to be a poor match for the Taliban, and there is little doubt that the current situation in Afghanistan is adding to the Obama administration's frustrations in the region. With the deployment of more than 30,000 U.S. forces and a rather blurred and disillusioned exit strategy, the U.S. is in the middle of a decade-old war with no end in sight.

The future of Afghanistan remains on the edge. The dismissal of General Stanley McChrystal in the midst of the ongoing war gave a body blow to the American war policy. Contrary to regular U.S. rhetoric of its successes in the country, the war is taking a reversal in its momentum. The Taliban have grown stronger and better organised and the situation seems to be going from bad to worse due to an incoherent strategy and weak indicators for success. For instance, Bob Woodward, in his book *Obama's Wars*, quotes Admiral Mike Mullen as accepting that "the Afghanistan war has been under-resourced for years and in truth there was no strategy."<sup>2</sup>

Despite, and perhaps due to, continuous attacks by the U.S. and NATO forces on the Pakistani border and in Afghanistan, insurgent groups are successful in finding new recruits. The decadal war has galvanized militants on both sides of the border. While the war has spilled over to border areas inside Pakistan, in what was an unwelcome but expected outcome, it has spread its tentacles in other major cities as well and

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harmed the country in a number of ways. Indeed, the political, economic and security situation in Pakistan has deteriorated dramatically since 2005.

The United States and Pakistan, regardless of being old allies, have different objectives in Afghanistan. Nine years of unfinished war in Afghanistan have caused American and NATO allies to question the success of war and even U.S. commitment to the cause. Moreover, the underlying security dynamics in Afghanistan remain uncertain, and it is even surmised that a successful turnaround in Afghanistan before a complete U.S. withdrawal may bring victory to the Afghan Taliban.

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The relationship between Pakistan and the U.S. has always been difficult – in the current scenario it is also an odd alliance. Both countries continue to have apprehensions regarding the motives of the other, even though they share a long and unique history of bilateral relationship. In the midst of the Cold War, Pakistan allied with the U.S. and heavily relied on its ties for its military and security concerns. And yet, this reliance brought significant risks, especially in the post-Cold War era.

The ongoing war in Afghanistan seems to be in complete disarray and the subject of great confusion and debate in Kabul, Washington and Islamabad. The transition plan rests on assumptions that are at best unreliable and at worst delusional. One, that Afghan security forces can be trained and readied to take over all combat responsibilities in the next four years. And two, that the insurgency can be ‘de-graded’ to the point that the Afghan National Army is able to face down Taliban forces once the Western troop withdrawal nears completion.<sup>3</sup>

This reflects an ever-increasing perplexity between the three major players, especially between Pakistan and the United States. The latter has consistently failed to develop healthy working relations with the civilian government of the former since it believes that Pakistan’s government does not have the will and desire to support the war and to reform its policies altogether. However, the situation with the military works better.

In spite of renewed cooperation, both countries remain sceptical about each other. The current relationship is at best described as a partnership of uncertain duration, implying a joint objective, presumably the roundup of

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al-Qaeda and Taliban cadre, without the legal and strategic implications of an alliance.<sup>4</sup>

It is not surprising then for Pakistan that the relationship is often characterised as a 'double-edged sword' - one that hangs over the U.S. as surely as it hangs over Pakistan. Despite the unremitting efforts made in the form of strategic dialogue and

other diplomatic exchanges, Pakistan and the U.S. lack the element of trust. According to an annual assessment carried out by the *New York Times*, in 2010, the number of drone strikes inside Pakistan increased considerably to 115, up from 53 in 2009; and they resulted in 3,500 civilian casualties. Side by side, President Asif Ali Zardari's approval ratings dropped to 20 per cent, as compared to 32 per cent in 2009 and 64 percent in 2008.<sup>5</sup> Despite the sharp increase in the number of Predator strikes carried out under the Obama administration, data from government and independent sources indicate that the number of high-ranking militants killed as a result has either gone down or barely increased.<sup>6</sup>

Increased use of drone attacks, and border raids inside Pakistani territory, are policies that have been hailed in Washington; yet, they bring out the concerns of Pakistan. The U.S. strategy is premised on rooting out militants from territory after territory, steadily taking decisive control, while also weakening terrorist groups by assassinating their leadership.<sup>7</sup> The increased use of drone strikes inside Pakistani territory is adding to the already mounting anti-American sentiment in the population at large. Altogether, intensified fighting in Afghanistan and expansion of drone strikes in the Pakistani tribal areas and beyond are likely to further escalate the insurgency in the country.<sup>8</sup>

### **Afghanistan Pakistan War Review 2010**

The Afghanistan Pakistan war strategy review 2010 by the Obama administration indicates measured but sustainable success and progress. Previous policies engineered by Washington have failed. Yet, it is too early to arrive at any definitive judgement on the new strategic review. For many, the review came out as it was expected. The core goal of the strategy remains to dismantle and disrupt Al Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan and Pakistan and to prevent its return.

Although the review sends a blend of mixed messages to Afghanistan and Pakistan about American interests in the region, it still pledges a long-term commitment even after U.S. withdrawal. The strategy does set out the objective of withdrawal, but does not identify the number of American troops to leave, and the areas they will depart from. At present, there are two contrasting narratives in the ongoing war in Afghanistan:

1. The war has brought no good to America; on the contrary, it has exacerbated the situation in Afghanistan, led to increase in insurgency, drug trade, and corruption in the government. Pakistan is a much more strategically troubling problem to policymakers and pundits in Obama administration and the U.S. does not possess any strategy for FATA and the north-western region. Moreover, there is no policy on the shelf that addresses Pakistan's current and future security concerns.
2. The situation is not as bad as it is believed to be. Over the years, the NATO and American forces have been able to achieve their goals of dismantling the Taliban in many areas, and reconstructing a new Afghanistan. The war is overall progressing in America's favour.
3. The document also acknowledges India's regional role and interests, but argues that America should not pursue these at Pakistan's expense. Pakistan, if the logic of the document is pursued, appears to be preparing for a settlement in Afghanistan that would accommodate competing regional interests.<sup>9</sup>

A key flaw in the report is that the existence of insurgent sanctuaries inside Pakistan still remains a question of great focus. The report also fails to answer two rising concerns and challenges:

1. It shows unawareness of regenerating, rebuilding and recruiting of Taliban militia from the common population, particularly in its stronghold in southern Afghanistan.
2. It shows a failure to understand the extent to which Pakistan has played a role and the country's limitations and independent interests in Afghanistan.

As 2011 begins, there are 150,000 U.S.-led international Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops in Afghanistan; 30,000 more than the Soviet Union had during its occupation of the country in the 1980s. Along with the manpower deployed, in Afghanistan the cost of Afghan war since 2006 has risen dramatically, making it one of the most expensive wars in U.S. history. In Fiscal Year 2010, Afghan War costs account for 61 per cent increase as compared to \$ 60 billion in 2009 and in fiscal year 2011 the \$ 105 billion cost for Afghan was is a 75 per cent increase.<sup>10</sup> Still, it

does not quite look like the war is coming to an end. With two strategic reviews, the Obama administration is at a standstill and has no clear plans to defeat and dismantle the Taliban and Al Qaeda elements or even to transform Afghanistan as a stable and secure state. Thus, U.S. success is still in question.

No matter what the stated policy of Obama is, many in Afghanistan and Pakistan believe that the U.S. cannot really start its troop withdrawal in Afghanistan by 2011 and exit by 2014, given the state of affairs today. Although the United States and its allies have scored important tactical gains over the past 12 months – destroying some of the insurgent networks and securing the once-violent districts in southern Afghanistan – they have no clear plan to either dismantle insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan or address the corrupt and predatory behaviour of Afghanistan’s political class, which threatens to undermine U.S. and allied military successes.<sup>11</sup>

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It is also believed that Washington is adjusting its own position: whereas it has previously set the preconditions for talking to the Taliban – renunciation of Al Qaeda, laying down arms, and accepting the Afghan constitution – Pakistan's generals today believe these are now end goals rather than preconditions for talks.<sup>12</sup>

The widespread perception among Pakistani officials and the military is that the United States has no effective strategy for winning the war, and the Pakistani military has in fact begun pursuing avenues to a separate peace deal to be made directly with Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> The U.S. is still uncertain as to how large and quick the troop reduction from Afghanistan is going to be. The U.S. and its allies should begin a transformation from a large-scale mission employing in excess of 140,000 troops to a more sustainable presence of 25,000-30,000 troops in Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup>

The U.S. may be able to address the apprehensions of both Afghanistan and Pakistan by signalling a long-term military and political commitment, including socioeconomic aid. Also this enduring U.S. military presence will be sized to both support and enable sustained Afghan National Security Force to combat the Taliban and maintain relentless U.S. pressure on Al Qaeda.<sup>15</sup>

### Active regional players

#### *India's role in Afghanistan - dilemma or geopolitical relevance?*

India's role in Afghanistan has been a silent but alarming concern since it is considered to be Pakistan-specific. However, India's security worries are concrete and tangible. They include, firstly, the prospect of a Taliban return and the consequent likely impact on militant Islamic fundamentalism in the region in general and Pakistan in particular; and secondly, what it perceives to be the Taliban's symbolic relationship with a revanchist military-jihadist nexus in Pakistan that India holds responsible for a series of security challenges and political reversals.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, its optimal goals and objectives in Afghanistan are unclear and uncertain.

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India's political and economic influence in Afghanistan is increasing as rapidly as its investments. However, analysts refer to India as the regional power with legitimate strategic interest in the stability and security of Afghanistan, independent of those of the United States and others.<sup>17</sup>

India has committed over \$ 1.2 billion in humanitarian, reconstruction, and developmental assistance for Afghanistan, making India fifth largest international donor to Afghanistan with projects spanning hospitals, infrastructure, and the social sector.<sup>18</sup> India is exploring its extended strategic interests in Afghanistan and the greater Middle East. Thus, while India's presence in Afghanistan has a Pakistan-specific utility, it is also about India's emergent ability to influence its extended strategic neighbourhood.<sup>19</sup>

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population rather than attempting to influence the military or politics in the country. Indian television soaps and films are becoming very popular in Afghanistan and are dubbed into Dari and Pashto as well. Shashi Tharoor, former Under-Secretary-General at the United Nation, says that Indian soaps and movies are very popular in Afghanistan and their particular strength is that they have “nothing to do with government propaganda.” The positive thing about it is that it engages the population in a way that takes into account what they want.<sup>20</sup>

According to an estimate, there are about 4,000 Indian workers and security personnel working under different relief and reconstruction projects in Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> Indian aid to Afghanistan extends and covers every corner of civil sector; civilian aid funds education and provides almost 1,000 scholarships to Afghan students and civil servants every year.<sup>22</sup> India has taken the burden of building major infrastructure projects in Afghanistan including the new national parliament building set for completion by 2011.<sup>23</sup> In December 2001, India moved in with humanitarian assistance by reopening the Indra Gandhi Children’s Hospital in Kabul and sending medical missions to assist in humanitarian work, donating three air buses to enable the state-run airline Ariana to resume operations and hundreds of buses for public transit facilities.<sup>24</sup>

One of the main policy focuses for India has been the development of a southern trade corridor linking India with Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Russia. It has built major highways and roads such as the 218-km-long Zarang-Delaram highway in southwest Afghanistan near the Iranian border,<sup>25</sup> providing India an alternate route to Afghanistan in order to reduce its dependence on Pakistan.

Speculations in Pakistan are mounting as to what exactly India wants to achieve in Afghanistan and what its larger goals in the region are. Although India has very limited options in Afghanistan, it is perhaps utilising all means to actualise its aims in its not too distant a neighbour.

### *China’s involvement*

China’s interests in Afghanistan are closely connected to its larger interests concerning Pakistan and South Asia, Central Asia, domestic counterterrorism, the acquisition of foreign goods, energy, and mineral resources, and finally, bilateral relations the United States.<sup>26</sup> China’s economic interests in the region, especially in Afghanistan, are very

significant. In Afghanistan, China Metallurgical Construction Group's \$3.2 billion in Aynak copper mine investment, in the eastern province of Logar, is the country's largest, with the mine-holding a much as the equivalent of a third of China's total copper reserves.<sup>27</sup> Besides, China also has an interest in Afghanistan's mineral wealth and is actively developing infrastructure and communication lines. China is one of the few countries capable of providing substantial packages of economic assistance and investment, which, if appropriately targeted and coordinated, could have a transformative political, economic and social impact on both Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>28</sup>

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Secondly, China has invested heavily in Afghanistan and does not want its position to be threatened. The greater prominence given to Pakistan in U.S. strategy – exemplified by the “AfPak” coinage – also placed China toward the top of any possible list of countries whose cooperation could have a major impact.<sup>29</sup> Stable Afghanistan and Pakistan are in China's favour and it cannot, at this juncture, afford to strain its policies in Afghanistan and its privileged relations with Pakistan.

The ongoing crisis in Afghanistan and Pakistan appears to offer a prime avenue for closer cooperation between the United States and China. There are various broadly shared interests in combating terrorism; countering extremism and offering global stability that bring both countries to the same platform.<sup>30</sup> However, Western commentators have eyed China's approach to Afghanistan with suspicion and resentment, accusing China of “free-riding” and snapping up investment deals at the expense of the United States, which is paying dearly in blood and treasure.<sup>31</sup>

The consequence of China's geopolitical perceptions is deep ambivalence about U.S. success in Afghanistan and Pakistan – unless success means exit.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, the failure of U.S. forces in Afghanistan will indeed have a great impact on China in the form of radicalisation in the region of a nature that it becomes contagious among



the ethnic minorities in China, especially the Muslim population in Xinjiang.

China also finds its interests shaken; security for its workers and major investment projects has deteriorated, U.S. role in the region has expanded much to China's discomfort, and Pakistan's capacity to protect Chinese interests has also weakened.<sup>33</sup> This offers enough justification for China to keep active in achieving its ends in Afghanistan and the region. Nonetheless, China is one of the few countries capable of deploying substantial packages of economic assistance and investment, which if appropriately targeted and coordinated, could have a transformative political, economic, and social impact on conditions in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>34</sup>

#### *Plan B - de facto partition of Afghanistan*

Certain voices in Obama administration propose a de facto partition of Afghanistan. Stressing that the United States will retain an active combat role in Afghanistan for years into the future, and that it does not accept permanent Taliban control of the South; they hold out that the United States and its allies withdraw ground combat forces over several months from most of Pashtun Afghanistan, including Kandahar. Washington should concentrate its efforts, meanwhile, on defending the areas in the north and west of Afghanistan, not dominated by the Pashtuns, including Kabul.<sup>35</sup> Many policymakers in Washington believe that partition of Afghanistan is best left on the table.

The basic argument is that since the U.S. is not winning the war in Afghanistan and is not weakening the Taliban, the best policy is to divide the country into two. Afghanistan is certainly an ethnic mosaic. The suggested partition is to divide it ethnically between the anti-U.S. Pushtuns fighting the war on one side and the Karzai regime, the Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and the supportive Pashtun population on the other. Such a partition would significantly minimise ISAF casualties, reduce the financial burden and limit the resources involved in the war. It will also considerably minimise the domestic political pressure that the Obama administration faces.

However, the idea is not without significant concerns for the U.S. since partition would be an invitation to Russia and enable the Taliban to gain strength and merge with the Al Qaeda network. The effects will be visible in the entire region, including India, China and Iran, in a struggle to

get hold of either side of Afghanistan. It is also believed that once the Taliban have acquired a secure leadership base in the remote parts of Afghanistan, a second civil war is likely to ignite, once again placing the Taliban forces in confrontation with the Northern Alliance and the Karzai regime.<sup>36</sup>

### **New generation of Taliban**

The decade-long war and the reshuffling of leadership both in the Taliban and al-Qaeda have paved the way for a 'new generation of Taliban'. It is believed that the new and younger generation of the Afghan Taliban is more susceptible to advances by foreign jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda, resulting in an increasing 'ideologization' of the conflict.<sup>37</sup> In recent years, many new terrorist groups have emerged, several existing groups have reconstituted themselves, and a new crop of militants has emerged, more violent and less conducive to political solutions than their predecessors.<sup>38</sup>

The recruits primarily include a much younger batch between the ages of 13 and 20 and the motivation to these kinds of groups is usually drawn from three main factors:

1. The indoctrination of Jihad – by means of Madrassas and local clerics belonging to insurgent groups.
2. Feelings of revenge – the younger population whose houses have been destroyed and families either killed or tortured by the State and the U.S.-led international forces.
3. Lack of alternative solutions and resources – a large section of the population is jobless and has no means to achieve social security.

Some experts also believe that this new generation of terrorists is also more willing to engage in suicide attacks and that the Taliban are recruiting younger and younger children to carry out suicide attacks.<sup>39</sup>

The psychological damage of the war remains unattended to. According to some U.S. intelligence officers, young Afghanis radicalized

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by nine years of war with western forces are opting for suicide martyrdom rather than the traditional role of conventional fighting under a local warlord.<sup>40</sup> It has paired the mentally fractured youth in the border lands of Afghanistan and Pakistan with more symbolic religious figures that fight against the occupation of international forces. However, there has been no coherent response by Washington, Kabul or Islamabad, as well as by the international community, to address this alarming issue. This has created an environment for the Taliban and al Qaeda leadership to influence a fragmented population, especially the younger generation on both sides of the border to come together for a common cause.

The new generation of Taliban is indeed more fervent in joining the Al Qaeda clan in order to gain quick and easy power and will undoubtedly bring in more movements and new jihadist groups. Besides providing militant groups in Pakistan with technical expertise and capabilities, Al Qaeda is also promoting cooperation among a variety of them, say some experts.<sup>41</sup> This new phenomenon has been significantly exploited by the Al Qaeda and its allied movements around the globe. It has been among the major sources of recruitment as the recruit is generally a minor to be used as a suicide bomber who is indoctrinated by extremist concepts of Jihad and fed with anti-Western sentiments.

The fundamental medium used by the Al Qaeda in building and recruiting for this new army has been the media and the internet. Both have played a vital part in Al Qaeda's propagation around the globe as it disseminates its message in such a way now that it reaches a diverse audience. Moreover, it is not just limited to Afghanistan in the remote lands, it is also growing and nurturing in countries outside the realm of the Afghan war. Surprisingly, it has achieved much success in the Western world through these means.

Virtual Jihad, according to a report published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, is taken up by those who might not be theologically devout or even have a sound religious foundation, but are using new terms like "jihadi cool"<sup>42</sup> and "wannabe terrorist"<sup>43</sup> to justify terrorism.

According to surveys conducted to assess militants' motivation for joining the movement, "the top three answers were motorcycles, guns and access to women."<sup>44</sup> Using creative methods, pro-Jihad and Al Qaeda websites are also among many active sources that include magazines such as *Jihad Recollections*, *Nawa-e-Afghan Jihad*, *Inspire Magazine*, *Defenders of the Truth*.

Radicalization through social networks is also among the many tools used by the al-Qaeda and Taliban. Its main agenda is to attract people looking for thrills and adventure and are exceptionally fond of violence and guns. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Orkut and YouTube are among the most used for extremist lectures and literature. Another important factor behind this active growth is the material benefits and quick economic gains that these new emerging organisations achieve. This can earn them prestige, good money as well as new recruits and fundraising opportunities.

### **Implications for Pakistan**

The United States today is a catalyzing power in this same, continual Afghan warfare. U.S. actions in Afghanistan since 2001 have amplified the debilitating spill-over effects of the Afghan war on Pakistan.<sup>45</sup> The international community should understand that there are limits to the role Pakistan can play in the war. Also, the U.S. needs to be aware of the fact that its reliance on immediate short-term military objectives in the region will prove to have detrimental consequences for Pakistan as well as Afghanistan. The continued reliance on a military strategy is not just delaying a meaningful search for a negotiated end to the conflict but could also end up compromising the chances for one, once the surge has run its course.<sup>46</sup>

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Pakistan is already facing several problems regarding its nation-building, and its vast areas affected by the war in Afghanistan are facing multiple social and security dilemmas. The dismal view of the United States held across so many constituencies in Pakistan today – particularly the widespread view that U.S. policy in Afghanistan and along the Pakistan-afghan border constitutes a grave threat to Pakistan – is a clear sign that U.S. policymakers need to think much more deeply.<sup>47</sup> U.S. policy in Afghanistan has failed to develop a robust strategy of political

negotiations, reconciliation and national reintegration that would address Pakistan's genuine security concerns.<sup>48</sup> The pundits and policymakers in Islamabad and Washington need to move beyond the conventional wisdom of fighting with insurgents in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The trajectories of their policies directly affect the movements of the Taliban and Al Qaeda groups operating in the border lands of both countries.

## **Conclusion**

The challenge now is to control problems that have been growing significantly. It is difficult to be optimistic about the situation in Afghanistan in the near future. It is, in fact, most important to have a long term perspective to achieve sustainable and enduring success in the war and in this region, especially in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Drastic change through military force is not a feasible approach. A lot more can be achieved through diplomacy, political flexibility and creating a balance between different options.

Pakistan and Afghanistan share the past, present and future. It is important for the U.S. to understand that no matter how many regional players it puts into action to achieve a safe gateway out of Afghanistan, Pakistan's role remains pivotal. Thus, it should be empowered rather than considered a residual and transitory ally in the region. Most policy experts in the United States support the idea of India's involvement in Afghanistan. However, for a better regional solution, incorporating security and stability in Afghanistan in the long run, it is necessary to look for a three-way solution between Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

The economic, political and security situation in Pakistan is in a state of disrepair. The United States must assist Pakistan in overcoming its fundamental challenges in order to not only fight its war but also to make Pakistan stand on its own feet. It is time that both countries realized and supported each other's commitment in the fight against terrorism and acknowledge that stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan is intertwined.

Concentrated diplomatic efforts and assurances are required to have a sound, stable and enduring relationship between Pakistan and the United States. Pakistan needs to be the regional focus for the U.S. in order to achieve a 'successful' and 'graceful' exit from Afghanistan. The best possible solution for Pakistan and the U.S. is to build a comprehensive approach towards each other and combining efforts in order to achieve success. Both countries should move forward in order to enhance and

develop the level of cooperation in different dimensions, including the security forces, governance and socio-economic sectors.

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