

**'Breakfast in Amritsar, lunch in Lahore, dinner in Kabul' \****Simbal Khan \*\***"Breakfast in Amritsar, Lunch in Lahore, dinner in Kabul"*

These words spoken by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in January 2007, envisioning a new South Asia of seamless political and spatial interconnectedness, appear to be an impossibly remote prospect three years later. However, we find a chilling sense of such 'seamless spatial interconnectedness' in the words of the US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, as he spoke of terrorism during his recent visit to India: "The Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT) which is operating in league with al-Qaeda is dangerous for the whole region of Afghanistan, Pakistan and India." Although the people and polities of the three countries remain disconnected by deep historical and geo-political cleavages, for the US, trans-border terrorist outfits have already actualized the seamlessness so whimsically referred to by Mr. Manmohan Singh.

This and many such statements that the Defence Secretary made during his visit to India and Pakistan are reflective of an ongoing conceptual shift in the US administration's approach to South Asia. The US military intervention in Afghanistan has led to the juxtaposition of macro-securitization, namely the 'War on Terror', on to prevailing regional security complexities in South Asia. Defined by an intensely securitised relationship between Pakistan and India, the region has long been characterised by cleavages which are generally geo-political in nature - such as unresolved territorial or border disputes and water issues. As the US, the primary extra-regional actor, has incrementally deepened its military footprint in Afghanistan, the imperatives of waging the War on Terror have necessitated a rewriting, or rather a staggered re-scripting of the operating concepts of security in the sub-continent.

This new framework identifies terrorism as the primary threat to South Asian security and a threat which is capable of obliterating all other faultlines. The discourse remains shorn of any references to historical causes, unresolved disputes and divergent geopolitical compulsions. The strategy in its current incarnation visualises for India a role as a major security contributor to the central government in Kabul in supporting its efforts in training and the expanding ANA (Afghan National Army) and ANP

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\* *This paper was written ahead of the London Conference on Afghanistan on January 28 2010 – Editor.*

\*\* *The writer is Acting Director (Russia and Central Asia) at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad.*

(Afghan National Police). While the Pakistani military is expected to take on the Afghan Taliban factions that straddle its borders with Afghanistan; supporting the efforts of and training the Afghan National Army, police force and intelligence agencies is likely to be one of India's contributions. There is little analysis yet of the likely costs and impact of such a strategy on both India and Pakistan's long term security.

## **The new US security framework - an encapsulated overview**

This new approach is a shift away from the Bush administration's policies of 'de-hyphenation' with regards to its relations with India and Pakistan that were followed during most of the last decade. 'De-hyphenation' in effect meant that post-9/11, as the US turned its energies to fighting the Al-Qaeda and Taliban on the Pak-Afghan border, the Bush administration refused to inject itself into the Indo-Pak peace process and disavowed activism on Kashmir. As a result it managed to simultaneously improve its relations with Islamabad and New Delhi. It declared Pakistan a major 'non-NATO ally' and India a strategic partner and concluded an exclusive nuclear cooperation agreement with the latter.

However, even before President Obama was elected to office, the faltering war in Afghanistan made it evident that a fundamental reorientation of US strategy was in order. By 2007 it was clear that there were limits to the extent of Pakistan's endorsement of the 'War on Terror' as the operating paradigm since it came at the cost of its own security calculus based on hard nosed geo-political realities - especially the security of its Eastern borders. Simply put, Pakistan still considered India the primary security threat and was unwilling to redeploy the bulk of its military from its eastern borders in order to dedicate more of its troops to fighting the said war.

Therefore, even before President Obama was sworn in, the US policy of de-hyphenation had run its course. The essence of President Obama's initial proposal to remedy the situation was to re-hyphenate the policy towards New Delhi and Islamabad as part of his new strategy towards Kabul. This had three elements:

Firstly, the US cannot prevail in Afghanistan without resolving problems within Pakistan. Secondly, Pakistan might be encouraged to focus on its western borders if the dispute over Jammu and Kashmir is sorted out. And thirdly, there might be a window of opportunity for a breakthrough over Kashmir if the US devoted enough energy and resources and enhanced its role by appointing a high-profile special envoy.

India's response was predictable. It rejected third party mediation and any possible linkage between Afghanistan and Kashmir. However, deeper engagement between India and the US has led to growing consensus that as long as Kashmir is kept out of the equation, India should have no objection in visualising the North Western parts of the sub-continent within a single conceptual framework. The November 2008 Mumbai terrorist

attacks provided an enabling environment for such a conceptual framework to actualise. The framework tellingly remains embedded in the discourse of trans-border terrorism and the presence of Al Qaeda in the Pak–Afghan border. The question is how far this strategy has succeeded in Afghanistan or is likely to succeed in future. The fact of the matter is that the war on terror has not proved to be a great leveller and has had a qualitatively different impact on both India and Pakistan.

### **New strategy: impact on India and Pakistan**

For India, the discourse underlying the ‘War on Terror’ resonated with its own struggles with trans–border Kashmiri Mujahideen factions. India readily endorsed such securitisation, superimposing the new rhetoric on old, essentially geopolitical disputes with Pakistan. US military intervention in Afghanistan also created space for extending and expanding India’s influence inside the country. Supporting US efforts in the war allowed India to bypass erstwhile geo-political limitations on its ability to create political and economic ties with Afghanistan during the Taliban rule.

According to Indian sources, there are currently about four thousand Indian workers and security personnel working on different relief and reconstruction projects in Afghanistan. Since 2006, following increased incidents of kidnappings and attacks, India has sent its mountain-trained paramilitary - that is usually tasked with guarding its border with China - to protect its workers in Afghanistan. Currently, there are about five hundred such paramilitary policemen in Afghanistan where India is involved in a wide array of development projects. In January 2009, India completed the construction of the Zaranj-Delaram highway in southwest Afghanistan near the Iranian border. It is building Afghanistan's new parliament building set for completion by 2011; it is constructing the Salma Dam power project in Herat Province; it has trained Afghan police officers, diplomats and civil servants; and it has provided support in the areas of health, education, transportation, power, and telecommunications. With an investment of 1.2 billion dollars, India is the fifth largest donor in Afghanistan.

Pakistan on the other hand has become increasingly concerned with the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and on its own western borders. The spill-over effects of the war added to the crippling economic situation due to spiralling internal insecurity, has made it increasingly difficult for Pakistan to see the rationale of its participation in the War on Terror. Growing Indian influence on the new Afghan government and mounting evidence of Indian support to insurgents in Balochistan and other anti-state elements has added to Pakistan’s scepticism and insecurity. After India opened consulates in Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Jalalabad, and

Kandahar, Pakistan charged that these consulates provide cover for Indian intelligence agencies to run covert operations against Pakistan including the support of insurgents in Pakistan's Balochistan province.

In short, although US bilateral relations with Pakistan and India had deepened as both participated in the War on Terror in different capacities, the South Asian neighbours also managed to superimpose their geo-political ambitions and rivalries on the already teetering Afghanistan.

The important question is how to proceed from this point on. As expected, there is an intensification of diplomatic activity and bargaining by various stakeholders to strengthen their positions before the London Conference on Afghanistan. Intense negotiations are likely to revolve around the following initiatives - some of which relate directly to India's role and Pakistan's position:

- There are indications that both the United States and Britain are exploring ways to boost India's role in Afghanistan, including a controversial proposal for it to train the Afghan National Police (ANP). A low profile trip to Delhi by Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, the British 'Pak-Afghan' envoy, also involved discussions on the ANP training proposal with Indian officials.
- The London Conference is also likely to discuss the formation of a regional stabilisation council for Afghanistan which will probably include India as well. Pakistan has been resisting India's participation in any such regional body claiming that India is not an immediate neighbour and therefore should have a limited role.

### **The US/NATO-sponsored contact group**

Even before the Obama administration had come into office, various stakeholders had been floating the idea of the formation of a UN-authorized Contact Group on Afghanistan. Such a group was to include all the five permanent members of the Security Council as well Afghanistan's neighbours including Iran. The proposed group was also to include India and Saudi Arabia. It would be tasked with promoting dialogue between India and Pakistan on their respective interests in Afghanistan and finding creative ways to solve the long-standing Kashmir issue. India's unwillingness to discuss this issue on any multilateral forum and Pakistan's reluctance to participate in a forum that limits its interaction with India only to the situation in Afghanistan has prevented the realization of the Contact Group so far.

## **The 6+3**

Reports also suggest that Pakistan is keen to revive the 6+2 at this belated stage and that the group has had a meeting in Ankara with Russia being replaced with the United Kingdom. The original initiative for a proposed multilateral group was floated in 2008 by Uzbekistan and is known as the '6+3' contact group. This proposed grouping comprises the six neighbours of Afghanistan along with three system-level actors: the US, NATO and Russia. The group was to function under the aegis of the UN. However, one factor that has hindered the realization of the Group in its envisioned form is that the proposed '6+3' group does not include Afghanistan. The Group is fashioned on the format of the older '6+2' group which was established under UN supervision in the late 1990s for mediation between various Afghan factions when most of the world refused to recognize the Taliban government.

In its current incarnation, the '6+3' places a great degree of emphasis on seeking political solutions to problems in Afghanistan through negotiations between all parties to the conflict - which include representatives of the Taliban. Although ambitious and bold in breaking away from militarised and force-based solutions, it is unlikely that without the inclusion of the Afghan government which is widely recognized as the legitimate authority, this proposal is ever going to become a reality. Another telling fact from the meeting between Afghanistan's neighbours in Ankara was Uzbekistan's absence. This was especially notable since Uzbekistan had originally proposed the revival of the '6+3' group.

However, despite Pakistan's very deep reluctance on giving any expanded role to India in Afghanistan, the fact remains that India by now has become heavily invested in various sectors of Afghanistan's economy and infrastructure. With an investment of \$1.2 billion it is the fifth largest donor. It is evident from the scale of its investments alone that it is likely to remain engaged in Afghanistan in the near future. Pakistan continues to push for the inclusion of the Taliban in Afghanistan's political process. However, if and when it appears that international consensus is moving towards meaningful discussions regarding a likely post-conflict scenario in Afghanistan, perhaps Pakistan should show some willingness to conditionally engage India in dialogue. It is important that both India and Pakistan moderate their regional ambitions and competition to assure the long term stabilisation of Afghanistan.