

Pakistan, the United States, and the war in Afghanistan*

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The American war in Afghanistan, in its tenth year, is perennially at an important juncture and the current times are no different. Indeed, it is in the last few months or so that significant changes have been made to the circumstances, the perspectives and the ideas surrounding the main stakeholders and the coming days and months will continue to show us new progress. Progress however does not necessarily mean success. And it has become more and more unclear as to what constitutes success. That is since there are multiple avenues in the current crises surrounding the situation in Afghanistan. In this paper, I aim to highlight three such areas of interest that are in many ways linked to regional stability. Firstly, the current situation in Afghanistan comes under the spotlight and this becomes all the more important as the war enters a crucial phase and we see developments on the one hand in power being handed over to local institutions and on the other hand we see targeted killings and grand attacks that raise questions as to whether this power comes too soon. Secondly, I will discuss Pakistan's state of the relationship with Afghanistan, the progress made as well as the issues of conflict that remain intact. Thirdly, and perhaps more importantly for Pakistan, I will spend some time examining Pakistan's relationship with the United States, which for many has entered its lowest phase in recent months, especially since the assassination of Osama bin Laden in early May.

Afghanistan – 2011 and beyond

The war arena in Afghanistan is entering a new phase. In some ways it is as much about American involvement in the region as it is about its war in Afghanistan. With President Obama's much-discussed timeline for withdrawal in 2014, have also come new movements as power is handed over to the Afghans. The killings of Wali Karzai and Jan Mohammad Khan, key individuals in their own ways, have however managed to take the spotlight away from what would otherwise have been key moments in recent history. Moreover, with another Bonn conference coming up and this time with a timeline in place, there are chances that finally some concrete steps will be taken. And all of this is taking place when the discourse has moved on to reconciliation and integration of the Taliban as

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well – a move that may have come too late and one that many insisted was the only way that success could be achieved. Success in this case, may I remind you, is not to be confused with victory.

The awaited Bonn conference in December 2011, coming ten years after the first one, will focus on three issues: the civil aspects of the transition process transferring responsibility to the Government of Afghanistan by 2014, the long-term engagement of the international community in Afghanistan after 2014, and the political process that should lead to a long-term stabilization of the country.¹

The 2014 troop withdrawal date looms large with every policy that comes to the table. Around 10,000 American troops will be returning by the end of the year, and around 33,000 the same time next year. This, one anticipates will be amid much fanfare and assertions that their job has been done – that many regions in the country have achieved stability, Afghan security forces have been enhanced though weaknesses remain, and that the al-Qaeda network has been sufficiently damaged. Indeed this is the narrative built up as the first stages of withdrawal begin. This has gone hand in hand with what is a new development in the American and western psyche – that reconciliation is the way forward; some would say it is the only way forward and comes as a policy perhaps too late.

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President Karzai's process of national reconciliation and peace in Afghanistan has begun to show up but details are still unclear – the consensus at least in Pakistan is that it needs to be Afghan-owned. There is a High Peace Council set up, though its own value remains questionable. While there is almost unanimous support to opening negotiations with the Taliban to end the war, the 70-member High Peace Council is criticized on grounds of being unclear as to what reconciliation means. Issues of who to approach and of holding people accountable for their past abuses of power are also unclear. Moreover, there has been, according to one report, a 'troubling disconnect between the High Peace Council and Afghan civil

society representatives who strongly criticized the Council's inclusion of former militia leaders among its members, the lack of transparency in its activities, and the lack of clarity in its objectives.'²

There also remain confusions – on the one hand there are claims made that many smaller groups have put down their weapons and agreed to integrate, but Taliban spokesmen continue to allegedly deny that any progress here has been made and that they are calling for 'full and unconditional' withdrawal of US forces.³

One of the aspects of success put forward is that the Taliban have been 'reduced' to high-level targets and killings and that this shows their inability to provide a comprehensive anti-state opposition. That in itself may be debatable and indeed an indication of what many have been fearing, i.e. the Taliban are simply biding their time and waiting for their time to come once the American forces leave. In these circumstances, it is understandable that concessions are being considered to bring insurgents to the negotiating table and new narratives are being sought as Afghanistan attempts to own the discourse. Thus there are calls for Muslim countries, including Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, to play a bigger role while inducements are also considered to tempt fighters back into the government fold.⁴The criticism of this entire program is however that it is only the low-level, inconsequential insurgents that are being tempted.

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This is not insignificant. When even NATO representatives and the Kabul government have been stating that they have opened channels with "significant Taliban leaders" with the intention that erstwhile estranged 'leaders' return to the mainstream, the issue here is that the policy seems unsure of who the leader is. Thus if leaders of the Taliban – Mullah Omar for instance – are being targeted while insurgents are being negotiated with, one knows that there is only so much that such engagement can achieve. One of the steps recently taken in an attempt to rectify this glaring loophole is the removal of 14 former Taliban from the sanctions list by the UN Security Council in response to a request from Kabul to

take off the list a number of former Taliban figures that the government believes have given up militancy.⁵

These are seen as necessary measures in preparation for the future when the US hands over combat operations against the Taliban to Afghan security forces by 2014. This is also a strong indication finally of a policy framework wherein the international community sees an Afghan-led negotiations path as the way ahead; the Security Council for instance has also split what was previously a joint list of Taliban and al Qaeda figures into two -- one for each group in order to 'persuade Taliban waverers they were not being lumped with the global al Qaeda movement.'⁶

While skepticism remains, the Afghan security forces are being trusted with more responsibility. They have already been handed over power – in what can be seen as a pilot project – in regions that were relatively peaceful and hence not seen as a major indicator of their successful training and management. Very recently some more volatile regions were also handed over – starting with Lashkar Gah in the Helmand province - where maintaining stability would provide a stern test for the local forces. It would not be wrong to say that this is a stern test also for their western trainers and financiers.

Already, the relatively peaceful province of Bamiyan was handed over by NATO to the Afghan security forces, as well as the Mehter Lam, the capital of eastern Laghman province, which again is a relatively secure city. In March this year, seven areas were designated to be passed to local forces under a plan announced by President Hamid Karzai in March. The remaining four areas to be handed over are Kabul province, Panjshir province, Herat city and Mazar-e Sharif city. After their withdrawal, the primary role of foreign troops will be to train and equip Afghan security forces and NATO troops will cease to engage in battle. The 2014 withdrawal is causing much apprehension however, and in order to soothe nerves, Washington has been taking pains to assert that its engagement in Afghanistan will not end.

The other key aspect here is of reconciliation. It seems however that before talks with the Taliban begin in full earnest, the rising issue is that of key individuals involved in the overall process being targeted. Together with the regions being handed over to the Afghan forces, this is the most pressing concern for the next few years as both policies rely on each others' success. The transitioning in the aforementioned regions, while starting already, could take up to two years to complete. It has been noted that the 'handing over' of Mazar-e-Sharif, Herat and Lashkar Gah — all

situated away from the Pashtun-dominated south and southeast — will become test cases, and the results will be observable soon enough. It is this ethnic aspect that is also important — the security forces were seen to be failing since the all-important Pashtun majority was under-represented; the situation is now improving but it remains far from conducive to a stable region.

Previously, there have been less than successful isolated incidents where the Afghan forces led the process; the police force also remains

a questionable asset. Overall, the situation in Afghanistan remains bleak; the US has won some respite before the election campaign gets up and running with the Osama bin Laden operation and with the withdrawal of the ‘surge’ troops as the criteria for success become greyer and greyer. The war policy remains largely based President Obama’s December 2009 speech — to dismantle al-Qaeda and train the Afghan security forces, with some important additional elements that perhaps come about more due to need and rationality once all the wrong options have been tried — that is, the primacy of regional actors supporting an Afghan-led process, and negotiations in order to mainstream erstwhile insurgents through a process of reconciliation.

Pakistan and Afghanistan

Moving on to more tangible matters of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations that have never been smooth but the current situation almost necessitates that the two work together. In fact, in any regional approach to solving the Afghanistan conundrum, one point is always stressed — at least from most parties — and that is for a strong Pakistani role, which makes sense for a number of reasons. This is practically imperative since the country is most affected by violence in Afghanistan, contends with the difficult cases of refugees, shares a porous border where terrorists seem to share space as well and hence any movement in one country is sure to affect the other. Clearly, Pakistan has a prominent role to play in the regional scenario — something that has slowly been clarified in the international discourse as well.

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For Pakistan and Afghanistan, the rational way ahead is quite clear: both have to work together to focus on regional stability. This means an acceptance of mistakes that have been made before and a commitment to sustainable development that would be in the interests of both countries. There has been some progress made as the two neighbours embark on a new relationship as equals, focusing on issues of mutual benefit – thus the transit trade agreement that will ultimately see trade increasing. Indeed one finds that not only has dialogue increased with high-level meetings, it has also adopted a more pleasant and optimistic tone. Perhaps this is a welcome and incidental result of the troop withdrawal strategy that has enabled regional countries to come closer together.

There are still issues intact. Border infiltration from both sides remains a key concern and one that has time after time led to violence in the tribal areas, affecting the peace process in either country. President Zardari's recent visit to Afghanistan and the positive overtures made in the preceding months are encouraging signs in very difficult times. It remains to be seen whether optimism translates into action, but it should be seen as a positive aspect when in the case of Pakistan and Afghanistan, at the least a clear narrative of direct communication, cooperation and assistance is being reached. This will after all only be the right way forward to calm nerves that naturally come up when one wonders the future of the region once the American and NATO forces withdraw. Moreover, it is of immense importance when one also considers the sort of dialogue being sought with the Taliban. It is almost conventional wisdom that for this aspect, Pakistan's role is paramount.

Pakistan has whole-heartedly supported President Karzai's process of national reconciliation and peace in Afghanistan as one increasingly finds that a regional approach is taking precedence. In this regard, there are bilateral and multilateral relations being built up in what is a rational and much needed step. Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan have also embarked on such a plan, agreeing to extend cooperation against terrorism and militancy earlier this year. However, there are skeptics who continue to see these as merely photo-ops and joint statements of no value. What needs to be done, at public platforms, is the acknowledgement of past mistakes and a commitment to future goals. Starting from the do-ables, Pakistan and Afghanistan need to prioritize and hence actualize the stated aims of multiple meetings and discussions. This would obviously include cooperation on terrorism and on drug trade.

In April this year, Pakistan and Afghanistan agreed to form a "Joint Reconciliation and Peace Commission" to deal with all misunderstandings

between the two countries, to discuss bilateral and regional issues and to stabilize cooperation in trade and defense. Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani [also] noted that "no foreign formula will be accepted for Afghanistan solution," adding that Pakistan will support only the solution acceptable to the people of Afghanistan. While there remain problems and trust issues, it is commendable that a rise in the dialogues and cooperation is visible from both countries' leaderships.

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One of the ways that it can be achieved is through trade, and in October 2010, Afghanistan and Pakistan finally inked together the long-awaited Afghan-Pak Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) allowing shipping trucks to enter into the others territories and for Afghan container trucks to drive through Pakistan to the Wagah border with India, including to the port cities of Karachi and Gwadar. There are other projects in the pipeline including the construction of rail tracks in Afghanistan to connect with Pakistan Railways (PR) and the formation of a joint chamber of commerce. The long-term energy projects involving other countries, such as the TAPI, are also part of the future ties. After some delays, in June 2011, the APTTA finally bore fruit quite literally with several Afghan trucks delivering fruits from Afghanistan to the Wagah border.

However, as one analyst notes, 'statistics may not fully explain the depth and the unavoidable nature of Pak-Afghan relations' and some points are telling factors.⁷ Pakistan is Afghanistan's largest trading partner while Afghanistan is Pakistan's third largest export market. Indeed, its exports worth \$1.2 billion, anticipated to reach \$1.7 billion this year, are much greater than other regional countries. However, the actual figure of overall trade, accounting for illegal trade, could be over \$4 billion, and that gives another indication of how cooperation needs to be multifaceted if benefits are to be gained.

It must be acknowledged however that mistakes of the past, the follies of an international and regional milieu that led to several problems for the countries, remain intact in collective memories and hence major confidence building measures are necessary. For Pakistan this also includes recognition of the valid role of other countries in Afghanistan –

India for instance with its economic power and development projects that should not inherently be seen as problematic.

Indeed the way ahead for Pakistan and Afghanistan is through cooperation and frank dialogue – the Parliamentarians meeting earlier this year is for instance a noteworthy step where issues of economic concerns, mistrust and even intelligence worries are raised and discussed as hurdles. Even if perceptions of a problem are present, it is a problem to be addressed. Real issues that keep propping up, for instance trade problems, or the infiltration of militants, or drug trafficking and even of the repatriation of refugees, are all important matters in Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship that have no other solution but active and sincere negotiations. This is so since as neighbours, the two countries are the proverbial conjoined twins that President Karzai asserted and in many ways mutually dependent.

On drug trafficking for instance, a regional approach has been suggested – Iran has bilateral working relations on this front with both Afghanistan and Pakistan, both of which have commitments in their own bilateral relationship but have not managed to go beyond rhetoric on tackling the problem. This is a key issue for peace and security since over 90 percent of the world's opium comes from Afghanistan and is smuggled through Iran and Pakistan. There are claims that this is responsible for 30 percent of the country's GDP and is a significant hindrance to sustainable peace and security – a fact that continues to bother the international community, as it creates structural and institutional relationships that hinder progress on fighting insurgencies as it becomes a source of major funding.⁸

For Pakistan and Afghanistan then, the way forward has been mapped out due to circumstances. However, it takes place in an overall situation where volatility is common, and for Pakistan, perhaps no relationship is more volatile, or more troubling, than its relationship with the United States, a topic that I now turn to for a brief and very current discussion.

Pakistan and the United States

A difficult relationship at the best of times, Pakistan and the United States currently face tremendous challenges in bilateral ties. Anti-Americanism is rife in the country and issues of intelligence agencies being present, of drone strikes that kill civilians, of the use of airbases, and of mistrust that manifests itself through events such as the unilateral operation that led to the assassination of Osama bin Laden, ensure that the negatives overshadow any positives on the bilateral front.

This is despite the fact that the United States remains Pakistan largest trading partner and donor of aid and continues to fund significant projects in several sectors. However, the trust deficit that has now entered diplomatic jargon, threatens to derail any such progress. The post-bin Laden narrative has led to many steps backwards as relationships with the military and intelligence agencies going sour and recently military aid worth \$800 million, including funds in the CSF, being stopped. On the war front, Pakistan has been under constant pressure to expand its operations and questioned on its commitment as well as its abilities to provide security to its 'strategic assets'. In such an environment, the Strategic Dialogue that began as a healthy exercise to remove misgivings and allow for better cooperation on several fronts that included civilian as well as security matters, has been postponed indefinitely.

American aid to Pakistan has also been a contentious issue; the Kerry-Lugar bill, announced to ensure that the assistance to Pakistan goes beyond military matters, and to ensure sustainability in ties, is yet to convince the population. Instead it is issues of sovereignty, hypocrisy and distrust that seem to matter most, and for good reasons. Clearly, Pakistan and the United States continue to interact and cooperate, but confidence building measures and transparency is badly needed for any progress from a remarkably sorry state of affairs. This is essential not just for both countries, but also for the region, as the permeability in the warzones does not allow for allies that cannot work together.

Notes & References

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