

Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: Post 2014 Challenges

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Abstract

With the war in Afghanistan spanning over 13 years coming to an inconclusive end, the three multiple transition processes (security, political and economic) have begun. Afghan security forces are assuming greater responsibility and leadership in the country along with the formation of a new political setup. Despite gains from the last decade, Afghanistan continues to be challenged by a plethora of problems, and is far from being stable. Afghanistan will continue to present challenges to the international community, its region and its neighbouring states, particularly Pakistan. Given its proximity to Afghanistan and its involvement in the war against terrorism (now referred to as the 'overseas contingency operations'), Pakistan is perhaps the most important regional player that has always been directly affected by events in that country. Although the challenges Afghanistan faces are domestic in nature, they have a direct impact on Pakistan as they, among others, stem from the porous nature of the Pak-Afghan border. Therefore, in such a scenario, a macro-level assessment of security risks that Pakistan may face in the aftermath of the withdrawal is essential.

Keywords: US Withdrawal, Security Challenges, Nation Building, Afghan Taliban, Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), Refugees, FATA, Border Management

Introduction

The US-led NATO alliance expressed its intent to end combat operations at the end of 2014 and withdraw forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2016.** With the thirteen-years' war coming to an inconclusive

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** Under a revised timetable, 9,800 – 10,000 US forces will remain deployed in Afghanistan throughout 2015. The number is expected to be reduced to 5,500

end, the transition process has begun, with the Afghan security forces assuming greater responsibility for security in the country along with the formation of a new political setup. Despite the considerable gains that Afghanistan has made over the past decade, it continues to be challenged by a plethora of problems, and is far from being stable. With the political and security transition underway, several outcomes are now possible, ranging from a patchy power-sharing set-up between the Afghan Taliban and the new government of national unity, to the outbreak of a fourth round of civil war. Each scenario is fraught with risks. Afghanistan will continue to present challenges to the international community, the region, and particularly Pakistan.

Given its geographical proximity to Afghanistan and its involvement in the war against terrorism (now referred to as the ‘overseas contingency operations’), Pakistan is perhaps the most important regional player. As Afghanistan hopefully moves towards the end game, it faces significant domestic security challenges that may become insurmountable if they are not addressed with a specific focus on regional security and stability. Afghanistan’s challenges are domestic in nature, such as the growing ethnic divide, a weak economy, rampant illicit drug trade, interflow of refugees and unmonitored cross-border movement of ordinary civilians and militants. However, these home-grown issues have an impact on Pakistan, as for the most part they stem directly from the porous nature of the Pak-Afghan border and the lack of its management and regulation, particularly in its tribal belt, due to the largely unrestricted movement of militants, increase in cross-border attacks and presence of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) on the Afghan side of the border. The upcoming months will be a turning point for Afghanistan, as well as Pakistan, as Western military power recedes in the region and regional powers strive to assert their influence in the wake of the American and ISAF armed forces’ drawdown.

in 2016. By 2017, the number will be limited to what is required for embassy security (Paul D. Shinkman, “Obama Shifts Plan to Withdraw US Forces from Afghanistan,” *US News*, March 24, 2015, www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/03/24/obama-shifts-plan-to-withdraw-us-forces-from-afghanistan-doubling-2015-commitment).

Although the US ended its combat operations in Afghanistan on December 28, 2014, the remaining US forces continue to stay in Afghanistan under mission ‘Resolute Support’ – a two-year programme to train Afghan security forces¹. While in the beginning of 2015 there were 11,000 US forces deployed in Afghanistan, under a revised timetable, 9,800-10,000 US forces will remain deployed throughout 2015.² The number is expected to reduce to 5,500 in 2016. By 2017, the number will be limited to what is required for maintaining embassy security.³ However, due to the fragile and uncertain situation in Afghanistan, coupled with President Ghani’s request to “re-examine the US withdrawal plan to ensure Afghanistan has the support it needs to maintain security gains”⁴, the US is reportedly reviewing its troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.

With the highly fluid state of affairs, be it political, economic, social, or still weak institutions, such as the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), the concern is that Pakistan will once again have to face the impact of turmoil and instability in Afghanistan as it had to during the Soviet occupation and the subsequent withdrawal from Afghanistan. It is essential that policy makers in Pakistan continue to formulate and refine a holistic, pragmatic and forward-looking strategy. This should be within the context of its national interests, to safeguard it from the emerging challenges and threats that will emanate from Afghanistan in 2015 and beyond. The aim should be not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Recent encouraging developments in Afghanistan have generated optimism following the installation of the new Afghan national unity government and intense engagement between the leadership of Afghanistan and Pakistan, on the full spectrum of political and economic relations in an attempt to build trust and reset their ties. That said, the relationship remains challenging and therefore constant vigilance and dynamic approaches are required to keep Pak-Afghan relations on a stable track and develop solid complementarities and interdependence. A word of caution: there is no room for complacency.

State of Affairs in Afghanistan

Although Afghanistan has made significant progress in certain sectors such as women and minorities' rights, education,⁵ democratisation and promulgation of a new constitution, the country still faces a major threat to its future. Despite thirteen years of the presence of foreign forces and the US so-called campaign of 'nation building' in Afghanistan, the country is far from being stable. Violence, turmoil, civilian fatalities, ineffective governance, booming drug trade and a growing Taliban insurgency continue to pose serious threats.

These problems are a legacy of the repeated involvement of external actors in Afghanistan for larger geo-strategic causes over the past three decades. Addressing these myriad challenges will require a collective and consolidated national approach and this, in turn, could have a critical impact on Pakistan's security and stability.

Challenges Facing Afghanistan

Governance

The political regime under former President Hamid Karzai had been unable to provide either security or good governance. He was commonly referred to as the "Mayor of Kabul"⁶ for his inability to extend the government's writ outside the capital. Despite having been in office for two consecutive terms,⁷ his government lacked sovereign authority, was marred by corruption, and remained weak and ineffective. However, the government of national unity in place, headed by President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, is taking drastic steps to address these issues and move the post-2014 Afghanistan towards a well-governed and functioning state. Both leaders have expressed their intent to eliminate corruption. However, there is a degree of uncertainty about the future structure of governance in Afghanistan and state institutions created over the past thirteen years. Evidently, a really formalised structure of governance would determine the level of stability in Afghanistan. A semblance of stability in the country will depend on the credibility of the process of government formation and institution-building. However, if

instability persists, even the new government with a strong mandate, and up to now a manageable coalition, would not be able to address some of the daunting challenges Afghanistan has been facing since 2001.

Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)

The future of Afghanistan primarily depends on the capability of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), which includes the Afghan army, police, air force, and local protection forces. In June 2013, NATO handed over responsibility for security of the whole of Afghanistan to the Afghan security forces in a transition process that began in 2011.⁸ However, the capability and capacity of the Afghan forces remains wanting: various components that would constitute the ANSF are still very much a work in progress.⁹ Command and control issues are being streamlined and key capacities are being built. In this context, the critical question is whether the Afghans and the international community have built sufficiently strong state institutions to which the armed forces are loyal. It is by no means a small achievement for the Afghan state to put together its armed forces despite a highly volatile situation, asymmetric warfare, and foreign occupation. That said, despite the claims by Afghan or ISAF authorities that the ANA conducts 90 per cent of operations¹⁰ independently, its' planning and operational tasks are difficult. The fact is that the bulk of the Afghan National Army (ANA) still comprises inadequately educated personnel who are reputed to lack commitment leading to desertions from time to time. Irregular ethnic make-up largely made up of Tajiks and Hazaras and the Pashtuns constituting as little as 2 per cent¹¹, combined with drug use and trafficking undermine the Army's unity.

According to a 2014 report published by the Office of Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), since 2013, the strength of the ANA was reduced from 184,839 to 169,203 personnel.¹² Hence, credible plans are needed for shaping Afghan security forces that can assume actual rather than aspirational responsibility. For that, the ANSF will need extensive training, guidance and support¹³ in order to manage security for the whole of Afghanistan, including its borders. This is also an issue that will affect Afghanistan's immediate

neighbours, who share a common border with Afghanistan. Afghan forces' inability to effectively control their own security and ensure security in their border area may lead to even more cross-border attacks by militants on both sides, as well as illegal trafficking of drugs, weapons and humans as is the case with the Pak-Afghan border.¹⁴ As the 'end game' approaches – rather than the so-called 'endless Game'- in Afghanistan, Pakistan has to prepare itself to absorb any blow back from the weaknesses in the security sector. Pakistan itself can work on beefing up ANSF subject to the comfort of the Afghan government and institutions. In this regard, high-level channels and mechanisms for instant communication are extremely important.

Taliban Insurgency

Despite the US and NATO's claims of blunting the Taliban's threatened offensive, the group seems to be adopting a policy of 'surviving to win' and that is exactly what the Taliban have done so far. The day the US-led-coalition announced to withdraw was, in essence, a victory for the Taliban because they had been saying repeatedly that their agenda from the beginning was an Afghanistan free of foreign forces.

Despite repeated offers for peace talks and attempts to include the group in a political process, the Taliban have proved to be a serious political and military threat. Neither the US dual policy of negotiations nor the military operations against the Taliban have worked. Although the setting up of a political office of the Taliban in Doha did not achieve the results that the Taliban and the Afghan government had expected, it has initiated the start of a process. In this regard, presently, China has expressed its desire to play a more proactive role in facilitating talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.¹⁵ This is definitely a positive development because China is a big stakeholder in the efforts to promote regional stability and it enjoys credibility as an honest broker. How successful that process will be is anybody's guess.

However, the main factor that will determine the future of Afghanistan is primarily based on how successful the reconciliation process will be. The new government in Kabul is eager to initiate talks with the Taliban.

But one has to wait and see how responsive the Taliban leadership is to the talks because they too are not a monolith. Starting talks is one thing, but making them successful would be a daunting, tortuous and cumbersome process. Looking at the Taliban's insurgency, despite their major losses and setbacks, the group has proved to be a resilient and stern force¹⁶, which has so far given no indication of compromise and is unlikely to do so any time soon. The key questions are: what would be the Taliban's negotiating conduct, and if the talks are successful, how could they be integrated into the Afghan electoral and democratic polity.

Economy

In the past decade Afghanistan has experienced spurts in its growth and development.¹⁷ The fear right now is that this may be because during the past 10 years, Afghanistan was a war economy that benefitted due to the international forces and actors. With the drawdown underway, there could be a vacuum pushing Afghanistan towards an illicit economy.

Afghanistan's economy is heavily dependent on illegal drugs and foreign aid.¹⁸ Currently, 97 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the Afghan state is allied to international presence.¹⁹ While around US \$ 60 billion has been pledged to Afghanistan over the past decade for economic reconstruction²⁰, much of that amount has remained in the air and delivered has most of what has been not been absorbed by the Afghan economy or economic institutions. Long-term projects that target infrastructural and social development²¹ still need to be implemented. Although it was agreed during the Tokyo conference in July 2012 that Afghanistan would receive US \$16 billion in additional pledges of development aid until 2016²², the World Bank has estimated that aid to Afghanistan could drop by as much as 90 per cent by 2025.²³ An essential question is whether the country will be able to sustain itself financially after the US withdrawal? It is therefore imperative for the international donor community to keep Afghanistan's economy afloat by investing in reconstruction and fulfil their pledges of assistance. Facing the prospects of a sharp decrease in aid and increasing reliance on revenue from illegal trade, a major fear is that Afghanistan's immediate neighbour, Pakistan,

could once again face the problems of refugee outflows, illicit arms and drugs trafficking as it did in the 1980's.²⁴

Ethnic Divide

Historically, politics in Afghanistan have been divided along ethnic lines. And it is this continual ethnic divide that is one of the major impediments to the future stability of Afghanistan, posing challenges to the peace process as well as national reconciliation. Ethnic differences became more acute and divisive since the former Karzai government expressed willingness to talk to the Taliban. The other ethnic factions such as Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks – have not favoured talks with the Taliban, let alone reconciliation. Subsequently, there is also the notion that it is just a matter of time before the entire state structure in Afghanistan and its components (i.e. government, as well as Afghan National Security Forces),²⁵ might very well collapse due to ethnic differences. The different factions in Afghanistan have to move beyond ethnic and personality cult politics and focus on national consensus. Afghanistan's complex ethnic divide is not limited to the boundaries of the Afghan state alone, but also has a deep impact on its regional neighbours who share the same ethnic linkages i.e. Pakistan, Iran, Central Asian States, and Russia. Therefore this is an issue that needs to be looked into. In case a civil war flares up, every regional state will be affected and, in turn, will attempt to extend support to its favoured ethnic group as has been seen in the past.

Illicit Drug Production and Trafficking

Afghanistan continues to be the world's largest producer of opium, producing 90 per cent of the world's illegal opium.²⁶ Sharing a 2,640km-long porous border with Afghanistan, Pakistan is one of the most vulnerable countries to the trafficking of drugs and arms from Afghanistan.²⁷ According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), US \$27-30 billion worth of drugs are smuggled from Afghanistan through Pakistan²⁸, to other parts of the world annually; of this, drugs worth \$1.5 billion stay in Pakistan. Moreover, Pakistan is now both a destination and transit country for approximately 40 per cent of the opiates produced in Afghanistan.²⁹ The inflow of drugs into Pakistan is an

issue of dire concern, as the number of opium and heroin users or drug addicts in Pakistan has increased enormously. For example, it is estimated that in 2012 alone, there were 6.7 million drug users in Pakistan.³⁰

Implications for Pakistan's Security

Historically, Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan have been strained and uneasy at best, with the exception of a few brief intervals of engagement and stability. One key cause of this strained relationship has been centred around the porous Pak-Afghan border. Pakistan, given its proximity to Afghanistan and coupled with cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious affinities, is perhaps Afghanistan's most important regional neighbour that has always been directly affected by events in that country.

There is no denying that over the past thirteen years, particularly under former President Hamid Karzai's government, the gaps in mistrust and continuous blame game grew. Over the years, the border has proved to be the major source of friction. Yet what both states seem to forget is that the problems and challenges confronting Afghanistan and Pakistan are multiple and mutual, and, therefore require a common approach based on trust. Despite having suffered the consequences of the Soviet occupation, subsequent withdrawal and its aftermath, both countries' policies towards each other, for the most part, have been vague, conflicting, and shrouded in ambiguity and suspicion.

Since the national unity government took over in September 2014, there appears to be a noticeable shift in both countries' approach towards each other – with President Ghani stating that “partnership with Pakistan is an important pillar of Afghanistan's foreign policy.”³¹ Pakistan has also proactively reached out to the Afghan leadership. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has said that “relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have been undergoing qualitative transformation” since the new government took over.³²

Pakistan took positive initiatives to welcome the new government in Kabul, which included President Mamnoon Hussain's visit to Kabul on September 29, 2014. He attended the oath-taking ceremony of President

Ghani. This was shortly followed by the visits of Pakistan's Adviser on Foreign Affairs and National Security Sartaj Aziz on October 20, 2014,³³ and Pakistani Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Raheel Sharif on November 6, 2014.³⁴

During General Raheel Sharif's visit and subsequent meetings with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, Chief Executive Dr Abdullah Abdullah and Afghan Defence Minister Bismillah Mohammadi, a number of bilateral issues pertaining to security and defence cooperation were discussed. The visit proved to be a success as it created 'immense goodwill and positivity'³⁵ on both sides. General Raheel Sharif's visit was followed by a two-day visit by the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to Pakistan, from November 14-15, 2014. During his visit, seen as a sincere effort to strengthen ties between both neighbours, President Ghani held meetings with President Mamnoon Hussain, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Adviser on Foreign Affairs and National Security Sartaj Aziz, and other cabinet ministers. He also held a separate meeting with General Raheel Sharif at General Headquarters in Islamabad.³⁶ During his meeting with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, President Ghani expressed that "Pakistan and Afghanistan have overcome obstacles of 13 years in three days."³⁷ Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif reciprocated by stating that "both countries recognise the historic opportunity to work together and build a stronger relationship based on mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, marked by mutual trust, understanding and close cooperation."³⁸ During the visit, both sides reaffirmed their "resolve at the highest level to transform bilateral ties and build a relationship marked by close cooperation on the political and security planes and a strong economic foundation."³⁹

In fact, since President Ashraf Ghani's visit to Pakistan, relations between the two countries have witnessed a marked improvement. The constant blame game between the two has drastically diminished, and it appears that both countries are making efforts to address contentious issues bilaterally. The new era promises gradual transcendence from the legacy of the past.

There have been a number of visits and exchanges leading to visible improvement in political relations and military-to-military ties. President Ashraf Ghani's visit to the Pakistan army's headquarters was not only an effort to acknowledge the important role the army has in the future stability of Afghanistan, but is also a conscious effort to strengthen defence ties. President Ghani articulated that "Afghanistan wants to bolster security and defence ties with Pakistan, including cooperation in training and border management".⁴⁰ In a fairly recent development and visible indication of improving ties, 6 Afghan National Army (ANA) cadets have joined the Military Academy (PMA) in Abbottabad to attend an 18-month course.⁴¹ This marks the first group of ANSF to receive military training in Pakistan – a move that was vehemently opposed by the former Afghan government.

Also, after the horrific attack by the TTP on the Army Public School in Peshawar on December 16, 2014 that left 141 school children dead⁴², significant security cooperation between the two countries can now be witnessed. Following the attack, Pakistan's Army Chief General Raheel Sharif and ISI Chief Lt. Gen Rizwan Akhtar travelled to Kabul in an attempt to seek cooperation from Afghan authorities in taking action against members of the Tehrik-i-Taliban based in Afghanistan.⁴³ President Ghani condemned the attack and also assured that Afghanistan would do all it can to help Pakistan,⁴⁴ and in this regard Afghan authorities arrested five Taliban suspects of the Peshawar school attack.⁴⁵

In an effort to improve border security and coordination between both states, a number of meetings have been taking place between the militaries of both countries. During the trilateral meeting, which was held in Islamabad on December 23, 2014 between Pakistani Army Chief General Raheel Sharif, Afghan National Army Chief General Sher Muhammad Karimi, and ISAF Commander General John Campbell, it was decided that military commanders on both sides would meet to discuss ways to improve security on both sides of the Pak-Afghan border. In this regard, Peshawar Corps Commander Lt. Gen. Hidayat-ur-Rehman travelled to Afghanistan in January 2015, where he held meetings with the Afghan military commander of the Nangrahar province as well as officials from the Afghan Border Police.⁴⁶ During the meeting, issues relating to border

security and coordination were discussed. Lt. Gen. Nasir Khan Janjua, Commander of Southern Command, would also be paying a visit to Afghanistan in the near future.⁴⁷ Hence, the above initiatives clearly indicate a genuine willingness to move beyond the past and strengthen ties.

Despite the positive shift in approach, the legacy of mistrust between the two neighbours continues to cast a shadow over their relations. Therefore they have to negotiate this transition to a better and stronger relationship with utmost vigilance and caution.

Issues of Concern for Pakistan

Pak-Afghan Border

Historically, the controversy surrounding the Pak-Afghan border and its mismanagement continues to be one of the most contentious bilateral issues between the two neighbours. To improve Pak-Afghan relations substantially, this fundamental bilateral issue must be addressed. The Pak-Afghan border witnesses an unprecedented and unmonitored movement of around 56,000 people daily, with more than 90 per cent of the flow originating from Afghanistan into Pakistan.⁴⁸ Successive governments of both countries have been facing immense domestic security threats largely emanating from the unrestricted movement of militants across the Pak-Afghan border.

Although initially the border issue was downplayed by both states, the Afghan State's non-acceptance of the border and increase in militancy in Pakistan, cross-border attacks and movement of militants led to a debate within Pakistan to advocate effective management and regulation of the Pak-Afghan border. Although internationally the 'Durand Line' is accepted as a recognised border, all successive Afghan governments, including the Taliban and the Karzai government, have rejected and considered "irrelevant any statement by anyone about the legal status of this line."⁴⁹ It is also important to highlight that insurgent groups operating in both states including the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqanis in Pakistan

do not recognise the legality of the border. And now, the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) follows the same logic.

For far too long, allegedly the security of the Pak-Afghan border has been wittingly or unwittingly outsourced to militant groups and elements whose activities have been detrimental to the vital interests of both Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁵⁰ Apart from the legal crossings, insurgent activity has also been taking place under the garb of trade. Militant groups have often moved freely across the Pak-Afghan border by exploiting the existing transit trade agreements, such as the Afghan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA), which was renewed in 2011.⁵¹ The selected routes through which the Pak-Afghan trade occurs and Afghan goods are transported pass through major cities and towns such as Karachi, Quetta, Chaman/Spin Boldak, Peshawar, FATA, and Torkham,⁵² where militant and terrorist outfits such as the TTP have an active presence.

Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and Cross-Border Attacks

Since the Afghan Security Forces (ANSF) assumed greater responsibility for security (including areas that border Pakistan), there has been a sharp rise in cross-border shelling, and attacks emanating from Afghanistan, between the ANSF and the Pakistani military personnel deployed along the border.⁵³ From 2007-2010, around 194 border violations were reported.⁵⁴ In 2011, there were 67 reported border incursions.⁵⁵ The year 2012 saw a dramatic rise with 732 cross-border attacks.⁵⁶ In 2013, 26 cross-border attacks were reported between Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁵⁷ In this regard, relations between the two neighbours hit an all-time low in 2014, which witnessed a dramatic rise in attacks across the border with substantial military losses on both sides.⁵⁸

Coupled with this was the alleged refuge given by Afghanistan to Baluch insurgent groups⁵⁹ as well as harbouring of members of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) including Mullah Fazlullah *aka* Mullah Radio. The TTP also took advantage of the US disengagement and subsequent ANSF takeover of security in Afghanistan, particularly in the eastern provinces of Kunar and Nuristan⁶⁰, where it is believed that Mullah Fazlullah has been mounting cross-border raids into Pakistan.

It is estimated that the TTP has been responsible for more than 398 attacks⁶¹ across the border on Pakistani check posts in Chitral, Upper and Lower Dir, and the Kurram and Bajaur agencies in FATA.⁶² This not only exacerbated the strained Pak-Afghan ties but also opened a new front in the conflict by mounting further attacks in Pakistan's tribal areas, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan.⁶³ In fact, the Pakistani government after exhausting all options of negotiations for peace with the TTP, instructed its' military to launch an offensive - 'Zarb-e-Azb' - in the North Waziristan agency June 15, 2014.⁶⁴ At the same time, the government also requested Afghan authorities to arrest Mullah Fazlullah, as well as to seal the Pak-Afghan border so as to prevent and deter TTP militants from fleeing into Afghanistan.⁶⁵

Hence, the increase in TTP activity as well as the spate of attacks emanating from the border would continue to cast a shadow on what possibly lies ahead after international forces withdraw.⁶⁶ It is essential that before complete withdrawal in Afghanistan takes place, both Afghanistan and Pakistan cooperate and find a workable mechanism to manage and regulate their common border. In 2006, in response to constant allegations emanating from Afghan authorities accusing Pakistan of sponsoring and supporting militant activity and movement in Afghanistan across the Pak-Afghan border, Pakistan began to demand proper border management and regulation. In this regard, Pakistan also proposed to fence parts of the border⁶⁷ on its side and installed a biometric system at Chaman in 2007.⁶⁸ However, this was not welcomed by the Afghan authorities and public, who vehemently opposed the suggestion.

Border Management

Both sides should explore workable and practical options to improve border control for any meaningful engagement on the issue and address it through formal negotiations, which the Afghans usually scuttle due to domestic pressures. There is a contradiction in the Afghan position: on the one hand, they claim that the 'Durand Line' divides families living on both sides of the border, and on the other, they accuse Pakistan of meddling in Afghan affairs; aiding the Afghan Taliban supporting cross-border terrorism, considering Afghanistan its' 'backyard',⁶⁹ or for that

matter its ‘fifth province’.⁷⁰ In short, they allege that Pakistan does not respect Afghanistan’s sovereignty as an independent state. Borders define sovereign states, and Afghanistan, being a sovereign and independent state should accept its defined border to uphold its sovereignty and prevent ‘interference’. Subsequently, this will also prevent, or rather limit, the movement of militants across the border.

As the international community moves towards complete withdrawal, it is vital that Pakistan and Afghanistan find a mechanism to manage, stabilise and control the unregulated cross-border movement of individuals by imposing an effective border control regime that halts illegal crossings and facilitates the legal movement of goods.⁷¹ This historically contentious border should be transformed into a conduit for cooperation.⁷² Thus, making the numerous border check posts which are estimated to be around 700 or more⁷³ into legal and recognised entry and exit points, in addition to the two currently recognised and functional check posts at Torkham and Chaman, would be an important step towards reducing tensions. This will assist legal movement of humans, goods and services and prevent the illegal movement of militant groups, as well as smuggling, illicit drugs and arms trafficking. Insurgent groups, after such measures, would not be able to take advantage of the unsurveilled crossing points.⁷⁴ In this regard, the US/NATO can play an instrumental role by improving coordination and border mechanisms already in place through the Tri-Partite Commission between the NATO-led ISAF, Afghanistan and Pakistan, where new joint border management initiatives can be established. In the meantime, it would be prudent for the Afghan government to engage Pakistan on this issue.

Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban

Over the years, Pakistan’s perceived support for Pashtun groups (including the Taliban) has led to the alienation of the other ethnic factions such as the Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and others in Afghanistan. These groups viewed Pakistan with mistrust, believing Pakistan was a spoiler in Afghanistan. These perceptions should be changing slowly as Pakistan has resolutely supported an ‘Afghan-led and Afghan-owned’ peace and reconciliation process. Pakistan’s assurances that it would assist the

Afghan government in pursuing an intra-Afghan dialogue if it so desires, are gaining credence. Clearly, moving away from its previous stance, Pakistan no longer talks about an Afghanistan with predominant Pashtun representation, but one that incorporates all ethnic groups. There is a clear awareness amongst policy makers in Pakistan that relations need to be established with all different ethnic and political groups in Afghanistan in order to reach out to them and assure them of Pakistan's sincerity and support. Making conscious, informed choices in this regard, Pakistani decision makers are taking concrete actions to follow up on their pronouncements.

Afghanistan, for its part, instead of blaming Pakistan for all the ills inside Afghanistan including Pakistan's support to the Afghan Taliban, needs to decide and identify the type of assistance and support they would like from Pakistan. While Pakistan has pledged support in various fields, the future political, economic and social roadmap of Afghanistan would be defined and implemented by the Afghan government and other Afghan would-be political forces.

Afghanistan's stance regarding Pakistan's role in the ongoing peace process with the Afghan Taliban has been somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, Afghan authorities blame Pakistan for abetting the Taliban, and on the other they have asked Pakistan to play a role in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. While Pakistan has publicly stated that it will do its best to facilitate, at the request of the Afghan government, at the end of the day, talking to the Taliban and reaching a compromise is solely in the hands of the Afghans themselves. Regional countries, especially Pakistan, can only do so much. A reflection of Pakistan's commitment to facilitate the reconciliation process has been the release of several 'high profile' Afghan Taliban detainees, including Mullah Ghani Baradar who was released by Pakistan in September 2013, as well as public commitments from the civilian and military leaders to help. Pakistan's role should be pragmatic and transparent. While Pakistan may extend its support, if and when needed by the Afghans, Pakistan could talk to those groups on its side of the border that have been instrumental in supporting the Afghan Taliban. It is, however, no longer possible to determine who has influence over the Taliban network, as there are numerous groups and factions

operating in Afghanistan under the garb of the Taliban with varying political agendas.

Afghan Refugees

The presence of Afghan refugees in Pakistan is another area of serious concern to the future stability of Pakistan, as well as an irritant in Pakistan-Afghan relations. Pakistan has hosted more than 5 million Afghan refugees. However, the bulk of around 3.8 million have returned to Afghanistan; and many returnees keep trickling back to Pakistan.⁷⁵ There are still 3 million registered and unregistered Afghan refugees⁷⁶ on Pakistani soil who continue to be a strain on the country's weak economy, as well as a grave security risk mostly in the form of support to militant groups operating in Pakistan. It is estimated that during the past 34 years, Pakistan has spent hundreds of billions of dollars on hosting Afghan refugees.⁷⁷

Pakistan has decided to extend the stay of Afghan refugees till December 30, 2015.⁷⁸ There is, however, an apprehension that the bulk of the unregistered and registered refugees will continue to stay in Pakistan due to the uncertain state of affairs in Afghanistan. There are over 5 million returnees and nearly 600,000 internally displaced people in Afghanistan⁷⁹ that need to be accommodated. If the state of fragility in Afghanistan worsens, the huge humanitarian crisis will exacerbate and Pakistan could see more influx of new refugees.

A repeat of the 1980's could occur, when Pakistan had to host the largest number of Afghan refugees. Given Pakistan's own economic and security problems and temporary displacement of an estimated 1.15 million IDPs⁸⁰, Pakistan is in no position to absorb more refugees. The recent measures taken by the provincial government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Azad Jammu and Kashmir against illegal refugees is only part of the solution.⁸¹ Therefore, it is essential that a workable and effective mechanism for repatriation be devised at the tripartite meetings between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Geneva in March 2015. This

will not only redress a key irritant between both countries, but allegations of interference from both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan (FATA)

Regardless of the outcome of the ongoing transition in Afghanistan, Pakistan must focus on its own tribal areas. This area and its people have been neglected and isolated from the rest of Pakistan for a long time. With the will of the people of FATA and through national consensus, the future status of FATA needs to be determined and formalised through dialogue, administrative reforms, and economic development. While Afghanistan has incorporated tribal areas on its side of the border into recognised provinces, Pakistan has not done this so far. In addition, the government's attention is rightly focused on a comprehensive policy towards the TTP aimed at tearing down terrorist networks through 'Zarb-e-Azb', demobilisation, de-radicalisation and reintegration. The ongoing military offensive, 'Zarb-e-Azb' was the only option left for Pakistan's government after the failure of all other efforts and overtures.⁸² Simultaneously, Pakistan will still have to adopt measures on its western border that will be challenging, such as fencing, maintaining high level of deployment, and pursuing its political initiatives to integrate the tribal areas to make them part of the national mainstream.

India's Role in Afghanistan

Strategic rivalries over and in Afghanistan are one of the main obstacles to peace in Afghanistan and the region. India's looming presence in Afghanistan has been an issue of concern for Pakistan. Due to the legacy of hostile relations between India and Pakistan, it has become all the more important for Pakistan to have a friendly government in Afghanistan. Over the years, India has drastically enhanced its consular and intelligence presence and increased its political and economic clout in Afghanistan. India has already established the future parameters of its relationship with Afghanistan post-2014, through the signing of a 'Strategic Partnership' in October 2011.⁸³ Similarly, in August 2013, Iran followed suit by signing a 'Strategic Cooperation Agreement'⁸⁴ with Afghanistan, which includes the extension of military and intelligence

initiatives that do not include Pakistan. Hence both these agreements imply that regional states will continue to compete with each other over influence in Afghanistan, and this competition for exerting influence is likely to intensify in 2015 and beyond.

Pakistan's concerns regarding India's growing role in Afghanistan are well known: Indian support and abetment to nationalist and secessionist elements; and penetration of terrorist networks in FATA and other parts of the country in Pakistan. Afghan leaders, both previous and present, have made several public declarations and given private assurances that Afghan soil would not be allowed to be used against Pakistan. But there is no evidence of this happening on the ground. In the recent past, the brutality and frequency of terrorist attacks against Pakistan have increased. For harmonious relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan to take effect, such attacks must stop; and sponsoring of such actions must cease. The "hidden hand" must be restrained.

Conclusion

Both Pakistan and Afghanistan need to realise that the geopolitical realities are not the same as they used to be. Regional dynamics have changed. There are now more players and new actors that have taken centre stage with new realities. Therefore, there needs to be a realisation and acceptance on both sides to face and own up to the prevailing ground realities, and it appears that both countries under their current political leadership seem to be on the same page. The vicious blame game and mistrust of the past must not be allowed to resurface. Blaming Pakistan for all the ills in Afghanistan is not only naïve, but also counter-productive, and derails improvement in relations between both countries. The Afghan state needs to take ownership of its own responsibilities and failures, as does Pakistan. Both countries should define the parameters of their bilateral relationship by working further to overcome differences between the two states. As a starter, they could focus on those issues that stalled the negotiations on the proposed 'Strategic Partnership Agreement'.

Until both countries focus on resolving the irritants between them, the notion of a strategic partnership between Afghanistan and Pakistan seems

difficult, especially before the upcoming withdrawal. While confidence has certainly increased over better relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, for both countries to move on, they will have to think beyond the past and focus on areas of cooperation with the aim to build strong and comprehensive relations. What is important is that once the US/NATO withdrawal reaches its final phase, both will have to deal with each other, and the region as a whole. Although the burden of history cannot be washed away easily, a pragmatic and holistic approach needs to be adopted by both countries to address the key issues and irritants in their strained relationship, with the aim to find pragmatic and plausible solutions that addresses their concerns and maximises their interests. Most importantly, the positive momentum generated must be kept alive to foster cooperation and create systemic, institutional linkages for sustainable collaboration in all fields.

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