

Pakistan-Afghan Relations: Challenging Prospects

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Security Environment in Afghanistan

In 2011, President Barack Obama had approved plans to draw down 10,000 US troops from Afghanistan during that year and another 23,000 in 2012. The withdrawal of the remaining combat troops is to be completed by 2014. A small number of troops is likely to be left behind at Kabul, Bagram and Kandahar to provide training and logistics support and to continue the drone war against hardcore terrorists inimical to US interests.

The NATO-ISAF withdrawal is likely to leave a security deficit in Afghanistan. There is no evidence at present that Washington and its allies are planning to help the Afghan government to maintain security by supplementing Afghan efforts through the deployment of a viable international peacekeeping force under a UN flag after the NATO-ISAF military withdrawal is completed in 2014. The willingness of regional actors to play a positive role in stabilising Afghanistan, rather than pursuing divergent national interests and disparate agendas, is also uncertain. Unless the Central Asian states, China, India, Iran, Pakistan and Russia jointly contribute towards ensuring stability, the security environment in Afghanistan is likely to deteriorate into a civil war.

The present security situation in Afghanistan can be described as a stalemate at both the strategic and tactical levels. The fledgling Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP), which have now assumed full responsibility for security from ISAF, are not yet equal to the task. Their numbers are small (352,000); they lack experience; standards of junior leadership are

low; and, they are inadequately trained and equipped. They lack heavy weapons, artillery, air support and helicopters for logistics support. They are poorly trained, badly led and lack the motivation necessary to sustain complex counter-insurgency operations on a prolonged basis. Fratricide and desertions with weapons are commonplace. Hence, the ANSF are not yet capable of undertaking counterinsurgency operations autonomously and need more time to settle down as cohesive infantry battalions.

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While the ISAF forces control most of the large towns, the Taliban—together with the al-Qaeda—controls large swathes of the countryside. Governance is virtually non-existent outside Kabul. Though significant funds are being expended on socio-economic development by the Afghan government as well as by donors like India (the US alone has pumped in 56 billion dollars), the results have consistently fallen short of the country's requirement. This is partly due to inadequate supervision and partly due to rampant corruption.

The present situation is best described as a stalemate at the tactical level as the US-led forces are not exactly losing and the Taliban are not winning. A stalemate between a superpower and a motley array of rag-tag militiamen of a non-state actor will be seen as a moral victory for the Taliban. The US strategy to clear-hold-build-transfer-exit has succeeded only partially as the Al Qaeda have not been completely eliminated. Hence, no matter whether the Afghan government agrees to limit US presence to 10,000 to 12,000 soldiers or a lesser number, Special Forces and drone strikes against the remnants of the Al Qaeda and the leaders of other organisations considered inimical to US national interest will continue, including on Pakistani soil, with or without the concurrence of the Pakistan government and the army.

Pakistan's Challenge from Afghanistan

The greatest challenge that the new Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif faces is on the national security front. Fissiparous tendencies in Balochistan and the restive Gilgit-Baltistan Northern Areas are a perpetual security nightmare. Karachi remains a tinderbox that is ready to explode. The Al Qaeda has gradually made inroads into Pakistani terrorist organisations like the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), Harkat-ul-Jihad Al-Islami (HuJI), Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi(TNSM) and the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ),

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and while it is still far from forming an umbrella organisation encompassing all of them, it is moving perceptibly in that direction. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has consolidated its position in North and South Waziristan despite the army's counter-insurgency campaign over the last two summers and appears capable of breaking out of its stronghold to neighbouring areas. Only concerted army operations launched with single-mindedness of purpose can stop the TTP juggernaut.

However, the fallout of the draw-down of the US-led NATO-ISAF forces by the end of 2014, will pose the most complex challenge to the new government as it is an external security threat with internal security linkages. The security vacuum that will be created by the departure of foreign troops from Afghan soil is likely to lead to a Taliban resurgence that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF – army plus the police) will be incapable of stemming.

The Karzai government is seen as an obstacle to the realisation of Pakistan's key objectives in Afghanistan due to its steady rejection of Pakistan's overtures, including the use of its good offices for reconciliation negotiations with the Taliban. India's commitment to a strong and stable Afghanistan and its US\$ 2 billion investment in the country's reconstruction are a cause for concern in Pakistan, particularly among the security agencies. They resent Afghan calls for military aid from India due to fears of military encirclement – even though the Pakistan army appears to have realised the folly of seeking 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan. To counter the perceived attempts at encirclement, the Pakistan army and the ISI have begun to reach out to members of the erstwhile Northern Alliance.

Another bone of contention is Pakistan's accusation that insurgent groups like the TNSM of 'Radio' Mullah Fazlullah, are operating out of secure bases in Afghanistan. At present the Pakistan army lacks the capacity to fight these groups across the Durand Line. However, it may have no option but to attempt to do so in case these groups step up their attacks post-2014 and the Afghan government is powerless to stop them. Such a scenario could even lead to state-on-state conflict in the worst case.

There are approximately two million Afghan refugees in Pakistan today. Most of them are Pushtoons. Besides being an economic burden, they are seen as a national security threat as the Afghan government does not recognise the Durand Line as the boundary with Pakistan. Though the Pushtoons in Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa are fairly well integrated with the national mainstream, separatist tendencies can come to the fore again. If the post-2014 security situation deteriorates into a civil war four to five years later – a probability that cannot be ruled out – Pakistan will be deluged with hundreds of thousands of additional refugees, further exacerbating the problem. Pakistan is hesitant to back Mullah Omar's Taliban fully because it is unsure of getting its unfettered support if the Taliban comes back to power sometime in the future.

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Afghanistan's Challenges from Pakistan

The foremost challenge that Afghanistan faces from Pakistan is that of trans-Durand Line hit-and-run strike operations from safe havens in Pakistan by groups like the Haqqani Network against targets in Afghanistan. Mullah Omar's Quetta Shoorā, the Paktia-based Haqqani Network and the Hizb-e-Islami, founded by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, all operate out of bases inside Pakistani territory. Pakistani Ulema Council chairman Tahir Ashrafi has sought to "legitimise" the Taliban insurgency. He has said suicide attacks in Afghanistan were permitted under Islam as long as US forces were present.

The Afghan National Security Council (NSC) has called for Pakistan's ISI to be blacklisted. "The government of Afghanistan and the people of Afghanistan have endeavoured to their last breath to have a good relationship with the government of Pakistan based on a virtue of neighbourliness. However in return, what did we see from Pakistan? They fire rockets, they send terrorists to our soil, they destroy our Jihadi leaders, clerics, influences, our Mihrabs, our tribe, our mothers, sisters, brothers, students, children, soldiers and police," the Deputy National Security Advisor Rahmatullah Nabil said after a meeting of the Afghan NSC. The Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) also reacted strongly to the statement of the Pakistani cleric, saying that the cleric's declaration contradicts every Islamic principle. The High Peace Council said that the people of Pakistan deserve better representation

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from their religious leaders, expecting the government of Pakistan to impede war-making individuals and groups. In a weaker moment, President Karzai urged the Taliban to turn its guns on Pakistan.

As Afghanistan is a land-locked country, for access to the sea for its exports and imports, it relies mainly on Pakistan. Despite the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA), which was implemented on June 12, 2011, Afghanistan continues to face several hurdles and delays in sending its goods across Pakistani territory. Unless these challenges are overcome, Afghanistan will find it difficult to

undertake socio-economic development.

According to Ahmed Rashid, a perceptive observer of the developments in the Af-Pak region, it is necessary “to ensure that Pakistan, which gives sanctuary to the Taliban leadership, cooperates rather than sabotages the transition and the peace process, and allows the Taliban to hold talks with Kabul on their own terms rather than on terms that Pakistan may impose. Farther down the road is the need to ensure the promised international funding to keep the Afghan army paid and fed, and to allow economic-development work to continue.”

However, all hope does not appear to have been lost – not as yet anyway. Rashid has written, “The ISI is in the process of freeing some one hundred Taliban whom it earlier jailed, either for maintaining secret contacts with Kabul, the United Nations, and the Americans, or simply for refusing to dance to the ISI’s tune. Most of these Taliban are so-called moderates who support an end to the war. Now the same ISI is pushing these freed Taliban to renew their contacts and discuss peace with their adversary. Despite continuing points of tension between the two countries, Kabul and Islamabad are finally cooperating rather than abusing each other. The military is now fully behind allowing the Taliban to open an office in Doha and will back Karzai in any initiative he takes.”

While the Taliban have opened an “office” in Doha, Qatar, and reconciliation negotiations may begin soon, it would be premature at present to expect too much headway being made. The Taliban have refused to lay down their arms as a pre-condition and the Afghan government will find it difficult to negotiate with guns being held to their heads, even though the US is eager and willing. Unless reconciliation talks are Afghan-led and Afghan-owned, any agreement that might be reached will not last long. Also, the Taliban could be playing for

time and the talks could be a ploy to rest, recoup and refit. It is hard to see them being serious about negotiations when they are on the verge of achieving a moral victory with the impending withdrawal of US forces.

Conclusion

Peace and stability in Afghanistan are critical for stability in the fragile South Asian region. However, the security situation that is likely to prevail in Afghanistan post-2014 is a cause for concern, as the ANSF appears incapable of ensuring a violence free security environment when they are given independent responsibility. This is due to the inadequacy of numbers, poor training, lack of the required arms and equipment and the proclivity of the ill-motivated soldiers to desert and refuse to fight. Junior leadership standards also leave much to be desired. It is essential for the international community to organise a “responsible withdrawal” from Afghanistan and not leave the country in the lurch, particularly in the field of security. Otherwise, the fallout from the planned NATO-ISAF drawdown will be extremely negative for the whole region.

The Afghanistan-Pakistan face-off could lead to an ugly civil war if it does not end soon. Under the circumstances, Afghanistan's regional neighbours need to step in to fill the void. The Taliban and its affiliates like the Al Qaeda must not be allowed ever again to launch international terrorist strikes from safe havens and sanctuaries within Afghanistan. Regional interests lie in a peaceful and stable Afghanistan that is governed by a broad-based government free of foreign interference in policy making.

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