



Pakistan's Role in Afghanistan

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Ever since the creation of Pakistan, except for brief periods, its relations with Afghanistan at the government level have been problematic for historical and geopolitical reasons. This distrust and friction bordering on hostility, regrettably continues to date, although steps taken by the Bush administration and European countries have helped in improving the working relationship. On the contrary, due to cultural, ethnic and religious links, people to people relations have remained cordial. Besides, Pakistan has provided phenomenal support to Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation. It gave refuge to more than three million Afghan refugees and still plays host to nearly two million of them.

There are several reasons why the two governments distrust each other. A major irritant is that successive Afghan governments have yet to fully reconcile themselves to the reality of the Durand Line as the official boundary between the two countries. Secondly, during periods of the Cold War Afghanistan remained aligned to the Soviet camp and Pakistan chose to be an ally of the US and an active member of the CENTO and SEATO security pacts. The India factor was another bone of contention, and even today plays a negative role in their relationship. Islamabad has expressed its deep misgivings about India's establishment of several consulates in proximity of its borders and perceives these to be indulging in activities detrimental to its national interests. Pakistan's relatively large size and resource base in comparison to Afghanistan leads to a "bigger neighbour syndrome" in the psyche of the nation. As a result Kabul is always apprehensive of Pakistan's regional designs, and the fact that Afghanistan is geographically landlocked makes it more dependent and insecure.

Currently, the major source of friction between the two countries is Afghanistan's misplaced allegation that Pakistan has been supporting cross-border infiltration and is assisting the Taliban and militant forces to gain influence. Islamabad vehemently denies these allegations and considers it as a tactic by Kabul to divest itself from its own responsibilities and failures.

Allegations and counter-allegations apart, never before has there been a greater urgency for the two governments to turn a leaf in their relationship. The two countries face a serious challenge to their integrity and future prospects by a major resurgence of Taliban and militant forces. On the one hand the state structures in Afghanistan, which were already very weak, have collapsed. United States, ISAF and Afghan security forces have so far failed to provide Afghanistan with the security critical to developing national reconciliation and economic growth. As a consequence the country remains under the dominance of several power centres and is highly factionalised.

In Pakistan's tribal belt, generally referred to as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) bordering Afghanistan, the government's writ has always been marginal; now in many areas, especially in Waziristan, it is non-existent. High mountains separate valleys,

and accessibility from one region to the other is difficult. In the context of the “war on terror” stability of the FATA region is critical for promoting peace and security in Afghanistan and this is equally important for Pakistan. Stability of the two countries is thus mutually dependent and intertwined. The best approach to combat insurgency waged by Taliban and other militant forces is through close cooperation and a unified vision for the region.

Pakistan’s role in Afghanistan will be largely determined by the progress made in stabilising the tribal belt and the adjoining North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). While maintaining a certain degree of autonomy in FATA, it has to be politically and economically integrated into the country. FATA in the last 60 years has been grossly neglected by successive Pakistani governments. Moreover, Pakistan’s major role in the Afghan Jihad and its deep involvement as a frontline state in the war on terror has further radicalised the area. Estimates by the US intelligence services that al-Qaeda is reorganising in the tribal belt has once again shifted international attention and especially US attention to Pakistan. There are, however, reports that the Bush administration – in order to absolve itself from the failures in Afghanistan and Iraq – has issued information of doubtful veracity. Pressure by the US on Pakistan’s government “to do more” has nonetheless increased. There is even talk from President Bush about all options being open including unilateral military intervention in the tribal belt. Even Democratic presidential aspirant Barak Obama has joined the chorus, although he has qualified his remarks by saying that should there be actionable intelligence about high value targets he would order surgical operations and military strikes inside Pakistani territory. Despite the threatening tone of the Bush administration there is a growing realisation in the US that this asymmetric war can only be won through winning the “hearts and minds” of people and not by application of military force alone. The hard core of militants has to be separated from the community. The United States provides economic assistance of nearly a billion dollars for the economic and social uplift of the tribal belt, and Pakistan is supplementing it with its own funds. This, combined with political reforms that would allow political parties to operate freely in the tribal belt, would, in the long run, help in combating extremism and militancy. However, should the US take unilateral action in the tribal belt or Baluchistan this will inflame the passions of the people and give rise to strong anti-American sentiments. This would also destabilise the government and give al-Qaeda the opportunity to win local support.

From the US perspective the peace deals made by Pakistan’s Army with the militants in the tribal belt have failed to bring peace. On the contrary, they have provided a space for the militants to expand their influence within the area and have given rise to heightened militancy. There is no doubt that militancy in FATA is also indigenous. There does exist an infrastructure of extremism and terrorism and this is supported by certain powerful elements in the tribal belt. These structures, formed in Pakistan to fight the occupation of the Soviets, have not been fully dismantled and have now re-emerged as power centres. Pakistan will have to step up its efforts to counter these forces.

One of the basic reasons for the resurgence of the Taliban in both Afghanistan and Pakistan is poor governance and massive corruption.

There is a wide gap between how the war on terror is perceived by US and Pakistan’s ruling elite. Washington obviously is more concerned about the global nature of the threat as opposed to Pakistan’s government seeing it as a threat to its internal stability and the radicalisation of the region. Both governments need to develop a better

convergence of their interests when it comes to addressing the terrorist threat. This becomes even more important in the light of the recently enacted legislation which bars assistance in the fiscal year beginning Oct 1 “until President Bush finds Pakistan is making demonstrable, significant and sustained progress toward eliminating support or safe haven for terrorists.” This legislation has come under severe criticism in Pakistan both at the government and public level, and there is a widely held belief that the US is not appreciative of Pakistan’s efforts and continues to advance its short term interests at the expense of Pakistan. There is also a huge gap in perception between how the people view the war on terror and President Musharraf’s and the government’s vision of it.

The military government, which has been considerably weakened due to the judicial crisis and deteriorating law and order situation in the country, will not be able to combat militancy. In the past, FATA has been used by several groups – the drug mafia, militants, foreigners – as a “no man’s land.” This has to end and the writ of the state has to be established in the area. The status of FATA has to change; it cannot remain frozen in time. Major political and economic reforms have to be undertaken in order to systematically and progressively integrate the area with the rest of Pakistan. Political parties should be allowed to operate in FATA. The government’s current efforts to revive old structures of government in FATA by supporting the Maliks (i.e. tribal leaders or chieftains) is unlikely to succeed due to the emergence of powerful militant and other forces that require a greater assertion of government authority and maximum grass roots support.

People are unhappy with the Frontier Crimes Regulations and yearn for drastic changes (the Frontier Crimes Regulations were instituted by the British colonial rulers and have been, in their present form, in operation since 1903; they all but abrogate rights otherwise guaranteed by Pakistan’s constitution). The return of refugees is another source of friction between Islamabad and Kabul. Refugee camps have become a major source of recruitment for the Taliban and other militant groups. A military government that is isolated cannot fight militancy. Allowing political parties to operate in the tribal belt and a return of civilian rule in Pakistan is likely to reduce the power of the Islamist parties in NWFP and Baluchistan – which will have a positive impact on the tribal belt.

Eliminating Taliban and al-Qaeda influence from the tribal belt and Afghanistan will require a long term effort as it requires winning the hearts and minds of people by using all elements of national power. Close co-operation at all levels and a vision of the future of the region shared by Afghanistan’s and Pakistan’s leadership is essential for the promotion of peace and stability in the two countries. The Loya Jirga (i.e. a meeting of tribal elders, religious leaders and other representatives of authority) being held in August 2007 could, apart from having a symbolic value, help to create a better environment and facilitate links between the two sides – provided it is perceived to be representative in character. Such a process should lead, at some stage, to an involvement of the Taliban and other militant groups in the Jirgas to make them broader in base and to draw the anti-government forces into the political fold. The sensitivity of the tribal people to outside authority has also to be taken into account. Pakistan’s government is under severe pressure from within as it has lost as many as 800 army personnel in the Waziristan operations since 2003 and there have been reprisals by radicals, i.e. waves of terrorist attacks in different parts of the country.

Based on the India-Pakistan experience there is a need for initiating confidence building measures between Afghanistan and Pakistan. These should be in areas of peace and security, trade and economic matters and political and cultural issues. Concrete projects such as joint border management need to be undertaken with the support of the G-8 or of individual governments. Political and economic linkages should be developed between the two countries. In addition, closer co-ordination and the harmonisation of policies between the two militaries will contribute toward countering the insurgency effectively.