

## Factoring in the Indo-Af-Pak triangle

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»» The security paradigm in the Af-Pak region is as paradoxical as it was on the eve of 9/11. After a decade of US hard and soft measures to root out extremism and terrorism, stability in Afghanistan remains elusive. Widespread violence and staggeringly slow development challenge US claims that many of the objectives of its war against terrorism have been accomplished. The US-NATO drawdown by the year 2014 seems hasty. The Karzai government has been unable to articulate the vision and vigour that the war-torn country requires. The international community has failed to understand the dynamics of the Afghan political and socio-economic context: more than 80 per cent of aid poured into Afghanistan has been allocated to short-term stabilisation programmes instead of more beneficial long-term development projects. Taliban forces have regained effective footholds in the southern provinces of the country, with a modified strategy focusing on intimidation and high profile attacks.

Regional political rivalries continue to aggravate the security situation. The Indo-Af-Pak triangle is the strategic prism through which the West must view its pursuit of stability for Afghanistan and the region. For the European Union (EU), it is essential to establish a constructive relationship with regional actors, especially India and Pakistan. Understanding their roles and interests is crucial. In the vacuum created by the West's withdrawal, the impact of Afghanistan's neighbours on the country will be amplified. EU efforts to provide stability will be in vain as long as indigenous and regional forces

### Highlights

- A decade of Western-led hard and soft measures has failed to stabilise Afghanistan.
- The West must view its pursuit of stability for Afghanistan and the region through the strategic prism of the Indo-Af-Pak triangle.
- EU-proposed cooperative frameworks involving India and Pakistan in the reconstruction of Afghanistan could effectively contribute to international efforts in Afghanistan.



remain unwilling to cooperate with each other. The EU's focus on the Af-Pak region and South Asia must therefore accentuate the EU's interactions with Afghanistan's neighbours and the creation of a cooperative environment.

### **INTERSTATE RIVALRIES**

Afghanistan's problems are complex. International efforts have proven unable to embed truly effective political governance in the country in order to guide it towards reconstruction. The country's lack of direction is compounded by the contradictory actions of both internal and external forces. Corruption, nepotism, feudalism and terrorism run rampant and keep Afghanistan on the brink of failed statehood, while the possibility of a return to Taliban rule remains an ever-present threat. The absence of security has grave implications for efforts to empower civil society in Afghanistan. Extremism in the region finds its roots in poverty, illiteracy and lack of economic opportunities. The population easily fall victim to political forces that use violence to procure their interests. Institutional anarchy in the region is disquieting: deteriorating economic circumstances and corruption generate extremist actions.

A crucial dimension to insecurity in the Af-Pak region is interstate rivalry. Afghanistan is already caught up in a sectarian-tinged power struggle involving Iran and Saudi Arabia. While Iran wants to spread Shiite influence, Saudi seeks the same for the Sunni faith, causing the growth of many conflicting groups. Russia, China and the Central Asian Republics are also consumed by the Afghan conundrum to varying degrees.

But the most important struggle is that between India and Pakistan. It is essential to develop a thorough understanding of these nuclear-armed neighbours in particular – their perspectives, interests and roles in Afghanistan – for the EU to fashion an effective Afghanistan strategy. A counter-terrorism strategy will merely exacerbate problems if it excludes this bigger picture. Despite various territorial and resource-led disputes in the region, none holds the potential to provoke a deadlier outcome than the rivalry between India and Pakistan. This is also the greatest contributing factor to terrorism and Islamist extremism in the region.

The factors responsible for strained relations between India and Pakistan are well known. That their *mêlée* extends into Afghanistan is widely recognised. But despite this, the India-Pakistan-Afghanistan triangle has been under-strategised by the West. There are no concrete Western-devised cooperation initiatives involving this trio of actors in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. The three countries have a long, intertwined history, and both India and Pakistan perceive Afghanistan to be their extended hinterland. The effects of their shared history today translate into a need for both countries to maintain strategic influence over Afghanistan for various reasons. India and Pakistan's fight for Afghanistan resembles sibling rivalry.

Afghanistan offers Pakistan strategic depth and a means to keep India isolated from the wider neighbourhood. India is keen to redraw the silk route first to Afghanistan, then through it to energy resources in the Middle East and Central Asia. India also sees the potential for vast commercial opportunities in Afghanistan.



It judges the latter to be a putative commercial hub linking neighbouring countries. At the same time, Afghanistan could offer India a highly strategic entry point into Pakistan in the case of conflict. While India sees a stable, democratic Afghanistan as key to its interests, an unstable Afghanistan would better serve Pakistan's interests. Pakistan's rivalry with India compels it to play a manipulative role in Afghanistan that generates worldwide criticism. Pakistan's spoiler role in Afghanistan should be viewed along these lines.

While India competes for geopolitical dominance in the subcontinent in an effort to enhance its position and give it leverage against

**For the European Union, it is essential to establish a constructive relationship with regional actors**

China and Russia, Pakistan is obsessed by balancing India's influence. India nonetheless finds some convergence of views with the Central Asian Republics, Iran, Russia and even China, who share its interests and threat perceptions regarding Afghanistan: combating religious extremism and trafficking, as well as ensuring political stability and security in the country. Pakistan

and Saudi Arabia's history of collaboration in Afghanistan, support to Taliban forces and religious similarities are viewed more suspiciously by the others.

Despite its friendship with Pakistan, China remains cautious of Pakistan's role in the spread of Islamist extremism, which is a destabilising factor in its Uyghur district. Though India has

wider interests in the region, New Delhi is not willing to give any concessions to Pakistan either. Rather, India too takes the opportunity to destabilise its neighbour as much as it can. In response, Pakistan has extended its role in Afghanistan way beyond its capacity at a huge domestic cost. Such high politics have not only led to negative developments in the region, but have proven self-destructive for Pakistan. This is evident in the terrorist attacks and bloodshed which take place on a daily basis in the country. International pressure on Pakistan to 'do more' to curb extremism in the region will be futile until the comprehensive conflict paradigm of the region is better understood.

The challenges are multifarious. The region is beset by poor governance and human rights abuses. Inter-and intra-state conflicts are rife, raising the nuclear proliferation stakes and creating a source of threat for the entire international community. Regional cooperation is restricted to lofty declarations. The admission of both India and Pakistan to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) will merely transfer their famous dispute to another platform, rendering the SCO impotent.

**EU ROLES**

The region could benefit from a positive neutral outside force. The EU could take on such a role and promote peace by encouraging closer cooperation, especially between India and Pakistan. For this to function successfully, a well thought out strategy is necessary. Rapid power shifts in international politics make it all the more essential for the EU to develop a blueprint for cooperative action which would also secure



its own strategic interests. The EU is perceived as a more welcome actor in the region than the US: its approach to crisis management is viewed locally as more beneficial than that of the US. A major difference is the EU's insistence on cooperative frameworks as opposed to the US pursuance of unilateral hard power. While a regionally-backed solution to the Afghan problem might appear implausible, the EU must help to construct cooperative frameworks which involve both India and Pakistan.

What the region sorely needs falls within the parameter of the EU's foreign policy objectives, namely: the encouragement of regional cooperation and integration; the prevention of violent conflict through political dialogue; the fight against international crime; and the promotion of human rights, democracy and good governance.

Conversely, the EU's close relations with both India and Pakistan generate mistrust from the two parties. Increased political engagement with both partners is therefore crucial. Candid dialogues on foreign policy would not only create a better understanding of the situation in the region, but also of EU intentions. In the case of India, a recently inaugurated foreign policy dialogue has been constructive and constitutes a promising beginning. Dialogue with Pakistan's political elites must be strengthened. The EU can complement the process through its good standing in regional forums and by enhancing its support to the regional cooperation process. The biggest hurdle to better relations lies in the trust deficit between India and Pakistan.

An EU approach which effectively promotes good governance and democracy in Afgha-

nistan in cooperation with regional powers is the best means of driving the Afghan peace process forward. Military means have not been successful in providing a solution to Afghanistan's problems. To end the pathologies of the Afghan polity, the country needs pragmatic, reformist and focused leaders who would genuinely focus on the quality of governance. But for such leadership to emerge, civil society needs to be empowered. Economic development will be the main catalyst. EU-proposed cooperative projects which – while remaining focused on Afghanistan – include both of its neighbours, would be most influential. Focusing on low political issues which include initiatives as simple as building schools or other civil society empowerment programmes would create goodwill amongst both India and Pakistan. Such regional cooperation initiatives are at present absent.

Joint development of the Afghan economy in cooperation with its neighbours would impart a sense of ownership and a more positive stake in Afghanistan's future to both India and Pakistan. Greater awareness of economic opportunities which would have spillovers effects on Afghanistan's neighbours would serve as an incentive for greater cooperation, in particular to Pakistan. In light of its own financial woes, an economic assistance programme will be difficult for the EU to devise. However, with the assistance of other donors, the EU could come up with tangible development projects involving India and Pakistan.

Greater understanding between regional players, abatement of their intervention in Afghanistan, and better management of traditional rivalries would all directly





contribute to international efforts in Afghanistan. The EU is well positioned to propose such initiatives. Its efforts in Afghanistan have focused mainly on soft power programs. It is one of the largest donors to the country, and its dialogue with India in particular (as the largest regional donor to Afghanistan) is conducted on a donor-to-donor level. There is no overwhelming aversion to such cooperation from Pakistan, India or Afghanistan itself. The EU can further seek to reduce mistrust between India and Pakistan through track two diplomacy methods.

The EU must secure its role in the 'great game' surrounding Afghanistan, which includes the US, China, Russia, India, Iran and other global and non-state actors. But the best strategy for rehabilitating Afghanistan is the employment of foreign policy objectives and implementing tools in a coherent manner – and in cooperation with Afghanistan's neighbours.

### THE VIEW FROM ISLAMABAD

There is a growing frustration in Pakistan that despite its own efforts and collaboration with the international community to combat terrorist forces, the country has been portrayed as a guilty culprit. The very term 'Af-Pak' is not viewed in a positive light in Pakistan. Critics argue that Afghanistan and Pakistan are not comparable, and therefore banding the two countries together is flawed. Pakistan and Afghanistan have very different political setups and socio-economic settings, requiring a variation in the type of international engagement employed. Eliding Pakistan with Afghanistan becomes a source of agitation. To Pakistan's population, it represents a Western

desire to punish Pakistan the same way as it punished Afghanistan after 9/11, in particular to guard if not control its nuclear weapons. The drone attacks on Pakistan's territory are viewed as an extension of the Afghanistan war. In particular, the way in which the Abbotabad operation that killed Osama bin Laden was carried out raised concerns within many official circles in Pakistan.

It is essential for the international community to understand the dynamics of the Pakistan-Afghanistan-India triangular relationship. Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan is a prolongation of its support against the Soviet Union's invasion. Pakistan has always recognised Afghanistan's strategic importance in maintaining its own security interests in the region. The 'war on terror' further embedded Pakistan's role as an arbiter of security in Afghanistan and the surrounding area. It is thus naïve to believe that Pakistan will be willing to cede involvement in Afghanistan's future. Furthermore, Pakistan has a complex concerning regional influence as a result of India's own growing global stature and influence in the region. Pakistan's continued involvement in Afghanistan and its need to maintain an influence must therefore be borne in mind by the US and the EU. While Pakistan might be aware that its involvement in Afghanistan is detrimental to its national security, it nonetheless requires the international community to recognise its need to maintain such influence, as this stems from the need for strategic reassurances against its giant neighbor.

Pakistan's problems are compounded by the vast dissonance and fractures within its society. Governance is a power struggle weighted in the



favour of the military rather than the ruling party. Democratic and judicial institutions are anemic and overpowered by a variety of forces, including radical Islamists. Moderate reformist voices are decidedly muted. Corruption eats away at any chances of Pakistan's socio-economic development and full reintegration into the international community. A weakening civil society and growing international isolation only exacerbate Pakistan's problems. Within Pakistani elites, there is a feeling that while the US might appear somewhat ignorant of Pakistan's realities, the EU could feasibly help to balance the situation.

The EU can play a constructive role in Pakistan through increased political engagement. The focus on empowering Pakistan's civil society and strengthening its democratic governance institutions must be intensified. The EU needs to ensure that its aid does not fall into corrupt hands. A greater role in bringing India and Pakistan closer would be effective, since negative forces in the region feed on strained cross-border relations. Economic integration of the countries would further reduce instabilities and create better prospects for cooperation. Terrorism is not the only problem that emanates from Pakistan. The scale, diversity and complexity of challenges related to the economy, illiteracy, food security and natural disasters require a comprehensive and positive engagement from an entity such as the EU.

## **CONCLUSION**

The European Union's policies in Afghanistan have not yielded substantial results. Nonetheless, it has genuine reasons to involve itself in the Af-Pak region. It must now take operational action. Above all,

the EU needs an objective analysis of the regional situation, which would help it to prioritise its interests and devise an effective strategy to accomplish its aims.

There is a need for effective partnerships in the region. Divergent interests of regional and international players – including those of the United States and Europe – have resulted in a zero sum game. The lack of trust and perpetual sense of readiness for war amongst Afghanistan's neighbours debilitates Afghanistan's own prospects for recovery and rehabilitation. While every country is bound to follow its own strategic interests, a stable and prosperous Afghanistan will only be realised once such interests are put aside. For this, it is necessary to implement cooperative measures involving Afghanistan's neighbours, especially India and Pakistan. Initiatives to empower civil society and the economy should be prioritised. If Afghanistan's neighbours feel a sense of ownership in Afghanistan's future, their need to maintain geopolitical influence can be replaced. The EU is ideally placed to initiate such programmes. Its role in the region as a benevolent power and a mechanism for conflict resolution could serve to create goodwill amongst Afghanistan and its neighbours.

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