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Pakistan, the United States and the End Game in Afghanistan: Perceptions of Pakistan's Foreign Policy Elite

Summary

- This brief summarizes the perceptions of Pakistani foreign policy elite about Pakistan's strategy and interests in Afghanistan, its view of the impending "end game", and the implications of its policies towards Afghanistan for the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. These perceptions were captured as part of a project, co-convened by the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) and Jinnah Institute (JI) in Pakistan, aimed at better understanding Pakistan's outlook towards the evolving situation in Afghanistan. A full report carrying detailed findings will be launched in August 2011 in Pakistan.
- Pakistani foreign policy elite perceive their country to be seeking: (i) a degree of stability in Afghanistan; (ii) an inclusive government in Kabul; and (iii) to limit Indian presence in Afghanistan to development activities.
- They perceive America's Afghanistan strategy to date to be largely inconsistent with Pakistan's interests.
- Pakistan insists on an immediate, yet patient effort at inclusive reconciliation involving all major Afghan stakeholders, including the main Afghan Taliban factions.
- Other issues that Pakistan's policy elite view as impediments to a peaceful Afghanistan settlement include: questionable viability of a regional framework; lack of clarity on Taliban's willingness to negotiate; the unstable political and economic situation in Afghanistan; and concerns about Afghan National Security Forces adding to instability in the future.
- Project participants felt that greater clarity in U.S. and Pakistani policies is critical to avoid failure in Afghanistan, to convince the Taliban of the validity of a power-sharing agreement, and to urge regional actors to play a more constructive role.

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Introduction

As the so-called "end game" in Afghanistan approaches, the momentum is growing to find an amicable solution to the conflict. The U.S. and other troop contributing countries are committed to transferring primary security responsibilities to Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) by

December 2014. While an internal consensus among Afghan actors remains the most crucial element of any settlement, regional players also have an important role to play in facilitating progress. Among them, Pakistan's role is pivotal.

This brief captures the perceptions of Pakistani foreign policy elite who were invited to participate in roundtable discussions and interviews as part of the USIP-JI project described in the summary above. Given Pakistan's centrality, such an exercise holds tremendous value for those grappling to identify ways to secure a successful transition in Afghanistan.

Specifically, the USIP-JI project focused on four themes:

- i. America's evolving strategy in Afghanistan;
- ii. Pakistan's short-term and long-term interests in Afghanistan; and how Pakistan is pursuing these interests;
- iii. In light of America's strategy and its implications for Afghanistan and the region, how can Pakistan best pursue its interests going forward;
- iv. Policies that the U.S., Afghanistan, India (and other regional actors) would have to pursue or accept for Pakistani objectives to be met.

Project findings are based on discussions with a wide spectrum of Pakistan's foreign policy elite—retired civilian and military officials, analysts, journalists and civil society practitioners—with established expertise on Afghanistan and/or with knowledge of the modalities of policymaking in the U.S. The project also solicited views of senior politicians.

Pakistan's Objectives in Afghanistan

In terms of the end game, Pakistani policy elite see their state as having two overriding objectives:

- The "settlement" in Afghanistan should not lead to a negative spillover such that it contributes to further instability in Pakistan or causes resentment among Pakistani Pushtuns; and
- The government in Kabul should not be antagonistic to Pakistan and should not allow its territory to be used against Pakistani state interests.

Translated into actionable policy, these umbrella objectives lead Pakistan to pursue three outcomes:

- i. *A degree of stability in Afghanistan:* Pakistan's interests are best served by a relatively stable government in Kabul that is not hostile towards Pakistan. There is across the board realization among the policy elite that persistent instability in Afghanistan will have numerous fallouts that Pakistan is ill-prepared to tackle.
- ii. *An inclusive government in Kabul:* Pakistan would prefer a negotiated configuration with adequate Pushtun representation that is recognized by all ethnic and political stakeholders in Afghanistan. Some opinion makers insist that a sustainable arrangement would necessarily require the main Afghan Taliban factions—particularly Mullah Omar's group and the Haqqani network—to be part of the new political arrangement.
- iii. *Limiting Indian presence to development activities:* Pakistani foreign policy elite accept that India has a role to play in Afghanistan's economic progress and prosperity. However, many believe that the present Indian engagement goes beyond strictly development and thus raises concerns in Pakistan. As the Pakistani security establishment sees the dynamic, a reluctance to address Pakistani misgivings increases the likelihood of a growing Indian footprint, and in turn, New Delhi's greater ability to manipulate the end game negotiations and the post-settlement dispensation in Kabul.

Views on U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan

Pakistani policy elite perceive America's Afghanistan strategy to date to be inconsistent and counterproductive, not only for Pakistan's interests, but also for durable peace in Afghanistan.

Numerous aspects of U.S. policy were identified as problematic. The most scathing criticism is targeted at the political component of the strategy, which is largely seen to be subservient to the military surge. Pakistani opinion makers sense a civil-military disconnect; the civilian administration is perceived to favor political reconciliation while the Pentagon still prioritizes the need for greater military gains. Not many are optimistic about the prospects of the military surge. While there is recognition that military operations over the past year have degraded the Taliban's capacity, virtually no one is convinced that this can put an end to the insurgency or that it can force the main Taliban factions to negotiate on America's terms.

Pakistani prognosis for a successful end game is bleak also because of the belief that the U.S. would want to retain some long-term security presence in Afghanistan¹ and that this will likely create unease among the Afghan Taliban and countries in the region, including Pakistan. As the Pakistani opinion makers see it, a post-2014 U.S. security presence would, at the very least, entail retaining military bases and using them for counterterrorism missions against al-Qaida and other high value targets in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is a scenario that worried most project participants.

In terms of Pakistan's role in the end game, there is very little faith in U.S. intentions. Pakistani elite believe that the U.S. would continue to push the Pakistan military to "do more" to stamp out militant sanctuaries while it tries to open up direct channels for talks with the Taliban—with an eye on reducing reliance on Pakistan's security establishment in the political reconciliation process.²

Pakistan's Afghanistan Policy: Reacting to the U.S.

Pakistani policy faces a dilemma vis-à-vis the U.S. On the one hand, U.S. military operations in Afghanistan are believed to be causing an internal backlash in terms of militancy and deepening the state-society rift within Pakistan. On the other hand, Pakistani policy elite appreciate that a premature U.S. troop withdrawal would lead to added instability in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has tried to balance these two competing aspects by providing significant counterterrorism and strategic support to the U.S. while also refusing to target the Afghan Taliban and other Pakistan-based groups operating in Afghanistan. This strategy has proven costly in terms of Pakistan's militant backlash. From Islamabad's perspective, the longer U.S. military operations continue without a clear path for political negotiations, the tougher it gets for Pakistan to manage its internal security balancing act. Islamabad therefore insists on an immediate, yet patient effort at inclusive reconciliation.

Pakistani policy elite believe that a genuine intra-Afghan dialogue will inevitably allow a significant share of power to the Pushtuns and thus produce a dispensation in Kabul that is sensitive to Pakistani interests. Based on their perceptions about the current realities on the ground in Afghanistan, Pakistani opinion makers deem any efforts to alienate the Pushtuns in general, and the main Afghan Taliban factions in particular, to be short-sighted. Notably, even as experts acknowledge that at present the Afghan Taliban may be the friendliest option for Pakistan (thus Pakistani support for their inclusion in a dialogue and role in any power-sharing arrangement), they are quick also to admit that this is a result of the state's myopic approach toward Kabul over the years. There is a strong feeling of being "stuck" with the Taliban.

Nonetheless, the Taliban's perceived utility for Pakistan does not translate into a desire for a return to Taliban rule in Afghanistan. A bid to regain lost glory by Mullah Omar's Taliban would

end up creating conditions in Afghanistan which run counter to Pakistani objectives, most notably stability. It is therefore believed that the Pakistani state is no longer interested in a return to complete Taliban rule akin to the 1990s.

Other Impediments to Successful End Game Negotiations

The following aspects are seen as additional hurdles in ensuring successful negotiations and a durable settlement in Afghanistan. They cast further doubt over prospects of the U.S. mission, and in turn, make the Pakistani state even less keen to conform to Washington's desires.

Viability of a regional framework: A regional framework which seeks neutrality and non-interference from countries in the neighborhood receives in principle support in Pakistan. However, there are few, if any, who believe that key countries would remain truly neutral. Pakistani elite are also unsure of how a regional agreement will be enforced. The expectation of interference by others will prompt countries to not honor the arrangement in the first place as each seeks "first mover's advantage" in establishing its influence in Afghanistan.

Taliban's willingness to negotiate: The Taliban's negotiating behavior and their desired role in post-transition Afghanistan remains a question mark. Pakistani policy elite claim a lack of clarity about the Afghan Taliban's willingness to participate in a political reconciliation process, or even to communicate directly with the U.S. beyond a point. Regardless, they predict that reconciliation talks will be a long, drawn out process with many twists and turns and with no guarantee of success. Notwithstanding, Pakistani policy elite feel that the longer meaningful talks are delayed, the tougher it will become for the Pakistani security establishment to persuade the Taliban to come to the negotiating table.

Political and economic situation in Afghanistan: Afghan President Hamid Karzai is increasingly seen as a liability for America's strategy. His loss of credibility among Afghan citizens is generating additional support for the insurgency and forcing Afghan groups opposed to his government to delay serious negotiations. In this political environment, a major challenge lies in identifying representatives who could mediate and speak on behalf of different Afghan stakeholders.

Economically, the international community would have to continue substantial monetary support for Afghanistan post-2014 to prevent a collapse of the Afghan economy. A collapse would be a nightmare for Pakistan because the country would be faced with fresh influx of Afghans seeking livelihood opportunities and escaping renewed violence.

Future of the Afghan National Security Forces: Pakistani policy elite remain wary of the future role of the ANSF. Few accept that the forces will be ready to become the principal custodians of Afghan security by 2014. They perceive the bloated size of the Afghan National Army to be unsustainable and a threat to Pakistan's interests. In terms of its ethnic composition, the presence of non-Pushtun officers in key positions is highlighted to suggest that the makeup is more likely to fuel ethnic hostility than to maintain peace in the country.

The Post-Osama Bin Laden Calculus

Because conversations with Pakistani foreign policy elite originally predated the May 2, 2011 killing of al-Qaida leader Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan, the project later requested participants to reflect on the impact of this development on the Afghan calculus for the U.S. and Pakistan following the development.³

Most respondents believed that bin Laden's death had no bearing on Pakistan's strategy in Afghanistan. As for the U.S., there was a sense that bin Laden's departure will make it easier to create a "narrative of victory" against al-Qaida and perhaps, to negotiate directly with Afghan

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

The authors of the report, respectively, are the South Asia adviser at the U.S. Institute of Peace, consultant author on the project at the Jinnah Institute, and security analyst at the Jinnah Institute.

The findings reported in this brief are based on a project co-convened by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and Jinnah Institute in Pakistan and funded by USIP. The project drew on the expertise of 54 Pakistani foreign policy elite and senior politicians. In March 2011, the policy elite were invited to roundtable discussions, and the politicians were interviewed between March and May 2011 for perspectives of major political parties. The findings capture the key perceptions of the policy elite but do not represent any consensus position. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the authors or the authors' respective organizations.

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Taliban leaders. A greater emphasis may be laid on distinguishing al-Qaida from the Taliban to facilitate the process further.⁴

That said, the growing mutual distrust between Pakistan and the U.S., exposed as it was during the May 2 raid,⁵ has raised doubts about the U.S.' and Pakistan's ability to collaborate in attaining a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan. The anticipated increase in pressure on Pakistan to "do more" is seen as an additional cause for bilateral tensions in the coming months. The state of the bilateral relationship, it is feared, may end up overshadowing the otherwise considerable overlap on the issue of reconciliation between the American and Pakistani positions. Some disagree with this view, arguing that the Obama administration will continue reaching out to elicit Pakistan's support in nudging the main Afghan Taliban factions to the negotiating table.

Looking Ahead

It is fair to conclude that the Pakistani view regarding the present situation in Afghanistan and the prognosis for the impending end game is fairly pessimistic. While there is candid admission that Pakistan has pursued a course different than what the U.S. wished, American policy itself is seen to be counterproductive to Pakistani interests.

Looking ahead, project participants felt that greater clarity in U.S. and Pakistani policies is crucial in order to avoid failure in Afghanistan, to convince the Taliban of the validity of a power-sharing agreement, and to urge Pakistan and other regional actors to stop hedging and offer a more constructive role.

Endnotes

1. Kabul and Washington had already initiated conversations about a bilateral strategic partnership when the roundtable discussions were held. The strategic partnership seeks continued U.S. access to some military bases in return for a U.S. commitment to continue providing assistance to the Afghan government.
2. These views predate Afghan President Hamid Karzai's statement of June 18, 2011 confirming that there have been direct political contacts between the U.S. and the Taliban. Then U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates subsequently confirmed these contacts. Although the contacts were characterized as preliminary, Pakistan's officialdom expressed its displeasure at being kept out of the loop by the U.S. See Emma Graham-Harrison and Hamid Shalizi, "U.S. in Peace Talks with Taliban, Karzai Confirms," *Reuters*, June 18, 2011; and "Pakistan Upset at Being Left Out of US-Taliban Peace Talks," *Press Trust of India*, June 27, 2011.
3. Less than half of the roundtable participants responded to our request to reflect on the post-bin Laden dynamic and thus these observations are not necessarily representative of the views of all those who participated in the roundtable discussions held during the project.
4. These views predate the U.N. Security Council's June 17, 2011 decision to treat al-Qaida and Afghan Taliban differently with respect to application of U.N. sanctions.
5. The unilateral strike by the U.S. against al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad heightened concerns within Pakistan about a growing U.S. intelligence footprint within its territory and consequent threats to its national sovereignty. This friction manifested itself on May 14, 2011, when, in response to the raid, a joint session of both houses of the Pakistani parliament passed a unanimous resolution to defend Pakistan's sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity against U.S. military actions.