Afghanistan-India-Pakistan Trilateral Cooperation: Islamist Proxies a Challenge

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Afghanistan, India and Pakistan have a history of hostility that threatened regional security and hindered economic integration in the region. The hostility is chiefly due to territorial disputes – a carryover from the colonial British era. These disputes not only led to inter-state wars but also use of proxies against each other. India and Pakistan fought three wars over Kashmir while Pakistan’s continued interference through its Islamist proxies in Afghanistan has been to keep the Durand Line issue at bay and in the meantime turn Afghanistan into its “strategic depth” against India. However, during last 13 years, it was seen that these proxies instead of serving the interests of their patrons largely constituted an enemy posing threat to all of them. The three countries are now facing the threat of Islamist militancy that has to be tackled collectively and sincerely. This requires a comprehensive approach and a serious regional commitment, which can only be achieved if the three countries put their rivalries behind and work out the way forward.

The start of the territorial disputes among the three countries traces back to 1947, when Pakistan was created. India was against partition and Afghanistan opposed the recognition of Pakistan in the United Nations due to the disputed Durand Line of 1893 as a border between the two countries. This led Afghanistan and India to sign a friendship treaty in 1950 and Pakistan accused the two countries of attempting to destabilize Pakistan through supporting Pashtun and Baluch nationalists. And in response, Pakistan turned to Islamist militants to use them against Afghanistan and India.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 and subsequent financial support from the US and the Arab world allowed Pakistan the opportunity to increasingly invest in the Islamist militant outfits. For the US, the Afghan mujahideen resistance was only part of the Cold War to defeat the expansionist Soviet Union but for Pakistan, it was also about fostering proxies against Afghanistan and India. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, the US and the Arab world ceased all its support to mujahideen and abandoned the region. However, Pakistan continued supporting certain mujahideen factions and then the Taliban and used Afghan soil as training ground for Kashmir focused militants in 1990s. India began supporting Ahmad Shah Masoud an anti-Taliban
commander of Northern Alliance (NA), which kept fighting against the Taliban from 1996 until their defeat at the hands of the US in 2001.

After the collapse of the Taliban regime, Pakistan accommodated the remnants of the Taliban regime and helped them resurge in 2003 to 2004 against the US-led coalition forces and the Afghan government. And India started to support the Afghan government and became among the largest aid contributors and the second largest investor in Afghanistan. India’s aid, while described as effective in development process in Afghanistan, has been indicative of increasing Indian soft power in Afghanistan. India also continued providing training to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and hundreds of scholarships to Afghan students each year.

Now both Pakistan and India see Afghanistan important to their divergent interests at the regional level. Pakistan perceives India’s advances towards Afghanistan in the past one decade as a threat to its security and economic ambitions and thinks that with growing influence of India in Afghanistan, it will be cornered from the east and west by two hostile neighbours. In addition, Pakistan fears that India – with the help of Afghanistan – will back the Baluch separatist movement for an independent Baluchistan. Pakistan accused India of intervention in 1971 war between West and East Pakistan that led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 and it is concerned that India now tries to galvanize and supports the Baluch separatist movements. India fears that repeat of abandoning Afghanistan will push the country back into the grip of Pakistan as in 1990s and that Pakistan use it against India.

Apart from the strategic interests of India and Pakistan in Afghanistan, security in Afghanistan is also linked to economic interests of these countries and also Iran. Deteriorated security in Afghanistan has allowed some countries to get economic advantages leading to the belief that a stable Afghanistan can serve the economic interests of certain countries but threaten those of others. Most mineral rich provinces in Afghanistan are restive – probably a strategy to pave the way for smuggling of minerals out of Afghanistan. Recently, there were reports of Pakistani business entities smuggling marbles from Helmand province to Pakistan. Export and import to Afghanistan is another
area of impact. Due to insecurity, Afghanistan is still heavily dependent on imports from Pakistan and Iran – the two leading exporters to Afghanistan. It also remains a hindrance to the implementation of Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas-pipeline project, which will be a replacement to Iranian energy export to Afghanistan on one hand, and Iran-Pakistan–India (IPI) gas pipeline on the other hand.

The Way Forward

Divergent interests of different stakeholders in Afghanistan especially India and Pakistan on one hand have hindered inter-state cooperation and economic integration in South Asia and on the other hand prevented the militant outfits from being neutralized. However, Islamists militants both local and transnational have indicated that they are determined to impose Sharia based governments in the Muslim world. This renders the Talibanization process in South Asia and transnational Islamic militancy a common threat to the entire region- not to a particular country.

Islamists – of any type – do not recognize boundaries to their fanatic objectives. Yesterday proxies are becoming today’s enemies. Afghanistan and Pakistan accuse each other of supporting Pakistani and Afghan Taliban – Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is alleged to be supported by Afghanistan and the Mullah Omar group supported by Pakistan. However, the Taliban on both sides of the border fight to promulgate a Sharia based government – a goal that is a threat to both the countries. Recently on the Eid eve, TTP reiterated their allegiance to Mullah Omar and said the group does not recognize borders. Six of the group’s commanders also pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria. This indicates a sense of a shared goal among the Islamist militant outfits – both local and transnational.

Militancy should be defined as a common threat and all three countries have to cooperate to tackle the problem through a cohesive strategy. Furthermore, Afghanistan, India and Pakistan need to boost economic cooperation among themselves and with countries in the broader region. Afghanistan has a great potential to serve as a regional trade hub in the long term between the energy-scarce South Asia and energy-rich Central Asia. It can
connect markets between the two regions and the rest of the world, which would contribute greatly to economic integration in the region and steady marginalization of the militant outfits. Continuation of unilateral policies and pursuing divergent interests will further isolate the countries in the region and make it easy for the Islamists to make inroads into them.

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