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The Proxy Wars: Kashmir and Afghanistan

Two of the most restive regions of South Asia continue to influence the strategic calculations of India and Pakistan. And while the projection of soft power by both countries may prove to be a confidence-building measure, its long-term impact upon regional security dynamics remains far from clear.

By Olof Blomqvist for ISN

The rivalry between India and Pakistan has dominated the politics and security of South Asia since the partition of British India in 1947. Since then, the two nuclear-armed states have fought three wars and been on the brink of conflict on numerous occasions. Historically, efforts to normalize ties have floundered upon Pakistan's demands for the full resolution of the Kashmir dispute and New Delhi's call for Islamabad to take action against anti-Indian militants. However, in recent years there have been signs that the civilian governments in both countries seem prepared to leave major differences aside and engage with each other on economic issues.

As a reflection, bilateral trade between India and Pakistan has increased over the past few years. Pakistan's announcement that it would grant 'Most Favored Nation' status to India by the end of 2012 is also a significant economic and political gesture. Moreover, the composite dialogue between India and Pakistan - as the peace process is known - also resumed in early 2011, having been broken off by New Delhi following the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks. But while the peace process enjoys broad political support in both countries, there are potential spoilers on both sides. In Pakistan, the military and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency hold enormous influence, and often pursue goals at odds with those of the civilian government. By contrast, Manmohan Singh's ruling Congress Party is under domestic pressure to take a tough line with Islamabad. Indeed, underpinning both governments' strategic calculations are long-standing problems associated with Kashmir and Afghanistan.

Kashmir: The Unsolvable Problem

Since 1947, when Muslim-majority Kashmir opted to join India instead of Pakistan, the Valley has remained a source of insecurity in South Asia. Currently, Pakistan controls one-third of Kashmir (known as Azad Jammu and Kashmir, AJK) and India two-thirds (Jammu & Kashmir, J&K), with the two sides separated by the de facto border known as the Line of Control (LoC). Both sides claim the whole of Kashmir as an "inseparable" part of their own nation, but take slightly different approaches to the issue. India, for example, seeks to maintain the *status quo* and rejects outside attempts to resolve the dispute. By contrast, Pakistan continues to call for a referendum to determine the status of Kashmir.

The popular uprising that started in 1989 in J&K - in the aftermath of local elections widely thought to

have been rigged by Delhi – has left more than 40,000 dead. The uprising has been fueled by Pakistani support for anti-Indian militant groups, while Indian security forces stand accused of countless atrocities towards the local population. Nevertheless, levels of violence in Kashmir are at their lowest since 1989. But despite the reduced militant activity, the Valley is still tense and local grievances run high.

Jammu and Kashmir is one of the most militarized regions in the world. India's 500,000 security forces are often accused of acting with impunity prompting human rights groups to demand that New Delhi revoke the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and other similarly draconian laws that create huge resentment locally. As a result of such measures, anti-Delhi protests are still frequent in J&K. In June 2010, the largest anti-India protests since 1989 broke out and continued for several months, claiming at least 110 lives.

While the Indian government stands firm in its refusal to repeal the AFSPA or to significantly reduce security personnel in J&K, it has made some attempts to address grievances. The 2010 protests only petered out after New Delhi agreed to some concessions, and sent a team of interlocutors to recommend a way forward. Their report, finally published in May this year, called for devolution of power from New Delhi and more cooperation across the LoC. The report is not legally binding, however, and it is unclear to what extent the government intends to follow up on it.

India also continues to accuse Pakistan (and in particular the ISI) of supporting and training militants in Kashmir. The armed uprising that started in 1989 was initially led by indigenous Kashmiri groups, but Islamic groups soon took over as the region became flooded by jihadists that were fresh from fighting Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Indeed many of these fighters were alleged to have close links to the Pakistani state and security establishment. Islamabad in turn saw that conducting a proxy war through militants in Kashmir was a way to put pressure on its militarily and economically stronger neighbor. As a result, it has often been suggested that it is the Pakistani military's interests to keep the conflict alive. By maintaining a permanent state of conflict with India, the military safeguards its dominant position within Pakistani society.

However, since Pakistan became a key US ally in the 'War on Terror' its support for militants in Kashmir has diminished. Yet India continues to claim that the ISI maintains links to the main Kashmiri groups. In particular, New Delhi accuses the ISI and of helping the Lashkar-e-Tayyba (LeT) to orchestrate the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks. Conversely, Pakistan continues to confront substantial internal struggles with its own militant groups. Indeed, there are concerns that Kashmiri separatists frustrated with the peace process could turn their weapons inwards. Recently, the leader of the United Jihad Council - an umbrella group of Kashmir militants that includes the LeT - stated that Islamabad now "cares more about trade than us."

Consequently, an outright solution to the Kashmir issue is as far away today as it was 60 years ago. New Delhi and Islamabad have taken tentative steps to reduce tensions in the Valley through confidence building measures, but these have had a limited impact. In this respect, attempts at better economic integration seem a promising alternative. As one Pakistani lawmaker, quoted in a recent report by the International Crisis Group, said: "So far, in 65 years, we've pursued one policy: armed conflict. It has failed. Now we have to try the soft approach."

Afghanistan: A New Great Game?

With the Kashmir issue receiving less international attention, Indian-Pakistani rivalry continues to be played out in Afghanistan. With the withdrawal of coalition forces due in 2014, both countries are set to play an increasingly important role in Afghanistan. Indeed, competition between the two neighbors has increased significantly since the toppling of the Taliban.

Pakistan has a long history of seeking to influence events in Afghanistan, and was one of the few countries to recognize the Taliban government. To justify its involvement in Afghanistan, Islamabad often talks of its need for “strategic depth” against India. Some commentators have gone as far as saying that “the road to peace in Afghanistan goes through Kashmir”, and argued that Pakistan’s policies actions in Afghanistan can be explained by its fear of the Indian military threat.

While Pakistani involvement in Afghanistan is undoubtedly motivated by its rivalry with India, it is too simplistic to take a wholly Kashmir-centric view of their strategic calculations. Pakistan has other vested interests in enhancing relations with Afghanistan. One of the most important concerns the Durand Line, the porous border established during colonial rule that runs through the volatile Pashtun tribal areas. The Durand Line has never been recognized by Kabul, and Pakistan fears that a strong Afghan government might challenge the *status quo*.

Islamabad is also concerned about the prospect of the 50 million-strong Pashtun population living in Afghanistan and Pakistan developing into a secessionist movement. The South Asia scholar Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh has written that fears of a Pashtun uprising has “been at the root of the 60-year history of [Pakistan’s] interference in Afghanistan’s affairs”.

Although denied by Islamabad, it is widely accepted that Pakistan supports militant groups operating in Afghanistan to ensure its influence in the country. In a memo leaked in early 2010, the former US ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry wrote: “Pakistan will remain the single greatest source of Afghan instability so long as the border sanctuaries remain, and Pakistan views its strategic interests as best served by a weak neighbor.” This perceived support for militant activity has created huge resentment among Afghans towards Pakistan. The two countries’ complicated relationship is reflected in the attitude of Afghanistan’s President Hamid Karzai, who at times is openly hostile towards Islamabad, and at times calls the country a “twin” he would defend against an attack from the US.

The landscape of militant groups in Afghanistan is extremely complex and goes beyond a monolithic “Taliban.” Pakistan has ties to a wide range of groups, but is widely thought to have the strongest connections with the Haqqani Network. This Taliban-allied group is based in Waziristan, and is accused of being behind several recent high-profile attacks in Afghanistan. Islamabad also holds immense sway over Afghanistan’s economy. Pakistan is Afghanistan’s largest trading partner, and Islamabad has actively tried to block other countries’ trade with Kabul. Attempts have included a ban on Indian goods flowing through Pakistan, or the recent blockade of NATO supply routes.

While India has historically had friendly relations with Afghanistan, New Delhi cut diplomatic ties with Kabul during the Taliban regime. Having seen Pakistani influence grow in the country during this period, India seized on the 2001 US-led invasion as an opportunity to regain its foothold in Afghanistan. India wants a strong and democratic Afghanistan that ensures a degree of stability in its immediate neighborhood, while also containing Pakistan’s influence in the country. New Delhi is similarly keen to strengthen its credentials as an emerging great power and show that it can take a leading role in the region.

India has taken a development-focused approach in Afghanistan, and has pledged more than \$2 billion in aid since 2001 for large-scale infrastructure projects and other efforts that have generated much goodwill among Afghans. While there are hawkish voices in the Indian establishment calling for a military presence in Afghanistan, these are a minority. Both the current Indian government and the main opposition are firmly against any Indian military commitment in the country, and New Delhi has restricted itself to training Afghan security forces. In October 2011, India signaled its long-term commitment to Afghanistan by signing a strategic pact with Kabul, the first country to do so.

Despite this seemingly benign approach, Islamabad is intensely suspicious of India’s real motives in

Afghanistan. Pakistan has accused India of using its four consulates in Afghanistan to foment anti-Pakistani feelings in Baluchistan and in the Pashtun tribal areas.

Accordingly, both India and Pakistan tend to see their rivalry as a zero-sum game in Afghanistan. This has, in turn, caused fears that Afghanistan will eventually be drawn into a new “great game” between Islamabad and New Delhi. If so, concerns will inevitably be raised that that competition between India and Pakistan may increase instability in the country. However, at least from an international perspective, India is increasingly regarded as a positive actor in Afghanistan. It was telling that, during his recent tour of Asia, the US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta called on India to assume a greater role in Afghanistan, while at the same time castigating Pakistan for its support for militants in the country. The impact that this may have on India’s and Pakistan’s policies toward Afghanistan remains to be seen.

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