

ISAS Working Paper

No. 56 – Date: 21 April 2009

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Prospects for Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations

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Introduction

Afghanistan-Pakistan relations and their implications for the wider world have been extremely complicated, much more than what should be normal bilateral relations between two neighbours. Relationships between any two countries, not just neighbours, are multifaceted but rarely are they so enmeshed as to make a bowl of spaghetti look simple. Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have been impacted by developments outside their borders and held hostage to developments spilling across their borders. Increasingly, Afghanistan has been at the receiving end, not unusual for an underdeveloped state with a weaker economy.

However, the new strategies adopted by the Barack Obama administration could potentially offer the two countries a historical chance to break out of past prejudices and actions as they face a common enemy in Islamic militancy. The United States is the common and dominant international partner of both these countries and it has lately realised the futility of dealing with the problems of these countries in isolation, and that ignoring the torturous inter-linkages that bind the two countries together was only exacerbating the situation. However, whether the two countries would be able to seize this opportunity remains an open question.

Complicated and Multifaceted Relations

There are four historical and geographical factors that underpin these relations and these, in turn, are dictated by local factors as well as their interactions with the world. Understanding these factors, along with other more traditional ones, are key to helping make this relationship a non-antagonistic one.

The first of these is the memory of the vivisection of the Pashtun territory in 1893 following the demarcation of a border between (British) India and Afghanistan, in Afghanistan minds. The Afghanistan government, under Amir Abdul Rehman, was weak and financially dependent on the British and, thus, unable to deny the latter's demands. The lines on the map drawn by Sir Mortimer Durand were signed onto in the Treaty of Gandamak whose validity was to be a hundred years. When the British Empire withdrew from India, leaving behind India and Pakistan as successor states, the Afghanistan government argued that the treaty stood abrogated on the grounds that one of the parties to the Treaty had exited and that it had no treaty obligations to Pakistan. Consequently, Afghanistan initially opposed the admission

of Pakistan as a member of the United Nations and wanted a resolution of its claim. However, the world was still weary in the aftermath of World War II and the partition of India had horrendous consequences – Afghanistan simply did not matter.² This aspect of the Afghanistan-Pakistan relations remains important even at present and, in fact, is one of the key driving factors in the unusual dynamics of this bilateral relationship.

Geography is the second feature that complicates the bilateral relations of these two neighbours. Afghanistan, a landlocked country, has two main ‘ports of entry’ on its Pakistan border, Torkham on the Khyber and Spin Boldak on the Quetta-Kandahar highway – entry points which, till quite recently, had near-monopolistic features. In addition, there is growing local trade with Iran, particularly through Islam Qala. The northern land ports, dormant till recently, except for the flow of Russian troops during the 1980s, are picking up especially through Hairatan. The Zaranj-Delaram road, built by India, would generate significant traffic once Iran-United States relations stabilise as it links with the Iranian port of Chabahar. There are other local factors, including insecurity in Nimroz province of Afghanistan and lack of facilities at Chabahar, that presently hinder the use of this highway. However, it alone has a huge potential to develop as an alternative to Afghanistan’s overwhelming reliance on the port of Karachi and on Pakistani trading and trucking interests.

A related, key long-term issue and one that was the main reason behind the Pakistani establishment’s decision to create the Taliban has been the United States’ desire to develop alternate evacuation routes for the oil and gas reserves of Central Asia, bypassing Iran and reducing the dependency on Russia. Afghanistan is central to these plans, with the proposed pipelines running to the Indian Ocean through its territory. This makes it attractive for Pakistan to try and be in charge or at least in control of this strategic crossroad.³

The third factor complicating relations between the two countries is the status and role of Pakhtuns in Pakistan. Reluctant to be part of Pakistan in 1947 when they were banking on the continuance of an undivided India, the Pakhtun elites have become an integral part of the Pakistani state. This initially came from their representation in the army, a hangover of the colonial days. This is especially so for the Pakhtuns from the settled areas of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Ayub Khan was the first of the senior army officers, a tradition that has continued, to be part of the military-bureaucratic elite which has led Pakistan and not allowed a viable political class to develop. It is said that the Pakhtuns constitute close to a quarter of the Pakistan army which places them distinctly above the status of the Sindhis and the Balochis, and next only to the Punjabis as the determinants of Pakistan’s fate. This gives the Pakhtun elite a considerably different worldview from that of their cousins across the border and even from the average Pakhtun within Pakistan.

The fourth factor which completely changed the dynamics of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations was the anti-Soviet *jihad* (1979-1992). It not only converted Pakistan into the gateway to Afghanistan with money, arms and Pan-Islamic *jihadis* flowing in one direction, and refugees in the other, but it also ended up making Pakistan a key arbiter in Afghanistan affairs. Afghanistan-displaced persons in Pakistani camps earned their refugee status only after they enrolled in one of the seven Afghan political parties recognised by Pakistan. All American and Saudi Arabian assistance for the *jihad* were routed through the Pakistan army which determined which group would receive the assistance and how much, a role which converted the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) into the formidable institution it has become. Millions of Afghans came across, settled in camps and cities in Pakistan and, while a majority has returned to Afghanistan, significant numbers have stayed back. This running of *jihadi* camps,

and other policies of the military dictator, General Zia-ul Haq, not only radicalised the Pakistani army but also the Pakhtuns of Pakistan, and this led to considerable dampening of the spirit of Pakhtun nationalism.

New Beginnings?

For some time in 2007 and early 2008,⁴ it looked like the relations between the two countries could take a turn for the better. Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's regime had become quite discredited domestically and the Pakistani army was on the defensive. The mishandling of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry's case and the subsequent lawyers' movement, allegations of corruption in the privatisation of state-owned companies and the economic downtrend was taking their toll. Further, Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai's claims of cross-border support for the Taliban had started gaining currency and the role of the Pakistani army came under scrutiny. The Pakistani state's inability to protect Ms Benazir Bhutto – she barely escaped at her Karachi homecoming and then fell at Rawalpindi days before the election – and the subsequent election results meant that the country had a civilian government with no baggage of aggressive intent on its neighbours.

Despite significant differences on the restoration of judges between the two main constituents of Pakistan's government, the relative ease with which President Musharraf was manoeuvred out of office, and the strong support given to the civilian leadership within the country and internationally was interpreted as an indication of the potential for change. The new army chief, General Ashfaq Kayani was touted as a professional soldier since he withdrew the army from retail politics, and agreed to brief members of the National Assembly on security issues. Significantly, President Karzai had met with Ms Bhutto just hours before her death, and was the only foreign dignitary at President Asif Ali Zardari's inauguration. The body language between the two presidents was so different from the earlier, poisoned relationships that it looked that the two countries were poised to enter a new phase of equal and friendly relations. A year down the road, the mood is very different; the euphoria is a distant dream and the opportunity for change seems to have passed.

Key Issues

Most explanations of Pakistan's efforts at controlling the Afghanistan state or at least of having a friendly regime in Kabul relate to the former's desire to obtain strategic depth against India. This view of Pakistan's driving force in its Afghanistan policy is an inversion of theory as strategic depth actually refers to the space a country has in front of its area of strength. It can then, in the face of aggression by a vastly-superior army, keep withdrawing into its own territory so that the enemy's frontline gets stretched, its supply lines are under strain, and the defender can choose a time and place for a counter-attack. The Russians' tactics against Napoleon and Mao's Long March are classical examples of this. Were Pakistan to choose Afghanistan as its strategic depth, it would imply vacating Lahore, the rest of Punjab and even Islamabad, and then hitting back at the Indian army only when the Pakistani army reaches the Hindu Kush. In reality, the control of the territory of Afghanistan would, at best, allow Pakistan to move a limited amount of its strategic assets such as nuclear weapons and aircrafts to Afghanistan.

The unfinished agenda of acceptance of the Durand Line keeps the Pakhtunistan issue alive, in a manner of speaking. Throughout the 1950s, the government in Kabul kept encouraging the forces on both sides of the Durand Line to continue putting pressure on the Pakistan

government, culminating in the then-Afghanistan Prime Minister Daud Khan's efforts to use tribal *lashkars* to force the issue. Pakistan reacted by imposing an economic blockade of Afghanistan that was effectively enforced, a far cry from the present argument of the Pakistan-Afghanistan borders being 'ungovernable spaces'. Even the nomadic Kuchis were not allowed their seasonal movement to Pakistan with their flocks of sheep. The economic consequences of this blockade on Afghanistan that lasted four years were disastrous – it ended in Zahir Shah's dismissal of Daud and the move to a new Constitution (1964).⁵ However, even with a strongly pro-Pakistan regime in place, the Taliban did not agree to recognise the Durand Line as the international border between the two countries. In any case, on the ground, the line is largely fictional, with considerably free egress for tribes and extremists. Consequently, the upsurge in Pakhtun radicalisation – presently on religious but, at some point, not inconceivably on nationalist grounds – could be a major threat to the unity of Pakistan.

Afghanistan has been traditionally friendly with India while, historically, Afghanistan and Pakistan have not been the best of friends other than during the Taliban interlude. In recent decades, Pakistan's goals have been to not allow India-Afghanistan relationship to foster and, in fact, to pro-actively disrupt it. In the period after the overthrow of the Taliban, Pakistan has sought to prevent India making inroads into Afghanistan. It regularly raises such issues as Indian development assistance and the 'opening' of Indian consulates near the Pakistan border. In fact, the Indian consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar (plus Herat and Mazar) are decades old. The Pakistani position on this has gained currency and is frequently referred to in the recommendations of think tanks/ experts.⁶

Key Pakistani Players

As part of the restoration of civilian government in 1988, the army made it clear to the incoming Benazir Bhutto government that Afghanistan policy, along with Kashmir and the nuclear policies, would continue to be with its general headquarters in Rawalpindi. This has broadly continued over the years, with the civilian authorities getting involved only when it suited the army. One example is then-Pakistan President Nawaz Sharif's decision to go nuclear post-Pokharan. This is shown in the speed with which General Kayani has been able to reassert the army's dominant role in strategic policy making.⁷ In fact, he has proved to be far more adept and effective than Musharraf in this and the army's credibility as the only institution holding the country together has been re-established, albeit with considerable help from the civilian government's ineptitude. General Kayani is universally seen as a 'professional' soldier and his role as Director-General, ISI, when the Taliban re-emerged in Afghanistan is almost never mentioned. His success in protecting the army's corporate interests against Pakistan's national interest will be a key determinant of the developing contours of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations.

The army's allies in this include the religious parties which have spawned thousands of madrassas along the two frontier provinces that have helped create the *jihadis* required to fight in Afghanistan. The army's equation with the religious parties is an interesting one in that while they agree on the goal of removing all the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)/International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops from Afghanistan and the establishment of a rigid Sharia-based regime in the country, they often disagree on the details of domestic politics in Pakistan.

There are important sections of the Pakistani establishment such as President Zardari and most of its political class who are quite comfortable with an independent Afghanistan. There are also large sections of the army, presently not in strategic positions, which see the current path as a dead-end.⁸ Then there are also the old trading and trucking interests whose area of interest extends all the way across Afghanistan into the fringes of Central Asia. It was this commercial desire for the stability in Afghanistan and the frustration at extensive extortions by local warlords during the worst phase of the Afghanistan civil war that prompted them to work with the Pakistan establishment and create the Taliban.⁹ All of these groups and interests would welcome a chance for peace and stability.

There are also groups who are caught in-between, the principal one being the Awami National Party (ANP). It swept the elections to the provincial assembly of the NWFP, runs its provincial government and is a part of the ruling front in Islamabad. At present, the ANP is on the run, chased out of Swat and many areas of the NWFP. Its hopes of being in the middle and to develop as an alternate source of power and legitimacy and, therefore, in a position to mediate conflict without surrendering to the militants, has been severely compromised. With the latest agreement on Swat, it can be said that the ANP has surrendered meekly to the Tehrik-i-Taliban-i-Pakistan (TTP), largely for reasons beyond its control. The ANP started off by muting its criticism of the government forward policy in the Federal Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) which is where an overwhelming numbers of the Pakistani Taliban are based. However, even this compromise did not help the ANP as the Pakistani army demonstrated its inability/unwillingness to really confront the Taliban. The recent agreement regarding the imposition of *Sharia* in the Malakand division (including Swat) means that the ANP has lost its credibility, arguably as it was an unwitting instrument of extreme elements in the army who used it as a cover.

However, the key actors, in significant positions of power, who have shaped the Afghanistan strategy, see things quite differently. It is their understanding of Pakistan's troika of strategic issues that drives the country's Afghan policy:

- What is the use of the nuclear deterrent if they still feel threatened?
- What is the use of investing so much in the asymmetric tactics of Lashkar-e-Taiba, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, etc., in Kashmir if they see India gaining in Afghanistan?
- What is the use of creating and running the Taliban to ensure a friendly regime in Afghanistan if they have to give it up under pressure?

End Game – Pakistan Army

The ideal end-game for the Pakistan army in Afghanistan is a stable and pliable regime, discreetly controlled by the former, where the levers of power would lie. The army is comfortable with the other parts of the country being unstable or out of its control. Pakistan would not only continue to be Afghanistan's largest trading partner but it would also be its largest foreign investor. The latter would, in effect, become a rentier state which is picking up the tab for a 'state' within the orbit of Pakistan. It is this desire that has motivated the Pakistani army's tactics of supporting extremist groups in Afghanistan such as Gulbudin Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami for a long time. When that did not work, it supported the creation of the Taliban as well as its activities.

The Taliban

Over the past years since the fall of the Taliban, the key thing from Afghanistan's and the region's perspective is that the insurgency is based not in the NWFP or FATA but in north-east Baluchistan, stretching northwards from Quetta.¹⁰ The several districts here play host to sanctuaries and training grounds for the Taliban. Both the Jamait-i-Islami of Qazi Hussein and the Jamait-i-Ulema-i-Islam of Maulana Fazlul Haq run several madrassas in this part of Pakistan. As various observers have pointed out, there has not been a single Pakistani army/Frontier Corps action in this area till now, something the Pakistani army and the United States, with its drone attacks in FATA, should be asked to explain.¹¹ It is clear that, as far as the insurgency/militancy/terrorists are concerned, there is no scaling down or repentance.

Regarding their operations in Afghanistan, the Taliban clearly see the land mass of Pakistan as affording them the 'strategic depth' to which they withdraw when pushed by NATO/ISAF and United States Special Operations. It also provides them with recruits and training camps, and acts as a conduit for assistance they receive from their well-wishers in Pakistan, the Gulf and elsewhere. A lot has also been written about the Taliban's links with the ISI specifically and with the Pakistan army more generally. However, their relationship is not as simple or as straightforward as it seems to be and Pakistan's Afghanistan policy will be increasingly shaped by the growth in the Taliban's free-lancing tendencies. The Pakistan army has, therefore, tried to develop a two-track approach to the Taliban. It encourages those groups to whom it has links to concentrate their efforts in ridding Afghanistan of the presence of 'infidels'. And as we shall see later, it has made efforts to confront some groups within Pakistan. However, it clearly lacks the will and inclination to actually take them on; instead focusing on its inability to launch counter-insurgency operations in 'ungoverned territories' of the Pakhtuns. This is in contrast to the state's brutal crushing of the Muttahida Quami Movement's control in Karachi in the 1990s and the Balochis' armed insurrection, or in enforcing the economic blockade of Afghanistan referred to earlier. The Pakistani army is not above using the Taliban chief Mullah Omar to mediate its differences with local extremists/Taliban. In January 2009, there were reports of Omar 'sacking' Baitullah Mehsud of South Waziristan and head of the TTP, the main Islamic militant outfit in Pakistan.¹² A month later, there were persistent reports of Omar admonishing the TTP and other militant groups in Pakistan for attacking the Pakistan army ('Muslim brothers'); instead of asking them to join hands in expelling foreign troops from Afghanistan.¹³

This reported inability of the army is used as an excuse to sell the idea that if Pakistan's eastern flank was secure ('solve Kashmir'), then the Pakistan army could be fully deployed on its western frontier. Factually, the Pakistan army has lost over 1,000 men in the fight against Al Qaeda-Taliban insurgents over the past few years and now it seems to be looking for a way out of the fighting. To paraphrase, the arms and legs are developed enough not to be controlled by the mind. This is borne out by developments in Swat and Bajaur, for instance.

The position in Swat, a settled area and part of the NWFP, has been in the news a lot recently. The government has agreed to the enforcement of *Sharia* in the entire Malakand Division, of which Swat and other districts are a part. In fact, it just reiterates an agreement reached with the same Sufi Mohammad in 1994 by Ms Bhutto's second government, the key issue this time was that no appeal would lie to the regular judiciary in Peshawar against the judgement of local *Sharia* courts besides the almost complete withdrawal of the formal state constituted under Pakistan's Constitution. In recent months, the Taliban have overrun the valley despite

the presence of 15,000 security forces. As part of their offensive, they used to display the bodies of four to five persons killed by them every day – these bodies were hung at the central square of Mingora, the headquarters of Swat. Paradoxically, the local army units are also based in Mingora. Their complicity or disinclination to tackle the Taliban is obvious. The key issue confronting even the supporters of the deal in mainstream Pakistan is whether the agreement would hold. Would Mullah Fazlullah allow his armed group to be disbanded? Or would the withdrawal of the Pakistani army from Swat free up Fazlullah's Tehrik Nifaz-i-Sharia Mohmadi (TNSM) forces and allow them to operate elsewhere? The kidnapping of the District Coordination officer even as the agreement came into force to bargain for the release of three of Fazlullah's boys detained in Peshawar (and not Swat) and continued aggressions are indications of things to come.

Though the Taliban leadership shows indications of developing its own agenda and the Pakistan army does periodically carry on operations which, however, do not look sustainable. Another important downside of the operations in FATA and Swat is that it has led to a substantial displacement of the civilian population caught in the crossfire – 600,000 from Swat and 300,000 from Bajaur. The displaced people specifically and the civilian population generally are angry with the Taliban for the insecurity and dislocation, and with the army for its botched operations, including the use of heavy artillery.

Pakistan's efforts seem to be to try and change the United States' policy. A key component of this strategy is the propagation of the idea of a 'moderate Taliban', with whom it is possible to do business. From latest indications – United States Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke's and United States Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton's statements – it seems that the United States will really buy this argument once peace prevails across the Durand Line. The other component of this strategy is to continue to put pressure on India by arguing for a resolution of the Kashmir issue. And the Pakistanis seem to lose no opportunity to raise the temperature, witnesses of which were the orchestrated remarks in the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks.

A particular form of concern is that the recruitment ground for extremism is from the South Punjab districts from where the Pakistan army (and Frontier Corps) increasingly recruits its soldiers, though not its officers. The potential flow of extreme ideas to the army from this source could alter the dynamics of power structures in Pakistan. The army has been under pressure in such places as Swat, Bajaur and Khyber – desertions and fratricide have taken place especially amongst the Frontier Corps and, in the possibility that if the conflict continues, it could impact Punjab-Pakhtun relations.

FATA – Key is Location¹⁴

To better understand the army-Taliban dynamics, it is useful to study the developments in the seven FATA. In effect, these areas are governed under colonial-era laws which vest all executive authority in the Political Officers who report directly to the Governor of the NWFP by-passing the government of the province. Regular judicial institutions and political parties are kept out and the tribe/clan is seen as the lowest unit of administration – a whole tribe can be punished for the transgressions of an individual by the executive. The large-scale flow of Islamic militants and weapons in these areas consequent on the anti-Soviet *jihad* and conscious army policies of creating militias weakened the traditional malik/arbab system, allowing mullahs and assorted power entrepreneurs to emerge. Post-overthrow of the Taliban, they provided fertile grounds for different *jihadi* groups to base themselves in. However, different agencies have their own dynamics which impact on broader developments outside.

In Waziristan, the army is confined to its camps, euphemistically called ‘forts’, but which are essentially barbed-wire camps. The Taliban operate openly, with only the occasional drone attack acting as a deterrent. Both Waziristans are home to considerable terrorist networks, with the Haqqani network dominant in North Waziristan, just south of Afghanistan’s important Nangrahar province, and Baitullah Mehsud’s TTP based in South Waziristan. Even Maulana Fazlullah (TNSM) of Swat acknowledges Mehsud as his leader. There are a number of foreign fighters such as the Arabs, Chechens and Uzbeks based in South Waziristan. Mehsud, in effect, insulates all these networks from the plains so that their sanctuaries are relatively safe, giving the Mehsud tribe a key role in all security arrangements, actual and potential.

The civil administration has closed and wound up from Orakzai, the only agency which does not have a border with Afghanistan. There is sectarian violence in Kurram between the pro-Taliban Bangash, who are Sunni, and the Turi who are Shia with little or no involvement of the army or any state security forces. The NATO’s main supply route and convoys have been regularly attacked on the main highway linking Peshawar to the Torkham border in the Khyber agency, though the overall damage has been minimal. The warlord, Mangal Bagh, has areas within his control which are not with the Taliban but not with the security forces either. However, the Taliban is gaining ground, taking control of the heights so that they could potentially target the NATO convoys. (The NATO’s other main supply route, the Quetta-Chaman road, enters Afghanistan through the south, with Kandahar acting as the gateway.)

The army had launched major operations in Bajaur from 7 August 2008 onwards but it suffered considerable casualties from ambushes. The Taliban denied injured troops medical assistance and the army carried out retaliatory action. Over 300,000 people have fled their homes as a result of the conflict. However, operations stalled after 26/11 which allowed the Taliban to start liquidating army supporters, tribal lashkars and their leaders. There have been isolated operations in Mohmand post-26/11 – the Taliban has been liquidating forces/persons that it sees as obstacles to its own goals.

Afghanistan’s View – End Game

Afghanistan’s political elite has also reasonably clear ideas of how it would like bilateral relations between the two countries to be, based on their understanding of the ground realities, the strengths and roles of the different players and how things would shape up.

At the moment of writing, all of them are watching with considerable anticipation how the Holbrooke mission would play out. Will it focus too much on Afghanistan or, as the scope of the mission itself indicates, would it turn the attention of the United States towards its eastern neighbour, which the Afghans see as key to any stabilisation in their own country?¹⁵ The Afghans’ faith in the ability of President Zardari to deliver has considerably reduced though there has been a spate of presidential-level meetings, including President Zardari’s Kabul visit in December 2008 when the Afghans really laid out the red carpet all over the city. The Afghans are instead looking at what it would take to convince the United States to sufficiently incentivise the Pakistani state to stop state support for the insurgency/extremism. And they realise that it (Afghanistan) would have to lobby hard with decision- and opinion-makers in the West against developing a sense of pessimism about the Afghanistan mission. Obviously, they realise that Holbrooke’s mission would require sufficient resources and clout so that it could work.

The accepted bottom line is that both President Zardari and President Karzai are weak. As such, institutional arrangements would be more important than the fate of individuals which they do not see as happening. The Afghanistan-Pakistan *Jirga* process which President Karzai worked so hard to create and push is seen as having limited scope, despite the wide involvement of political players across the spectrum in Afghanistan.¹⁶ President Karzai's hopes for a successful approach to the Quetta Shura through the Saudi medium have limited potential, though a series of meetings have taken place. The drone attacks have acted as acupuncture – by itself, it is unlikely to cure the disease but it is useful to put pressure if it is successful in eliminating key personnel. Also, since the ISI is so dominant and unrepentant, in the short-run, the Afghans see immense difficulties in achieving anything significant.

There is almost universal acceptance that in the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship, they (the Afghans) would be the junior partner as they are militarily weaker, economically smaller, geographically challenged and less central to the world's challenges and problems. They also accept that, in such circumstances, they would have to compete for attention/favour from the United States and other international partners and donors. There is also no thought that at any time Afghanistan, as the weaker country, would resort to the use of asymmetric warfare as Pakistan used in Indian Punjab and Kashmir, or in a different way, it is doing with its patronage of the Taliban.

There are also three clear 'Nos' in the Afghanistan position. There is no question of Afghanistan ever becoming, or being seen as, Pakistan's fifth province. During the Taliban times, international calls to Afghanistan were routed through Pakistan utilising its country code (+92) and it specifically referred to as a Pakistan's state by a few, as trivial as it may sound. The Afghans completely reject any form of common security arrangements between the two countries. And controversially, they rule out ceding any territory which makes the acceptance of the Durand Line as the *de jure* international border virtually impossible. This is not to suggest that the Afghans are about to take any step to change the status quo but to indicate that the process of normalisation of relations between the two would necessarily leave behind some unresolved issues for a future date. However, this lack of resolution would not hold up moving ahead bilaterally if other positive factors are in play.

Going Forward

The most important determinant of the direction and intensity of bilateral relations between these two countries would be the role of the United States., specifically, how much leverage the United States has over Pakistan and how much of it the United States is prepared to use. Increasingly, American policy-makers are openly questioning the Pakistan army's links with the Taliban. However, America's perceived reliance on Pakistan both for access and intelligence leads limit its leveraging capacity. The issue of the United States' success in finding alternative routes for fuel and supply is extremely important. Such success will put a lot of pressure on Pakistan. At a more structural level would be the United States' ability to hold Pakistan, especially the army, to account. Billions of dollars in assistance to the Pakistan army should have equipped it to wage counter-insurgency warfare effectively. Similarly, the Pakistani army's continued patronage of the Taliban, who in the ultimate are seen by them as a strategic asset for which they are prepared to pay a significant price (deaths of hundreds of army men in operations, international opprobrium and ultimately a threat to the Pakistan state itself), is an issue that the paymasters must confront.

While civilian casualties in Afghanistan have gone up by 40 percent in 2008 over 2007 (2,100 from 1,500), the total casualties in the conflict are in the region of 8,000 and 8,500, indicating a more or less steady state. However, the total terrorism-related casualties in Pakistan have gone up from 3,599 in 2007 to 6,715 in 2008, indicating a rapid deterioration in the situation in the country.¹⁷ In fact, more civilians have died in Pakistan than Afghanistan in 2008 from acts of terrorism. Further, in Afghanistan, the casualties are concentrated in Helmand and Kandahar, strife-prone provinces which account for around 35 percent of all deaths. On the other hand, over half of all casualties in Pakistan have occurred in the NWFP, challenging the credibility and even existence of the civilian set-up recently inaugurated after free elections, made worse by the Swat accord which exposed the weakness of both the civilian and military components of the Pakistani state. Clearly, the Pakistanis would need much more capability and willingness to act to restore the authority of the state on their western border areas, thereby preventing Afghanistan insurgents from using these areas as their sanctuary. Holbrooke has often underscored this, stating that "...you can't succeed in Afghanistan if you don't solve the problem of western Pakistan."¹⁸

The announced three-month delay in the holding of the presidential elections in Afghanistan, while practical from the logistical point of view, weakens President Karzai's position and opens him to greater political challenge domestically. The Supreme Court's backing for his continuance beyond the constitutionally-fixed limit of the presidential term has not ended the controversy, with his political opponents continuing to demand the installation of an interim, neutral, caretaker government. Further, President Karzai has put off both the United States and the NATO troop-contributing countries by his erratic behaviour and perceived refusal to take on corruption within the government. He has not compensated for this weakness by building bridges domestically – the United National Front is clearly not impressed. His first Vice-President, Zia Massoud, made a statement on 17 February 2009 that the presidential system has not delivered. His own reformer allies have put him on notice.¹⁹ As a result, President Karzai feels cornered and looks unlikely to make the right moves, lacking in self-confidence.

However, it is not just a matter of President Karzai's credibility and abilities; it is about increasing the capacity of the Afghanistan government to deliver essential services to its people – security and justice most of all. Recent announcement by Afghanistan's international partners, primarily the United States, acknowledging deficiencies in the amount of resources they have allocated to state building efforts is a good beginning but not a sufficient one. Both additional resources and political will are required to address governance and development deficits. Similarly, it would make much more sense to have more effective Afghanistan security forces. Scrimping on it has cost Afghanistan and its partners tremendously in terms of loss of popular support for their mission and, ultimately, sustainability.

Another determinant, though by no means crucial, of how Afghanistan-Pakistan relations would develop in the short- to medium-term is the regional dimension. However, this factor can be over-estimated since regional powers have limited leverage over either of the countries. The argument that if Pakistan's relations with India improve, it would make the former less interested in Afghanistan has limited traction since it ignores the inner dynamics driving Pakistan's Afghanistan policy. Certainly, in the long run, a more integrated neighbourhood would lessen bilateral tensions and would enable both countries to better exploit mutually-beneficial synergies.

Weak states do not make for good neighbours, especially if important sections of one neighbour have developed clearly predatory interests in the other. It requires the important catalytic role of a mutual benefactor with the resources and leverage to reduce the influence of negative factors and promote positive ones – in promoting these very important bilateral relations that has global implications. Equally, it requires the leadership in these countries, particularly Pakistan, to realise that it would need to re-order its internal mechanisms to deny extremist forces space and opportunity to operate in.

Endnotes

- ¹ Mr Shakti Sinha is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at isassinh@nus.edu.sg.
- ² Dupree, Louis (1973), *Afghanistan*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, United States.
- ³ Rashid, Ahmad (2001), *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Yale University Press.
- ⁴ This piece is based on a presentation made at a seminar in Chennai on 25 February 2009, well before United States President Barack Obama's announcement of its new 'AfPak' policy of 27 March 2009. This policy does present a fresh opportunity to turn things around.
- ⁵ Dupree op cit
- ⁶ For example, see Rubin, Barnett and Ahmad Rashid in *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2008 (*'From Great Game to Grand Bargain'*)
- ⁷ The United States has made clear that even as it engages the civilian leadership, it maintains direct links with the army, for example, Admiral Mullen's continuing dialogue with Kayani. Also, Kayani's reported role in persuading Zardari to defuse the lawyers Long March and restore Chief Justice Chaudhary.
- ⁸ See, for example, the writings of Lt Gen (r) Talat Masood.
- ⁹ Reports that power entrepreneurs of different types had set up over 100 checkpoints on the 60 mile stretch from Kandahar to the Pakistan border reflected the total breakdown of authority, and the colossal scope for extortion.
- ¹⁰ Maley, William (2008), *'Stabilizing Afghanistan'*, Foreign Policy for the Next President, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2008.
- ¹¹ See, for example, Seth Jones in the *Washington Post* of 15 February 2009 (*'Going the Distance'*)
- ¹² http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/south-asia/mullah-omar-sacks-baitullah-for-fighting-against-pak-army_10014775.html
- ¹³ Tufail, Mazhar (2009), 'Mulla Omar orders halt to attacks on Pak troops', *Pakistan Defence Forum*, available at http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/south-asia/mullah-omar-sacks-baitullah-for-fighting-against-pak-army_10014775.html
- ¹⁴ This section is based on extensive discussions with experts in Kabul, and some in Delhi.
- ¹⁵ This section is based on discussion with a range of Afghanistan and international interlocutors in Kabul, end-January, early-February 2008.
- ¹⁶ The ex-Foreign Minister, Dr Abdullah, seen as part of the opposition United National Front, and a potential candidate in the forthcoming election in opposition to President Karzai, has been tasked by the latter to lead the Peace *Jirga* from the Afghanistan side.
- ¹⁷ The *New York Times* (18 February 2009) quotes figures from report released by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (*'Afghan Civilian Deaths Rose 40 Percent in 2008'*). Pakistan figures from South Asia Terrorism Portal, <http://satp.org>
- ¹⁸ Quoted in *Spiegel Online International*, 23 March 2009 (*'The new American determination'*), for example.
- ¹⁹ The recent open revolt of his Foreign Minister and other cabinet ministers over the controversial Shiite Family law is an indication of this.

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