
Pakistan's Afghanistan Relations: A "Strategic" Shift?

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The rise of Ashraf Ghani in Afghanistan, albeit in a power-sharing arrangement, has led to the generation of optimism in Pakistan.¹ The Interior Minister of Pakistan calls it a "quantum leap in trust".² Pakistan was one of the first countries visited by him [including his visit to the General Headquarter (GHQ) Rawalpindi]. During his presidential poll campaign, Ghani had said, "Afghanistan and Pakistan have a choice: Do we become Asian roundabouts or do we become cul-de-sacs? The goal is a special relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan that would resemble that of France and Germany".³ Pakistan President Mamnoon Hussain attended the oath-taking ceremony of President Ghani which was followed by visits by the Pakistani Adviser on Foreign Affairs and National Security Sartaj Aziz and Army Chief Gen Raheel Sharif. Much bonhomie was witnessed after a trilateral 'strategic dialogue' held in Kabul.⁴ In fact, even when four Afghan officials were arrested in Peshawar, the Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister said that ties between the two countries had "entered a new phase and should not be strained by such acts".⁵ Interestingly, Moeed Yusuf traces the "strategic shift" in Pakistan's policy to the pre-Ghani period 2012. To quote him, "Since early 2012, Pakistani leaders have sought to convey to the world that they have adopted a more hands-off approach towards Afghanistan. This

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‘strategic shift’ has been touted with repeated claims of greater willingness to support the Afghan reconciliation talks; moves to engage in regional outreach, including with countries Pakistan has not traditionally seen as partners in Afghanistan; the release of a number of mid-level Afghan Taliban prisoners from Pakistani custody in late 2012; and public calls on the Taliban to negotiate sincerely”.⁶ Are Pakistan-

Afghanistan ties in for a turn in a different direction?

Traditionally, Pakistan has border issues on both sides of its frontiers, so, while India may be the prime target, there is no love lost for Afghanistan too. However, things recently seem to be showing a change with Afghanistan, even as frictions with India remain unabated. To quote Sajjad Akhtar, “Functionaries on both sides, civilian as well as military, are issuing one feel-good statement after the other. but the ‘love Afghanistan’ and ‘hate India’ policy of recent vintage is nothing short of exceptional. *Our default foreign policy position features suspicion and rancour on both the western and eastern borders.*”⁷ The shift was seen in the acknowledgement by the Pakistan Army spokesman of Afghanistan stepping up intelligence and military cooperation along the two countries’ mutual border and Afghan security forces capturing six militants linked to the terror attack on the Peshawar school in which 132 children died.⁸ Though it can be considered a tactical move, Pakistan still seeks the capture of six Taliban fugitives linked to the Peshawar attack—including the movement’s leader, Maulana Fazlullah – who are believed to be hiding in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan.⁹ Going by the political history of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, which are underlined by mutual suspicions and accusations, both countries have accused each other: Afghanistan accusing Pakistan of sheltering the Afghan Taliban, cross-border shelling and killing Afghan civilians, and the latter accusing

the former of providing sanctuaries inside its borders to the Pakistani Taliban.¹⁰ Pakistan's strategic interests in Afghanistan are rooted in the geographical contiguity of the two nations and as a corollary, the shared social, cultural, religious and ethnic linkages, which made Pakistan a "frontline" state of the United States not once, but twice.

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Pakistan's Objectives

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Pakistan-supported the Sunni Islamist Pashtun elements in Afghanistan, and eventually helped in the creation of the Taliban who ruled Afghanistan from 1996–2001. Pakistan's goals in Afghanistan have broadly been identified as having (1) a friendly government in Kabul to prevent the reconstitution of a Kabul-New Delhi axis; (2) to establish strategic depth against India, by using Afghan territory; (3) to enact a "Sunni Islamic policy", which is the very basis of Pakistan's legitimacy, both internally and regionally, setting up safe havens for Pakistani-trained extremists; (4) having a corridor towards Central Asia, which could be used to import gas and oil, expanding its sphere of influence into Central Asia, thus, if feasible, acting as a bridge between the latter and the Arabian Sea; (5) to counter the Afghan moves to carve out Pashtunistan; (6) getting recognition for the Durand Line; (7) using Afghanistan to attract the regional and extra-regional powers (read China, the US) for security leverage in its disputes, especially with India.¹¹

Blocking the Afghanistan-India Axis

Fredric Grare says, "According to Pakistan, whatever India does in Afghanistan is a ploy against Pakistan, be it economic investment, infrastructure, or any related matter . . . As a result, Pakistan has ensured

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that Indian interests would be blocked whenever and wherever possible.”¹² According to Ahmad Rashid the “Kashmir dispute continued to be a key factor in the intense rivalries that erupted between India and Pakistan after 9/11. *Islamabad viewed its Afghan policy through the prism of denying India any advantage in Kabul*”.¹³ Weinbaum says that a cooperative, if not altogether satellite, Afghan state would be an insurance against the threat from India.¹⁴

Others argue that while the military is concerned about Kabul’s close ties with India, there is a “calculated campaign to exaggerate the Indian threat”, aimed at justifying intervention in Afghanistan.¹⁵ Musharraf in his famous speech of September 19, 2001, put the onus on India, arguing it could be advantage Kashmir for the latter.¹⁶ Terror attacks in India continued regardless of massive deployment of troops by Pakistan on the other border, as did attacks on Indians in Afghanistan. Both the Haqqani and Taliban groups—which are engaged primarily in fighting US-led coalition forces—are believed to have conducted strikes aimed specifically at India.

Strategic Depth

Conceptually, this is a doctrine rooted in the narrowness of the country and the location of cities and communication networks, within a short striking range of the Indian military forces, thereby making Afghanistan a safe haven for Pakistani forces. In other words, in the event of a conflict with India, if Pakistan’s forces faced defeat, they could withdraw/march to Afghanistan to fight from there.¹⁷ A weak, dependent as well as pro-Pakistan Afghanistan was believed to give Pakistan this much desired strategic depth. The quest for strategic depth dominated Pakistani thinking

beginning in the late 1980s. Articulated in 1989 by then Chief of Army Staff, Gen Mirza Aslam Beg, the notion of 'strategic depth' in the context of Pak-Afghan relations essentially meant, "...hiding Pakistan's military assets in Afghanistan beyond the current offensive capabilities of the Indian military. Interestingly, it has been argued that "Pakistan does not want an Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban" as that could "lead to an alliance between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban", who could benefit from the "reverse strategic depth" inside Afghanistan.¹⁸

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Creating a Sunni State and Safe Haven for Terrorists

According to Weinbaum "a pure Islamic state in Afghanistan not only promised to neutralise Pashtun irredentism but also helped to train and indoctrinate *jihadis* for the struggle against India in Kashmir".¹⁹ This explains the establishment's support to the Taliban and the Haqqani network (training, funding, supplies, and safe havens). A pro-Pakistan Afghan state was an ideal and necessary corollary to Pakistan's policy of proxy war against India since 1989—an attempt to duplicate the Afghan *jihad* in Kashmir. Being geographically adjoined, it would be an ideal location to train Islamist militants while disclaiming any involvement.²⁰ The emergence of the Pakistani Taliban is a post-2001 development, a reaction to the Pakistani military assaults in the tribal areas. Operating since 2004 in different agencies, Baitullah Mehsud, Maulvi Nazir, Mullah Fazlullah, Maulvi Faqir, et al. coalesced in late 2007 under the banner of the Tehreek-e-Taliban or the Pakistan Taliban, under the purported leadership of Baitullah Mehsud of South Waziristan, who was succeeded by Hakimullah Masud on his death. "Talibanisation" of the Pashtun belt

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initiated in North and South Waziristan of Pakistan in 2004, soon engulfed Mohmand, Orakzai and Kurram Agencies as well as the Frontier areas of Bannu, Tank, Kohat, Lakki Marwat, Dera Ismail Khan, Swat and Buner. The Pakistan Taliban’s justification for targeting the Pakistani state was that the country’s military was fighting for the cause of the ‘infidel’ USA occupying Afghanistan—against fellow Muslims. Besides these, there were Islamists groups in Pakistan – the Haqqani network and Mullah Omar’s Taliban group, the Afghan Taliban—fighting the

North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) presence in Afghanistan, who found sanctuary in Pakistan and have not targeted the Pakistani state: the Haqqani network (of the former Mujahideen who fought the Soviets) in the North Waziristan Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the Quetta Shura of Mullah Omar (who ruled Afghanistan before September 2001 and has its strongholds in southern Afghanistan) in Quetta in Balochistan province—thus, the popularly used name Quetta Shura.²¹

Attacks on Indians in Afghanistan have also been attributed to the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) backed militants. Pakistani sectarian groups aligned to the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), such as the Sunni extremist Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), have targeted Shias in Afghanistan, including in the December 2011 bombings in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif. The LeJ has also killed hundreds of Shias in Pakistan – from the southern port city of Karachi to Balochistan’s provincial capital Quetta.²² Pakistan’s failure to end safe havens is evident in the ongoing military operation in FATA’s North Waziristan Agency (administrative district), which was

launched after efforts, begun in February 2014, failed to achieve a peace deal with the TTP and following high profile attacks, including on Karachi's airport in June 2014.²³ Operation Zarb-e-azb may have "displaced but has not dismantled militant networks and their leadership", as evident by the relentless terror attacks. Besides, it is being asked, "Where did the region's deadliest militant faction, once cited as the 'veritable arm' of Pakistan's intelligence

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apparatus by an American military commander, and widely assumed to be based in North Waziristan, disappear to? Kurrum? Quetta? Rawalpindi? Safe passage across the border?"²⁴ A crackdown in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) against unregistered refugees in the wake of the Peshawar school attack includes prayer leaders who are in Afghanistan in the province.²⁵

Pashtunistan

After India, Pakistan's strategic concerns lie in preventing the emergence of Pashtunistan, an independent state to be carved out of Pashtun dominated land by the large Pashtun populations on both sides of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Thus, Pakistan's interest in seeing a friendly government in Afghanistan is also rooted in thwarting attempts of a Pashtun secession movement in Pashtunistan, which might be supported by Kabul.²⁶ The term Pashtunistan though coined by the Pashtuns on the Afghan side, was never clearly defined and may not have got the targeted popularity, but has been compelling enough to make the Pakistani leaders insecure. Barnett Rubin says that the Afghan War gave Pakistan "a golden opportunity to act on its long-standing desire to weaken Pashtun nationalism".²⁷ This was sought to be done through fomenting active support to pan-Islamism among the Afghan refugees

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as it sponsored Pakistani Islamist parties in the border region. This resulted in a newer brand of “Pashtun Islamism”, spread exponentially as the Taliban rose to power—pan-Islamist solidarity was sought to overshadow tribalism and ethnic cohesion. The demand has been supported by various regimes of Afghanistan, albeit with varying intensity. Thus, during the reign of Zahir Shah, Muhammad Daoud’s republic (the latter, specially from 1953 to 1963 and again after 1973 when he overthrew Shah in a coup), forcefully championed Afghan

claims to a greater Pashtunistan, and post-1978 Communist governments in Kabul, the movement has seen an upswing, either for an independent Pashtunistan to be carved out of Pakistan or a “Greater Afghanistan” annexing lost Pashtun areas in Pakistan. Pakistan’s state response, like its general response to ethnic conflict, has been repression.²⁸

Seth Jones has also argued that there were deep divisions among the Pashtun ethnic majority regarding the Taliban. While the Pashtun Ghilzai tribes, as well as such Durrani tribes as the Alekozai, Eshaqzais, and Norzais supported them, most Durrani Pashtuns and a number of other eastern and southern Pashtun groups did not support the Taliban.²⁹ Again, even though many Pashtuns belong to the TTP, the latter has not used the Pashtun nationalism card as that “would deprive the organization of other (e.g., Saudi, Uzbek, Turkmen, etc.) sources of financial, military, and political support”.³⁰ A prime reason to foster a compliant government in Afghanistan has also been to mitigate the fervour for an independent Pashtun homeland in parts of Balochistan, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. But Pakistan’s

calculations vis-à-vis the Taliban went haywire. Its objectives in creating and promoting the Taliban included their recognition of the Durand Line and curbing Pashtun nationalism but the reverse happened. The Taliban neither recognised the Durand Line nor dropped Afghanistan's claim to parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; instead, they boosted Pashtun nationalism, imparting a greater religious colour, appealing to Pakistani Pashtuns.³¹

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Pashtun resentment towards the Musharraf government's policy of cooperation with the US had manifested itself during the October 2002 general elections in Pakistan, as evident from the success achieved by the candidates of the religious parties' alliance, the MMA (Muttahida-Majlis-i-Amal).³² Weibaum says Pakistan's support to the Afghan Taliban is with an eye on the future: in the post withdrawal Afghanistan, the Pashtuns "will serve Pakistan's interests as a proxy force in creating a Pashtun buffer zone in southern and eastern Afghanistan".³³

Durand Line

In the process of making Afghanistan an isolated buffer state between their empire and Russia, on November 12, 1893, the British signed an agreement with the then Amir of Afghanistan which laid down the Durand Line defining the southern and eastern limits of the Amir's dominion, beyond which he renounced any claim. Post-independence, Afghanistan did not agree to the agreement, signed as it was, according to it, under duress. Those who advocate Pashtun ethnic unity claiming the Afghan nation beyond Afghanistan, set their boundary at the Indus river to create a Pashtunistan, independent or otherwise; others would

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draw the boundary at the limits of the settled zones of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) saying the Frontier Agencies were never directly administered by the British—the Frontier residents freely crossing the Durand Line do not consider it legal. Still others do not mind settling the issue with Pakistan, using it as bargaining chip for Afghan interests. Pakistan holds the Durand Line as a formal international boundary: as a successor state to the British Raj, it claims legal title to the lands up to the line. From

Pakistan’s point of view, the issue is not open to negotiation, even though Pakistan, like the British, has failed to establish direct state administrative authority in the tribal areas. The lack of a unitary version of the Durand Line is further complicated by the free movement of people across the border. Ahmed Rashid argues, “Pakistan Government did not push the Afghans to recognize the Durand Line as it suited Pakistani expansionist ambition to keep the border situation fluid”.³⁴

Access to Central Asia

Pakistan’s fears, argues Christine Fair, “of Indian encirclement are not limited to Delhi’s presence in Afghanistan. India’s relations with Iran, rapprochement with China, and access to the Central Asian states (including two bases in Tajikistan), animate Pakistan’s concerns that it is being surrounded by hostile states or states friendly to India”.³⁵ Even in building relations with the Central Asian Republics (CARs), “to preserve its ability to procure oil and gas and to otherwise trade with the CARs”, says a RAND Report, “Pakistan has pursued a dual-track strategy directed at augmenting cordial regional relations, while simultaneously jockeying

to box India out".³⁶ Islamabad has emphasised common historical and religious links to conclude energy deals with countries such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, offered to build road and rail links throughout Central Asia, and "strengthen its trade links with the CARs by controlling both new infrastructure and the Silk Route's traditional western routes that connect Karachi with markets in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Pakistan has assumed a degree of influence over the Kushka-Herat-Kandahar highway, a critical strategic artery that provides the sole non-Iranian trading route between Central Asia and the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf."³⁷ Pakistan's objectives to establish trade links with the landlocked Central Asian nations in order to give them access to the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar required a cooperative Afghanistan, given its geographical position. Another Pakistani interest has been the potential 1,040-mile gas pipeline from Turkmenistan.

Economy, Trade

Landlocked Afghanistan has had trade linkages (dependence on) with Pakistan. By virtue of being the neighbour, the former's economy suffered adversities due to the periodic impeding of the transit of goods from the port of Karachi. In March 2010, the two governments agreed to double the current level of bilateral trade to \$5 billion by 2015 and the July 18, 2010 Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA), to replace the 1965 Afghan Transit Trade Agreement.³⁸ In July 2010, the two signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the construction of rail links between Peshawar and Jalalabad; in June 2011, then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton launched the New Silk Road initiative; in February 2014, Islamabad and Kabul agreed to upgrade the 75-km Torkham-Jalalabad road to a dual carriageway (Sharif increasing the assistance from \$385 million to \$500 million); again in the same month, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan agreed on the terms and conditions for establishing the Central Asia-South Asia Electricity and

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Transmission and Trade project (CASA-1000), with Ashraf Ghani's government signing an agreement with Pakistan over transit pricing on October 11, 2014.³⁹ One of the fallouts of Afghanistan's reconstruction and foreign aid has been "rampant inflation compounded by the replacement of food crops by poppy cultivation" which may have helped Pakistan sustain the elimination of its own narcotics production, but "has also raised wheat prices to twice the level prevailing in Pakistan, prompting large-scale smuggling of food and essential commodities into Afghanistan and

contributing to nationwide shortages of wheat flour in Pakistan. Estimates (2008) of the annual volume of gray market trading run as high as \$10 billion—five times the official volume of trade between the two countries. A strong parallel economy run by Afghan Pashtuns has also emerged in Balochistan".⁴⁰ More recently, Pakistan and Afghanistan agreed that no Indian export to Afghanistan would be allowed through the Wagah border but Afghanistan would have the opportunity to export to India and reciprocally Pakistan would be able to export its goods to Central Asia through Afghanistan.⁴¹

Conclusion

If the Pakistan military interferes in President Ashraf Ghani's moves to open a dialogue with the Taliban and the Hizb-e-Islami, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's efforts to improve relations with Afghanistan could be in jeopardy.⁴² Even if Kabul responds to Pakistani requests to take action against sanctuaries used by the Pakistani militants and to hand over Mullah

Fazlullah, relations will remain tense as long as Pakistan does not reciprocate by putting an end to safe havens for the Afghan insurgents. While the Pakistan military's operations may be on in the borderlands, specially FATA's North Waziristan agency since February 2014, they "may have displaced but not dismantled militant networks and their leadership" as evident in the continued attacks, the worst being the attack on the school in Peshawar.⁴³ However, the Haqqani network and its Pakistani Taliban allies who have peace deals

with the military, are yet to be targeted, with some militants relocated to KPK, other agencies of FATA and even to Karachi and others pre-informed of operations.⁴⁴ It is, therefore, not surprising that even after the coming of the new government, Afghanistan's Interior Minister Umer Daudzai alleged that the Taliban gets training and equipment in Pakistan.⁴⁵ Although neither Pakistan nor Afghanistan has any direct lines to the multiple Taliban factions, much would depend on the outcome of the forthcoming peace talks (according Abdullah Abdullah, in two weeks at the time of writing this article) between the Afghan government and Afghan Taliban (denied by the latter).⁴⁶ The Taliban reportedly claimed victory as NATO's combat mission came to a close, adding that "no peace talks could happen before all foreign troops leave the country".⁴⁷ Pakistan, in turn, talks of supporting a process that is "Afghan owned and Afghan led".⁴⁸

Ghani's options are not unlimited, in that he knows the residual US/NATO military force of 12,000 troops and the "trained" Afghan National Army can hardly deal with the situation, a reason why he quickly signed the Bilateral Security Agreement with the US. This could well explain

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his attitude or “changed policy” towards Pakistan. There is also the issue of the crackdown on unregistered refugees on which Afghanistan has asked Pakistan to slow down.⁴⁹ The same is true for improving trade: the impact of Islamabad’s decision to make payment for goods for export to Afghanistan in US dollars rather than in Pakistan rupees from March 2014 is aimed at curbing the informal economy, but lack of infrastructure may seriously impact the prospects.⁵⁰ With the military calling the shots, little will change until the military ends support for the Quetta Shura, Haqqani network and other Afghan insurgents. Hopes had been raised when Nawaz Sharif came to power two years ago, promising “no interference” and “no favourites”.⁵¹ However, in the wake of the Imran Khan-Tahir Qadri protests and destabilisation, Sharif again has become dependent on the Army and may do nothing to change the latter’s Afghan policy.⁵²

Implications for India

A resurging Afghan Taliban in the region does not bode well for India, particularly when the Pakistani establishment is failing to contain the rebels on its own territory, and diverts the militants to Kashmir. Anti-India oriented *jihadi* groups, such as the Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT, renamed Jamaat-ud-Dawa – JD) and the Haqqani network, which maintain close ties with Afghan insurgent groups, have reportedly conducted several attacks against Indian targets in Afghanistan.⁵³ There is no doubt that India’s increased presence is seen as formidable by the Pakistani establishment. Pakistan alleges that the Indian Consulates in Jalalabad, Kandahar, Herat, and Mazar-e-Sharif back the rebels in Balochistan. India’s development work in Afghanistan includes construction of the 215-km long, Rs 600 crore Delaram-Zaranj highway in January 2009.⁵⁴ Its other major infrastructure projects include construction of the Afghan Parliament, a 220 kV DC transmission line from Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul; the 220/110/20 kV sub-station at Chimtala and Salma Dam project in Herat.

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