



India and Pakistan: Proxy War in Afghanistan

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When the U.S. and its allies dismantled the Taliban regime in 2001, it gave the people of Afghanistan hope for peace, stability and prosperity. However, eight years into the conflict their aspirations for stability have begun to diminish. Afghanistan is in need of cooperation from the international community, particularly its neighbors Pakistan and India to accelerate the political development process and promote peace and stability in the region. Nonetheless, rivalry between Afghanistan's two strategic allies, India and Pakistan, has added to the declining security climate. The two historic rivals view each other's role in Afghanistan with suspicion and interest assuming that each is using Afghanistan as a launching pad against the other. Such regional rivalries have further strengthened after the announcement of NATO forces withdrawing in 2012. Now the question arises, how can Afghanistan pursue peace and stability when its interests are jeopardized by regional contention and competition?

Regional rivalry in Afghanistan has been a very serious issue since the Cold War era when particular countries, including India and Pakistan, supported different political figures, specific personalities, groups and parties in Afghanistan to expand its influence in the country. In 2001, at the Bonn Conference decided that all countries will support and strengthen their relations with the central government in Afghanistan and end their previous client patron relationships.² Although certain regional players claimed to have supported the central

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² The Bonn Agreement- Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment institutions, <http://www.afghangovernment.com/AfghanAgreementBonn.htm>, April, 2010

government, they nonetheless continued their support of anti-government elements as a means to sustain their own interests in the country. Afghanistan has long considered these actions as a clear interference in its internal affairs and a violation of its sovereignty. Since the ousting of the Taliban regime, Pakistan has taken an active part in the reconstruction process in Afghanistan. So far, Pakistan has completed the reconstruction of the Turkham to Jalalabad road in the eastern Nangarhar province and now they are remodeling the road to turn it into a dual carriage highway. Pakistan is also working on building a hospital in Kabul, called Jinnah Hospital Complex. However, the most important role Pakistan could potentially play in Afghanistan is the role of securitization, as it not only shares the longest border with Afghanistan but it also has close relations with the Afghan Taliban. The stop strata of the insurgency currently reside in Pakistan's tremulous tribal area, thus Pakistan has enough influence on the Afghan Taliban to encourage them to participate in the peace talks and give up from fighting. Moreover, the Afghan economy is largely dependent on imports from Pakistan with a majority of NATO supplies coming to Afghanistan through Pakistan. Unfortunately, Pakistan has not cooperated with Afghanistan and instead has used the Afghan Taliban as a tool for achieving its own interests in Afghanistan, such as countering Indian influence in the country.

Keeping in mind the above mentioned points, Pakistan has set certain objectives that it wants to achieve in Afghanistan. For instance, Pakistan is greatly concerned about the Durand line which separated Pashtun tribes between Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is assumed by Pakistan that if stability is brought to Afghanistan, it will enable Afghans to raise the long debated Durand Line issue. Moreover, Pakistan fears a strategic encirclement predicated on the notion that friendly Afghan-Indo relations, in a time when relations between Pakistan and India are hostile, would give Afghanistan support to claim the Durand line. However, this claim seems baseless because the Afghan government has never claimed the Durand line during any of the Indo-Pak wars considering that Afghanistan in comparison was stable enough to pursue this notion. Currently, for Pakistan the most burning concern is India's growing influence. Therefore, Pakistan insists that Afghanistan must control or limit Indian influence in its territory. Nonetheless, this suggestion by Pakistan is unjustifiable for if India actually had a military presence in Afghanistan then it could be gathered that it would pose a direct threat to Pakistan. But to

suggest to another sovereign democratic government to limit its interactions with its neighbors is a direct interference in the affairs of that nation. However, many analysts in Afghanistan believe that Pakistan's request is unilateral and considering past experiences it cannot be determined that Pakistan would cooperate with the Afghan government even if it did limit India's influence.

Being the fifth largest donor to Afghanistan, with aid programs reaching USD 1.2 billion since 2001, makes India another major player in the country. There are 4,000 Indian citizens working on reconstruction and development projects in Afghanistan.³ India's role in transferring skills to Afghans is a crucial aspect of their presence which helps build and enhance the capacity of the local population. Furthermore, each year India provides hundreds of scholarships to Afghan students seeking graduate and post-graduate studies. In comparison to Pakistan, Afghans tend to consider India's influence to be more genuine and free of hidden agendas. Some of India's strategic projects include the Salma Dam in Herat, joint project with Afghans to transfer electricity from central Asia to Afghanistan; the Zaranj and Dellaram road which connects Afghanistan to Iran and the Chahbahar sea port of Iran. Experts deem that Indian national interests in Afghanistan are focused on gaining access to the rich natural resources and deposits in central Asian countries through Afghanistan. Thus far, Afghanistan, Iran and India have a trade agreement signed in 2003 to use the Chabahar Sea port for exports and imports to Afghanistan and Central Asia and back to India. This gives India an opportunity to use the Sea Port for its trade but this route is more costly and longer compared to using Pakistani territory. The Sea Port can be used as an alternative then traveling through Pakistan, and perhaps this could convince Pakistan to open up its own routes. Indian goods can reach Afghanistan within a day through Waga the only road on the border between India and Pakistan but it will take at least a week through Chabahar Sea Port to reach Afghanistan. Considering that India is the biggest democratic nation in the world and the big brother of South Asia, it has the potential to play an stabilizing role in different geographical areas of Afghanistan.

Both India and Pakistan have struggled to enhance their influence in Afghanistan while struggling to limit each others at the cost of further destabilizing the nation. Lately, Indian civilians have become targets of insurgency attacks in Afghanistan and it is believed that

³ "Hamid Karzai to visit India on Monday", 24th April 2010, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/updates.asp?id=103567>, April 2010

Pakistan's Intelligence Agency (ISI) has been behind these attacks. The main aim of such attacks, as many analysts suggest, is to limit India's influence, or force them to withdraw their workers from Afghanistan. However, this could have a reverse response by India as it could potentially strengthen its involvement in Afghanistan by reinforcing its engagement in Afghanistan. Alternatively, if the attacks on Indian workers continue, it could also deter development workers from coming to Afghanistan.

India blames Pakistan for supporting militants that target Indians inside of Afghanistan. India has gone as far as accusing the ISI for being involved in the Indian embassy attacks in Kabul. Meanwhile, Pakistani officials have blamed India for using Afghanistan to destabilize Pakistan. For instance, Pakistan believes that India is printing false Pakistani currency in Indian consulates across Afghanistan and then infiltrating it into Pakistan to devalue their currency. Pakistan is also blaming India of establishing terrorists training camps in Afghanistan that carry out attacks inside Pakistan.⁴ Therefore, in the current situation, Afghanistan is part of India and Pakistan's proxy war having replaced Kashmir as a battlefield between both the two rivals. As a result of all these rivalries there is a fear of destruction, such that if the West withdraws from Afghanistan, it will once again leave the country at the mercy of its neighbors.

What should the Afghan government do to avoid becoming a victim of regional rivalry? The international community has not been able to prevent both India and Pakistan from interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs, or strengthening local governance to protect its national interest. Also, Afghanistan's neighbors have not proven their will to refrain from interfering in its affairs. For example, withdraw from training insurgent groups or provide support to both political and military anti-government elements. With its constant complaints and criticisms, the Afghan government has been able to redirect the international community's attention from the Afghan conflict to Pakistan's tribal area. Consequently, Pakistan has used this opportunity for its interest to absorb billions in international aid to fight terrorism and build the capacity of its Army. According to U.S. congressional documents, Pakistan has received nearly \$18 billion from the U.S. since 2001. In the latest annual budget, Obama administration has proposed another \$1.6 billion for military assistance and about \$1.4 billion for civilian support which makes the US aid

⁴ Baldauf, Scott, "India-Pakistan rivalry reaches to Afghanistan", The Christian Science Monitor, 12 September, 2003, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0912/p07s01-wosc.html>, April 2010

to more than \$20.7 billion.⁵ There is a need for a strong leadership and diplomacy to convince regional players, particularly India and Pakistan to work together for proxy peace rather than for proxy war. This will require priorities to converge as security has become a serious challenge for all three countries (Afghanistan, Pakistan and India); they are all bound by shared challenges and resolutions. Therefore, the Afghan government needs to provide opportunities for cooperation and not rivalry among Pakistan and India by acting as a bridge between both rivals. The Afghan government needs to build trust within the Indo-Pak relationship in order to prevent clandestine attacks in Afghanistan targeting individual interests.

Afghanistan's neighbors must begin to look at their role in Afghanistan as an opportunity instead of a threat. Even though Afghanistan is a land-locked country it offers an important land bridge between various regions of strategic significance. Afghanistan has full-fledged membership in SAARC, CAREC and ECO regional organizations. It connects industrial countries of South Asia with the rich natural resource countries of Central Asia. Taking advantage of the needs of these various areas, Afghanistan can play an active role by establishing mutually beneficial economic interconnectivities within the region and between regional players. Since both India and Pakistan are in dire need for energy, thus transferring energy from the rich natural resource countries of Central Asia would help them in addressing some of their critical demands. For instance Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India gas pipeline and transferring electricity from Central Asia through Afghanistan, and to South Asia, particularly Pakistan. Afghanistan could become a new ground for cooperation between India and Pakistan as both can mutually benefit from exploring their individual relationships with Afghanistan, instead of countering each other

⁵ "Pakistan got \$18bn aid from US since 2001", The Times of India, 23rd February 2010, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/Pakistan-got-18bn-aid-from-US-since-2001/articleshow/5605864.cms>, April 2010