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US-Pakistan Relations and the 'End-Game' in Afghanistan

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Abstract

As the rush towards the Afghan end-game intensifies, the United States and Pakistan are back to mending their fences. After more than a year of frayed relationship following the May 2011 raid that killed Osama bin Laden, the Salala incident and the increased drone strikes, the two allies are on the road to making amends to repair the relationship. As US prepares to drawdown, re-engaging Pakistan is seen as critical in maintaining its minimalist approach in Afghanistan. For Pakistan, ensuring its influence in post-2014 Afghanistan and avoiding implosion remain crucial. Whether the two can bridge their differences for the stabilisation of Afghanistan remains to be seen.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar's 28 November 2012 statement that the strained relations between Pakistan and the United States (US) have been "fully repaired"² needs to be viewed in a context. With the US-Pakistan relationship hitting the rock bottom in President Obama's first term, there are indications that his administration, with a mandate for

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² "Pakistan foreign minister: U.S., Pakistan ties fully repaired", *Reuters* (28 November 2012), <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/11/28/pakistan-usa-idINDEE8AR08020121128>. Accessed on 3 December 2012.

the second term, is on course to initiate a strategic engagement with Pakistan. While softening its rhetoric on Pakistan, the new strategy could involve a renewed attempt to prod Islamabad to act decisively on sanctuaries and safe havens that act as capacity enhancers for the Taliban.³ As a result, the stalled negotiations with the Taliban have begun to see some movement though the contours of such negotiations continue to remain unclear.

The ongoing negotiations between the Obama administration and an increasingly assertive Afghan government over a residual American military presence after 2014 are expected to result in a minimalist US presence on Afghan soil. US military commanders in Afghanistan have reportedly laid out options for a post-2014 force ranging from about 6,000 to 15,000, consisting of counterterrorism forces and trainers. A final decision is expected by the end of the year.⁴ In the post-2014 scenario, with the limited US troop presence and inability of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSFs) to thwart the insurgent attacks in the countryside, particularly in South and East Afghanistan, there are worries about a military stalemate.

Both the US and Afghanistan have long sought Pakistan's assistance in facilitating talks with the Taliban. With the Taliban leadership ensconced in the southwestern Pakistani city of Quetta in Balochistan and the port city of Karachi, neither the US nor Afghanistan have much leverage to initiate a peace process with the insurgents without Pakistan's cooperation. Amid Pakistan's continuous denial that its military and intelligence establishment abets senior insurgent commanders in Afghanistan, the insurgents carry out an unceasing cross-border campaign of violence, combining both asymmetric as well as high-profile attacks. During the Bush administration, Pakistani establishment nurtured the Taliban as strategic assets. At the same time they used their counter terrorism cooperation as a bargaining chip to accrue huge financial windfall. The spread of the Taliban led insurgency in Afghanistan can be attributed to such policy.

A Strategic Embrace

With the US retaining a limited troop presence and the present democratic regime showing no signs of imminent collapse, Pakistan's logic of nurturing strategic assets to reinstall a Pakistan friendly regime seems to be heading nowhere. The limited US troop presence in Afghanistan would ensure that a return to the situation of 1990s,⁵ would not recur. In such a scenario, the best bet for Pakistan would be to be seen as cooperating with Kabul and Washington to retain its minimal influence rather than be left out in the cold in a post-2014 order. This would

³ Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, "What Does Obama's Re-Election Mean To South Asia – Analysis", *Albany Tribune* (20 November 2012), <http://www.albanytribune.com/20112012-what-does-obamas-re-election-mean-to-south-asia-analysis/>. Accessed on 1 December 2012.

⁴ "Administration debate on pace of troop withdrawals from Afghanistan hinges on risk assessments", *Associated Press* (3 December 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/administration-debate-on-pace-of-troop-withdrawals-from-afghanistan-hinges-on-risk-assessments/2012/12/03/2108551e-3d24-11e2-8a5c-473797be602c_story.html). Accessed on 3 December 2012.

⁵ The 1990s were not like the 1980s when the US had a strong stake and used Pakistan to further its interests. In the '90s the US had largely wiped its hands of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

further ensure Pakistan's influence in the Afghan polity and curtail the influence of other regional powers. Moreover, this would allow Islamabad to negotiate with the US, the use of drone strikes and covert operations inside Pakistan and also dilute the US pressure tactics of raising the issue of human rights abuses in Balochistan.

Of late, the cost of protecting their 'strategic proxies' has increased for Pakistan. The policy of covert support to the Taliban insurgency has the dangers of reaching a hurting stalemate. The country is facing a classic blowback where the TTP and its allied groups have raised the spectre of violent retribution. The possibility of the country splintering on religious and sectarian lines remains an imminent danger. Associated with this are the problems in Balochistan and Sindh. For the last three decades of conflict, the influx of Pushtun refugees in cities like Peshawar and Karachi has changed the demography and popular voices of resentment from within are growing louder.

Similarly, for the US, a minimalist strategy in Afghanistan would require Pakistan to stop its support for the Taliban. With the troop numbers declining and a negotiation with the Taliban becoming more desirable, Pakistani involvement, if not approval, remains critical for limited achievements in Afghanistan to be maintained. Further, from a logistical point of view, the US needs the supply route through Pakistan to transfer its military hardware and equipment out of Afghanistan over the next two years.

A Compliant Pakistan?

In the past one month, Pakistan has released several Taliban prisoners from its custody, a move that may boost the prospects of negotiations with the insurgents. On 14 November 2012, nine senior Afghan Taliban prisoners including Mullah Nooruddin Turabi, a former Taliban justice minister and religious hard-liner, were released. On 30 November, the Pakistani foreign ministry issued a statement agreeing to release another batch of Taliban prisoners. However, expectations that the releases will provide momentum to the peace process with the Taliban may be somewhat overblown. According to Rustam Shah Mohmand, who served as Pakistan's ambassador to Kabul between 2002 and 2005, the release of mid-level Taliban members is unlikely on its own to persuade the movement's leadership to begin substantial negotiations.⁶ Pakistan not only has to effect many more releases, including that of senior Taliban leader Mullah Baradar, but also has to declare its univocal support for the peace process. There are no indications of Pakistan becoming compliant to that extent. Baradar had been arrested by the Pakistani authorities in 2010 after he initiated unilateral talks with the Afghan government, without Pakistani sanction.

There are indications of Pakistan remaining somewhat glued to its age-old formula of underlining its criticality in the peace process. Media reports indicate that certain

⁶ Haris Anwar, Pakistan to Free More Taliban Captives to Back Afghan Peace, *Bloomberg news* (3 December 2012), <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-12-01/pakistan-to-release-more-taliban-to-support-afghan-peace-talks>. Accessed on 3 December 2012.

preconditions have been set by Pakistan⁷ before it releases senior leaders like Mullah Baradar. Pakistan reportedly demands a "clear cut policy" from the US before they release the senior Taliban leaders. A senior Pakistani official was quoted as having said, "What if talks fail even after we release all the Taliban? Chances are that Pakistan will be held responsible for this. We want to pre-empt this scenario. That is why we are seeking a clear-cut policy not only from Afghanistan but also from the US."⁸ While the outcomes of such negotiations remain unclear, Pakistan wants to be certain that any settlement in Afghanistan does not ignore its interests and influence.

Evolving Policy Contours?

On 3 December 2012, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar in Brussels to discuss US-Pakistan relations and Afghanistan. A handout provided by a senior State Department official said both countries "reviewed the progress in US-Pakistani relations in 2012 based on their commitment to identify shared interests and act on them jointly."⁹ However, the renewed camaraderie would depend on how quickly Pakistan addresses the US concerns in Afghanistan. The tact with which Islamabad builds on another chance to live up to its repeated promises would define the prospects of its bilateral relations with the Americans.

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⁷ Kamran Yousaf, "Pak-Afghan relations: Preconditions set for release of senior Taliban cadres", *Express Tribune* (3 December 2012), <http://tribune.com.pk/story/474331/pak-afghan-relations-preconditions-set-for-release-of-senior-taliban-cadres/>. Accessed on 4 December 2012.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Huma Imtiaz, "Pakistan, US agree to deepen bilateral, trade ties", *Express Tribune* (4 December 2012), <http://tribune.com.pk/story/474958/pakistan-us-agree-to-deepen-bilateral-trade-ties/> Accessed on 4 December 2012.