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Ankara Summit: A Possible Road to Afghan Peace?

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Abstract

The Americans are firm in their commitment to pull their combat troops out of Afghanistan by the end of December 2014. As that deadline approaches, there is considerable diplomatic activity aimed at steadying the situation in that war-torn country. The favoured approach is to involve the countries in Afghanistan's immediate neighbourhood in helping the nation deal with what promises to be a difficult period of transition. The most recent effort of this type was made in February 2014 in a summit held in Ankara, Turkey, involving the host, as well as Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, as this paper suggests, a multilateral effort must involve a larger group of countries to obtain the desired results, and the effort should go beyond addressing the role of Islam in Afghanistan's political system.

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The Summit in Turkey

Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey – three large countries in the western part of the Islamic world – held a summit in Ankara on 12-13 February 2014. This was their eighth summit meeting. The main subject of discussion was Afghanistan’s future. Attending the summit were the Turkish hosts –President Abdullah Gul and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan; Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan and President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan. Addressing a joint press conference after the conclusion of the summit President Abdullah Gul expressed satisfaction over the outcome of the trilateral summit. He was of the view that the three countries working together should be able to facilitate Afghanistan’s transition from a state of war to a state of peace. This sentiment was echoed by Pakistan’s Prime Minister who reaffirmed his country’s “strong and sincere commitment” to peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan through an Afghan-led process. “Afghanistan today is at a defining moment in its history. This is time for all Afghans to come together, make peace, and rebuild their country”, he said. “Together we are ready to build a new chapter in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations”, he emphasised and lauded the support his country was receiving from Ankara.²

In his statement at the press conference, Hamid Karzai, the Afghan President, said that 2014 was going to be a difficult year for his country. The American troops were ending their combat mission after an engagement that would have lasted thirteen years. On 5 April, his country will hold the next presidential election with power passing on to a new leader. As he has served for two terms, the Afghan Constitution bars him from contesting again. This is expected to be the first peaceful transfer of authority in the country. Karzai gave no indication as to the role of the United States after 2014 and whether he would sign the agreement he had negotiated with the United States in the summer of 2013. Without his signature the Americans would opt for what they had termed the “zero option” which would mean that all their troops will be pulled out from Afghanistan. If the Afghans sign the negotiated agreement, the United States is prepared to leave about 10,000 troops behind who will help train the large Afghan force of 350,000. These American troops will also be available for conducting special operations against the terrorists. There is an assumption that the American troops will be available to help conduct the April presidential elections.

² *Dawn*, “Pledge at summit for regional peace”, 14 February, 2014, pp. 1 and 5.

The Afghan Conundrum

The three leaders who took part in the deliberations in Turkey are faced with their own internal problems. The greatest amount of uncertainty exists in Afghanistan, the smallest of the three countries in terms of population and the size of economy. It is difficult to predict how the Afghan economy will fare, dependent as it is on external capital flows, once the Americans cut down the amount of money they have been pouring into the country. The reduction would be severe under the zero option. This will have an almost immediate impact on youth employment and will make it easier for the Taliban to recruit young men into their ranks. There will be consequences for Pakistan as well. In the financial year 2012-13 Pakistan ran a large trade surplus with Afghanistan. Estimated at about \$2.5 billion it was financed entirely by the American assistance provided to Afghanistan. The post-2014 economic result will be a severe reduction in the Pak-Afghan cross-border trade, in case American money is no longer available to Kabul to finance the trade deficit. A significant amount of traded goods and commodities originates in the tribal belt that Pakistan shares with Afghanistan. The likely reduction in exports to Afghanistan will also encourage the tribal youth of Pakistan to join the Taliban on their side of the border.

Extremism in Pakistan

Pakistan with a population of 190 million is the largest of three countries at the summit. It was represented by its Prime Minister Sharif who had assumed office on 5 June 2013 with the promise to address the many problems his country faced. His focus in particular was on what he called the “3Es” – extremism, energy and economy. The three are linked, with extremism being the most important challenge for his government. Violence has picked up in the country during the first eight months of rule by his new government.

The new prime minister had promised action upon taking office, but he waited until 29 January 2014 before announcing his government’s approach towards extremism. In an address to the National Assembly – a forum from which he was generally absent – he surprised the Pakistani people by offering to negotiate with the Tehrik-i Taliban Pakistan (TTP) the most violent of the dozens of extremist groups operating in the country. The government in Islamabad nominated a four-man committee to initiate discussions with the Taliban. The Taliban responded by appointing a three-man committee to represent its

interests in the dialogue. It was a clever move since the chosen people were not from the Taliban *shura* – the body that governs the terrorist organisation – but from three religious parties sympathetic to the main TTP demand – incorporating *sharia* in the Pakistani Constitution.

If Prime Minister Sharif had hoped that his initiative would bring peace to Pakistan he must have been disappointed. As *The Friday Times*, an influential Pakistani weekly, editorialised, “since the Pakistan Muslim League (N) government decided in January 2014 to make a last ditch effort to engage the Taliban in committee-led talks which aimed at securing a ceasefire, there have been 15 terrorist attacks in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province in which 75 people have lost their lives and over 200 have been injured”.³ On 14 February 2014, newspaper *Dawn* reported on its front page that at least 13 police commandos were killed and over 50 injured in a bomb attack on a police van near their training centre. The TTP claimed responsibility for the attack. It said that it carried out the attack to avenge the killing of “innocent TTP fighters” by Rangers and police in “fake encounters in Karachi, Peshawar and Swabi”.⁴

It is well understood that Afghanistan and Pakistan are bound together by the way Islamic extremism has developed. Mullah Fazlullah, the current leader of the TTP, is operating out of Afghanistan, having withdrawn to that area when the Pakistani military carried out an operation in his native district of Swat. Addressing this issue at the press conference in Ankara, President Karzai and Prime Minister Sharif said that while there were concerns, the two countries were on the same page and had been “quite successful in addressing these issues”.⁵

Turkey Stumbles

Turkey once seen as the beacon of hope in the Muslim world has also stumbled. In the summer of 2013, the Turkish youth, restive over the style of governance on offer by Prime Minister Erdogan, came out on the streets of the country’s major cities to protest. They were hoping to enact the “Turkish street” paralleling the one that had brought about so much

³ *The Friday Times*, Editorial: “War or Peace”, 14-20 February 2014, p. 1.

⁴ Imtiaz Ali, “Blast leaves 13 police commandos dead, 50 injured”, *Dawn*, 14 February, 2014, p. 1.

⁵ *Dawn*, “Pledge at summit for regional peace”, 14 February, 2014, pp. 1 and 5.

political change in the Arab world. This attempt was suppressed by the use of considerable force by the Erdogan administration. It resulted in splitting the Islamic movement that had contributed to the prime minister's political rise. If the Turkish leader was hoping to inspire other Muslim nations to follow his country's example in combining religion and politics, he could no longer present his country as the model.

Need of the Hour: Larger International Assembly

The effort to internationalise the Afghan problem may still work but it must involve a larger assembly of nations and not necessarily from the Muslim world alone. The larger grouping could include, in addition to all the neighbours of Afghanistan, such near-neighbours as India and Russia as well besides the United States. In this group of some ten to twelve nations the majority will be from the world of Islam. But having the presence of non-Muslim nations will broaden the scope of the problem to be addressed: not just the role of Islam in the political system that needs to evolve in Afghanistan but also that country's need for economic and social development.

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