

Evolving Dynamics In Indo Afghan Relations

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President Ashraf Ghani's maiden visit to India – months after coming to power and after close interaction with the Pakistani establishment, was viewed with keen interest by analysts and strategic commentators in this country. Unlike his predecessor, the articulate and media savvy Hamid Karzai whose ties with India were known, the new President has no links with this country. With his higher education in Lebanon and the USA, a spouse of dual Lebanese American nationality and a background of having held important positions both in Western academic circles and the World Bank, his world view was bound to differ from that of his predecessor. Anticipated Indian support for his opponent in the Presidential elections of 2014, the reliable and well known Abdullah Abdullah, minister in the previous Karzai government might have also played a part in the perceived coolness emanating from Afghanistan. However, recent developments, point towards a need for India to energise its policy towards all the stakeholders including non state actors in that region, lest it gets left out in the ongoing strategic sweepstakes in the region.

Two recent headlines this month have grabbed attention. One pertains to an agreement (MoU) inked between the Afghan and Pakistani governments for sharing of intelligence – specifically between the Afghan National Directorate of Security and the Pakistani ISI, to 'jointly fighting terrorism'. The second pertains to another agreement between the two governments for Pakistan to train the Afghan police. Both the above are indicative of a trend, earlier affirmed by Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif during a meeting in March this year with the Afghan ambassador to Pakistan, Janan Mosazai that "relations with Afghanistan have undergone a qualitative change, **especially bilateral security ties**, since the new government in Kabul took over last year (Economic Times 02 March 2015).

Pakistan has high stakes in Afghanistan, due to the imperatives of Near East and Central Asian geopolitics as also in its plans for any confrontation with India. The 'Beg Doctrine' of the 80s articulated the centrality of Afghanistan in this thought process very clearly. Traditional Pakistani thinking has always viewed India's age old engagement with Afghanistan with hostility and suspicion, viewing it as yet another means for carrying out the training, directing and funding of all shades of secessionist outfits operating in that country, whether of Baloch or Pashtun origin. With a view to pressurizing India to reduce its engagement with Afghanistan, Pakistan has over the years been voicing apprehensions in various fora about India fostering secessionism in that country from across the Durand Line. Given such a mindset, India's strategic response of wholehearted engagement with the Afghan people in various fields - education, healthcare, infrastructure building, communications, humanitarian aid, military training to name a few, has been wholly appropriate and farsighted. It has also left Afghanistan delicately balancing its relations with its two Eastern neighbours (India too is a neighbor, as reminded by our NSA recently, with POK sharing 106 km with Afghanistan).

President Ghani however appears to have decided that the surest way to establish peace in his country is to strengthen relations with Pakistan. President Nawaz Sharif, Army Chief Raheel Sharif and ISI Chief Rizwan Akhtar have all recently visited Afghanistan (multiple visits in the case of the Pak COAS). Earlier in April, for the first time ever, Afghan defence forces chief General Sher Muhammad Karimi was specially invited for the passing-out parade at PMA Kakul. All this despite the irony that for years now, Afghan security forces have been fighting an open war with the Taliban and the Haqqani network, both declared by Pakistan to be its strategic assets. Also, memories of the fall of the Taliban regime, the flying out of ISI advisors and regular Pakistan army personnel and top Taliban leaders from Kunduz to Gilgit Baltistan in PAF aircraft in November 2001 seem to have faded, with the Afghan Army Chief stating in his address that 'both Afghanistan and Pakistan, face the greatest threats and dangers from individuals and groups that are not affiliated directly with any state....' (Express Tribune, April 18) It is also learnt that again, for the first time, six Afghan cadets have commenced training at the Pakistan Military Academy. This is despite the existing and time-honoured agreements between Afghanistan and India on training of Afghan military personnel to include cadets, military doctors (including those studying post-graduation at the AFMC), and officers on various training courses, upto the NDC, a process that has worked well over the years. Training of the Afghan police by the Pakistanis is taking the matter yet another step further.

As brought out in the beginning, the new President's world view would have been shaped by his background and experiences. Expectedly, the signing of the MoU has been welcomed by portions of the American establishment with one former ambassador to Pakistan, Cameron Munter, warmly

welcoming the agreement (VOA News 21 May). With such sentiments, it is likely that the new government's actions would be tailored to Washington's viewpoint in a post Iran-US nuclear agreement scenario, with sufficient quid pro quos to shore it up in return. Also, with the current Chinese pressure to take up the Silk Route project and open up the economies of Central Asia, American and Chinese interests in stabilizing Afghanistan would find a common proxy in Pakistan.

Once implemented, the above agreements will take Pak-Afghan security ties to a qualitatively higher level, with obvious implications for India. There is of course a fair amount of resistance within the Afghan establishment to this new cosying up to Islamabad. This heartburn is supplemented by members of the old government, led by Karzai himself, who has been vocal in opposing any deal with Pakistan which would give the ISI guaranteed inroads into Afghan intelligence. Afghans have long memories of Pakistani double dealing in their country, and only time will tell whether this new approach to a troublesome neighbour will prove truly beneficial to both countries. Notwithstanding the same, if the current government looks set to bury the past and set out on a path of cooperation with Pakistan, India needs to take a hard look towards recalibrating its available options towards Afghanistan. Geopolitics and the current situation in the region have dealt Pakistan some good cards. While acknowledging this, India too has options to leverage its strengths.

Since the arrival of the Soviets, the dominant Indian narrative in Afghanistan has been security related. While there have been no boots on ground, in the long term, all agencies of the Indian state have viewed Afghanistan through the prism of National Security. This has got further enhanced after 9/11. While the security aspect will continue to remain a very important factor and warrants no dilution, more so in view of frequent attacks on Indian personnel and projects, ***the new driver of Indo Afghan relations should be economics and trade.*** Notwithstanding the figure of \$ 2 billion given as aid by this country to Afghanistan over the years, it is interesting to note that the volume of trade between the two nations currently hovers around \$600 to \$700 million, two thirds of which is exports from India. This is well below figures notched up between India and some of the other SAARC nations, despite the huge potential for Indian trade in Afghanistan and development of the battered Afghan economy.

Early commissioning of the Chabahar port in Iran and improving road and rail connectivity on both sides of the Iran Afghanistan border therefore become an all-important imperative. A focused push in this direction by India, as initiated by the May 7 agreement will prove a strategic game-changer in Indo-Afghan economic ties, while also providing access to the markets of Central Asia. It would permit smooth flow of Indian goods into Afghanistan without worries about any disruption because of problems in Pakistan, while also providing Afghanistan with an access to the sea and markets in Europe and elsewhere, without relying solely on Gwadar - in effect a win-win situation for both countries. Taking a cue from the Chinese, India needs to finalise all follow-up issues on Chabahar pro-actively without worrying too much about the financial implications, including management of the port itself. This initiative on Chabahar, in addition to concurrent ongoing initiatives in other fields, would ensure continued Indian relevance in Afghanistan's strategic mindset for years to come.

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