

Afghanistan: The challenge of relations with Pakistan

MOST OBSERVERS AGREE THAT NO OTHER COUNTRY has had or will have a greater impact on the situation in Afghanistan than Pakistan. Some view the fortunes of the two countries as inextricably linked, with all that this implies for regional security. For example, former US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage has argued that “if Afghanistan is not successful, Pakistan cannot be successful as a moderate Islamic nation.”¹ Similarly, after the assassination of Pakistani opposition leader Benazir Bhutto in December 2007, Canadian Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier said, “I urge the Government and people of Pakistan to continue to reject all forms of violence and to resist those who seek to destabilize their country. Stability in Pakistan is vital for regional stability and security.”²

Unfortunately, over the past several years the traditionally poor relations between the two countries have effectively served to strengthen the Taliban-led insurgency in southern Afghanistan and have limited broader cooperation on drug interdiction, trade and other issues. Relations between the two countries have improved somewhat in recent months, but given that both face serious challenges with respect to stability, governance and development, it remains to be seen to what extent they are willing or able to increase their cooperation. Any attempt to assist these two states must take into account their core security needs; as one recent Canadian study argues, “‘Outsiders’ will have to work hard with both governments to open space for ... political compromise.”³

A troubled history

The origin of the poor relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan lies in history, geography and ethnology. The border region between the two countries is long and the terrain mountainous, while the population on both sides is almost completely Pashtun and lives according to tribal customs (*Pashtunwali*), which include protection of those who demand sanctuary.

With respect to history, when US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage presented a series of unilateral demands for Pakistani cooperation on 12 September 2001, the head of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate responded that “You have to understand the history.” Armitage replied, “No, the history begins today.”⁴ This has proved to be wishful thinking.

During the 19th century, the British and Russian imperial interests competed in a “Great Game” for influence in Central Asia, notably in Afghanistan, which lay between their territories in the region. After the second Anglo-Afghan war (1878-1880), the British installed a ruler in Afghanistan who was dependent on them for an annual subsidy of money and arms and was willing to administer the country as a buffer between British and Russian interests and to recognize the “Durand Line” that Britain drew to separate Afghanistan from British India.⁵ This border “arbitrarily cuts through the large Pashtun tribal areas. The border is mostly unmarked and has remained highly contested by those living in the regions on both sides. Approximately one-third of all Pashtuns live within Afghanistan, the remaining two-thirds inside Pakistan.”⁶

The wrenching and tremendously violent partition of British India into the states of India and Pakistan in 1947 set the stage for ongoing conflict between the two countries over areas such as Kashmir. The partition also reopened the issue of the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Afghanistan argued that Pakistan was a new state rather than a successor to the British Empire, and that border treaties established with the British – including that recognizing the Durand Line – had therefore lapsed.⁷

Over the next several decades, as Pakistan fought three major wars with the larger and more powerful India, it also struggled with issues of fragmentation, poor governance and chronic poverty. While Pakistan aligned itself with the United States in order to balance the influence of India, Afghanistan turned

to India and the Soviet Union for aid, thereby reinforcing Pakistan's distrust. From a geostrategic point of view, Pakistani generals feared that a pro-India Afghanistan on its border would leave their country encircled by its enemies. Conversely, a pro-Pakistan – or at least weak – Afghanistan to the north would ensure “strategic depth” in the confrontation with India. According to Rubin: “Pakistan’s military establishment has always approached the various wars in and around Afghanistan as a function of its main institutional and national security interests: first and foremost, balancing India, a country with vastly more people and resources, whose elites, at least in Pakistani eyes, do not fully accept the legitimacy of Pakistan’s existence.” He adds: “To defend Pakistan from ethnic fragmentation, Pakistan’s governments have tried to neutralize Pashtun and Baluch nationalism, in part by supporting Islamist militias among the Pashtun. Such militias wage asymmetrical warfare on Afghanistan and Kashmir and counter the electoral majorities of opponents of military rule with their street power and violence.”⁸

In response to the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the United States, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia decided to finance, arm and train *mujahedeen* (“holy warriors”) to fight there. Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate played a key role in this endeavour, and Pakistan also provided sanctuary for the mujahedeen, mainly in the poor, sparsely populated and mountainous Pashtun tribal areas along the Afghan border, where it had continued the British practice of maintaining little presence on the ground.⁹ As Rubin told the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development in March 2007, the tribal areas adjacent to the Durand Line are not administered by the Pakistan government either in fact or in law; thus, the “border problem”

is not where the Durand Line is or recognizing the Durand Line. The border problem is also that these tribal agencies are not administered territories.

Furthermore, the people who live in those territories say they’re Afghans and they also say they’re Pakistanis. They don’t believe they only belong to one country, and yet they don’t participate in the Afghan political system, except as fighters. It’s actually a bigger problem there.¹⁰

After the Soviet defeat and withdrawal from the country, the United States and the rest of the international community essentially forgot about Afghanistan. Pakistan, however, could not do so. The Soviet invasion had led to the first of a series of waves of Afghan refugees into Pakistan. The civil war that quickly broke out among various mujahedeen factions soon threatened to leave the country in the hands of “Northern Alliance” forces allied with Russia, India and Iran. Pakistan therefore assisted the emerging Taliban movement, which after several years of expanding its territory beyond its base in Kandahar finally occupied the capital, Kabul, in the fall of 1996; however, the Taliban never succeeded in controlling the northern Panjshir Valley held by Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Shah Massoud. In May 1997, Pakistan became the first country to grant diplomatic recognition to the Taliban, and was followed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.¹¹

At the same time, the civil war also resulted in a significant return to Pakistan of both more refugees and also radical mujahedeen, a fact that eventually increased the radicalization of the country. A landmark census in 2005 found that some three million Afghans were living in Pakistan – most in the North West Frontier Province – and that about one million of these were living in refugee camps.¹² Many of the fighters that commentators later alleged were entering southern Afghanistan from across the border were probably Afghans born in Pakistan.

Post-9/11 developments

After the quick capture of Kabul by Northern Alliance forces in the fall of 2001, the United States pursued Taliban and al Qaeda leaders and forces into Pashtun regions in southern Afghanistan. Although the majority of Taliban fighters probably laid down their arms and blended into Pashtun villages, most observers believe that senior al Qaeda and Taliban leaders crossed the border into Pakistan – mainly the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and parts of the North West Frontier Province, but also Baluchistan – where they spent the next several years regrouping and rearming.

Despite the fact that American demands for co-operation were certain to prove unpopular in Pakistan, President General Pervez Musharraf

quickly decided to become an ally in the “War on Terror.” Then, after months of negotiations and promises of economic assistance, in mid-2002 Musharraf began to send larger numbers of troops into the tribal areas. Although they suffered significant initial losses, Pakistani forces killed or captured some foreign al Qaeda fighters and leaders – although neither Osama bin Laden nor his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri were among them.

General Musharraf responded to those who criticized Pakistan’s efforts by warning of the dangers of hindsight. In mid-2006, he argued that the immediate threat that Pakistan focused on after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 was al Qaeda, while the “Taliban were dormant after all of the attacks against them in Afghanistan. They were suppressed totally.”¹³ Others argue that Pakistan was disinclined to attack Pashtuns, whether for fear of inflaming public opinion even further or out of ethnic loyalty. Musharraf objected to what he viewed as a shifting of blame to Pakistan: “Who the hell is doing anything if Pakistan is not doing enough? ... Is [Afghan President Hamid] Karzai doing something? ... The whole countryside is rampant with Taliban today, the south of Afghanistan. The Afghan government and all of the allied forces had better act there.”¹⁴

Uncertain allies in the fight against terrorism?

Although Pakistan immediately agreed to unilateral US demands to become an ally in the “War on Terror” after the attacks of 11 September 2001, many observers have begun to question the depth of its commitment. In March 2007, RAND analyst Seth Jones wrote that “extensive interviews with United States, NATO, United Nations and Afghan officials in Afghanistan in 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007” yielded “significant evidence that the Taliban, Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG), al Qaeda, and other insurgent groups use Pakistan as a sanctuary for recruitment and support. In addition, there is virtual unanimity that Pakistan’s Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has continued to provide assistance to Afghan insurgent groups.”¹⁵

American journalist Sarah Chayes, who has lived in Kandahar for the last five years, emphasized to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development in May 2007

that the situation in southern Afghanistan should be understood not as “an indigenous uprising by locals – but rather as a kind of invasion by proxy of Afghanistan by Pakistan using Afghans. Fundamentally, this so-called insurgency is being orchestrated, organized, financed, trained, and equipped across the border in Pakistan.”¹⁶ Similarly, the United States Homeland Security Council has stated that al Qaeda has “regenerated a safe haven in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas.”¹⁷

Although Pakistan did take significant military action against Arab and other al Qaeda fighters on its territory in the years after 2001 – and received financial and other assistance in return – it was far less forceful against the Taliban, who are ethnic Pashtuns and have long been allied with Pakistan’s ISI. According to Rubin:

Of course, the official policy of the Government of Pakistan is that they support the international effort, but they think it has been excessively military, not sufficiently political. They argue for a political approach to the Taliban, and also to the tribal areas.

There certainly is, in Pakistan, obvious infrastructure of support for the insurgency, both in the tribal agencies and also in parts of Baluchistan, which includes madrassas, training camps, recruitment, videos and DVDs that are sold openly, and so on.¹⁸

Unfortunately for the international mission in Afghanistan, the fact that the Taliban have a secure sanctuary in Pakistan makes them much more difficult – some would say almost impossible – to defeat. In the view of Seth Jones, “The ability of insurgent groups to gain external support is highly correlated with insurgent success. Research by the RAND Corporation, which examined 91 insurgencies since 1945, suggests that insurgencies that have gained and maintained state support have won more than half the time. Those with support from non-state actors and diaspora groups (but not state support) won a third of the time, and those with no external support at all won only 17% of the time.”¹⁹

Jones adds that support can take a number of forms, from physical sanctuary – which, he notes, “is sometimes the result of a weak government” – through recruitment and financial support.²⁰ He argues that the Taliban have received all of these supports on Pakistani soil and continue to do so. At the same time, Rubin cautions that:

[a] realistic assessment of Pakistan's role does not require moving Pakistan from the "with us" to the "against us" column in the War on Terror account books, but recognizing that Pakistan's policy derives from its leaders' perceptions, interests, and capabilities, not from ours. The haven and support the Taliban receive in Pakistan derive in part from the hostility that has characterized relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan for as long as both have existed.²¹

Recent developments

Pakistan attempted over the years to negotiate ceasefires with tribal leaders in exchange for a crackdown on terrorist activity. By 2007, this strategy had failed and was largely abandoned. At the same time, Afghanistan and Pakistan were recognizing the need to cooperate more closely. In April, their leaders held bilateral talks in Ankara and signed a declaration in which each pledged to respect the territorial integrity of the other and to cooperate on confidence-building measures related to border security.²² In June, they signed a trilateral agreement with Iran to carry out more joint border operations and increase information-sharing. In August, President Musharraf made headlines at a special "Peace Jirga" proposed by Afghan President Karzai when he said: "There is no doubt Afghan militants are supported from Pakistan soil. The problem that you have in your region is because support is provided from our side."²³ The UN Secretary-General later added that the joint declaration produced at this jirga "was an important confidence-building measure between the two countries and the communities on both sides of the border. Both sides identified the need to address jointly a broad range of common problems, beginning with terrorism."²⁴

Pakistan has become much less stable in recent months. In July 2007, Pakistani military forces stormed the Red Mosque in Islamabad, which had been controlled by radical elements. At about the same time, Pakistani forces also increased their military operations in the tribal areas. When Benazir Bhutto's return to Pakistan from exile was met with deadly bomb attacks, Rubin wrote that the "bombing of Benazir Bhutto's motorcade in Karachi signals a new level of integration of the political arena of Afghanistan and Pakistan."²⁵ Another observer noted, "The attack was hardly a surprise. Militants see Bhutto's return to Pakistani politics as a Western-backed coup against Islamists in Pakistan, akin to the

arrival in the Afghan capital, Kabul, of the US-backed Northern Alliance in 2001."²⁶ In early November General Musharraf declared a state of emergency, citing both the increase of terrorism in the country and an activist judiciary that he claimed was preventing the government from dealing with the terrorists. While the state of emergency was lifted in December, the assassination of Benazir Bhutto later that month led to a postponement of the elections scheduled for January 2008 and plunged the country into an even greater crisis.²⁷

What is possible?

Although it has become conventional wisdom that Pakistan must "do more" against the Taliban and jihadist leaders on its territory if the insurgency in southern Afghanistan is to be defeated, the fact is that there is a limit to what can be done in its more remote areas – particularly by a government that has grown weaker in recent years. Many observers call for Pakistan to "seal the border" with Afghanistan, but this is effectively impossible given the geography of the region, the limited official Pakistani presence in the area and the fact that the Government of Afghanistan itself still refuses to recognize the border – which it feels should be drawn much deeper into Pakistan. A proposal by President Musharraf to place landmines along the border would never have been accepted by the rest of the international community. Although some still argue that US or NATO forces could cross the border into Pakistan to carry out their own operations, most observers would probably agree that such a move would be not only dangerous, but also ineffective and counterproductive.

At the same time, Pakistan can do much more to disrupt the command and control of Taliban leaders, who most observers believe are based not in remote caves but in cities such as Quetta. As Rubin has argued:

Western and Afghan officials differ over the extent to which Pakistan's aid to the Taliban is ordered by or tolerated at the highest levels of the Pakistani military, but they have reached a consensus, in the words of one senior Western military leader, that Pakistani leaders 'could disrupt the senior levels of [Taliban] command and control' but have chosen not to. Disrupting command and control – not preventing 'infiltration,' a tactical challenge to which Pakistan often tries to divert discussion – is the key to an overall victory. That will require serious pressure on Pakistan.²⁸

Although such measures would be difficult, Pakistan could take a range of actions in addition to military operations, including curbing public recruitment campaigns for the Taliban, closing training camps and developing and integrating the tribal areas.

Other countries can encourage these developments in a number of ways, including working to have the Government of Afghanistan finally recognize the border with Pakistan. In return, Pakistan might be encouraged to end its long-standing unofficial trade embargo on Afghan goods, which has prevented their transshipment south to India.²⁹ Action can also be taken in terms of influencing the policies of India, which, as Jones notes, has become Afghanistan's "closest regional ally by far."³⁰ As he explains:

Since 11 September, India has provided several hundred million dollars in financial assistance to Afghanistan, and provided assistance to Afghan political candidates during the 2004 presidential and 2005 parliamentary elections. It helped fund construction of the new Afghan parliament building, and provided financial assistance to elected legislators. A significant point of contention was India's road construction near the Pakistan border.³¹

It must be recognized that Afghanistan's receptiveness to Indian cooperation increases Pakistani suspicions and thus fuels tensions. As Rubin has explained, because "most of the uncooperative things Pakistan does with regard to Afghanistan are motivated by its fear of an Indian presence in Afghanistan" it is important for

the United States, Canada, and others that are there ... to do what they can to assure that India's role is not threatening to Pakistan. There are certain specific issues that Pakistan has raised, like Indian consulates, and Pakistan has tried to at least induce some confidence-building measures and transparency between the two countries regarding their activities in Afghanistan.³²

Overall, the complicated history of relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan provides the context for recent tensions. Although the situation remains challenging and fluid in both countries, there may be reason to hope for improvement. As the Secretary-General of the United Nations argued in September 2007, "The recognition by Presidents Karzai and Musharraf at the peace jirga in Kabul of the cross-border nature of the insurgency provides a unique opportunity for their respective countries to pursue a

joint strategy for crossborder peace and security, aimed at defeating extremism and terrorism in both countries."³³ Following another meeting of the two presidents in December 2007, Musharraf said that "I think we have developed very strong understanding of each other's problems and we look forward to co-operation and coordination in all fields for our mutual benefit."³⁴ However, in the chaotic situation following Benazir Bhutto's assassination, the challenges to a hopeful outcome have increased once again.

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