

In search of Pythagoras

The India-Afghanistan-Pakistan triangle under stress



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Until recently, the India-China rapprochement, the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and the initiation of a composite dialogue between India and Pakistan seemed promising indicators for stability and security within South Asia and beyond. However, a growing struggle over resources, the unsolved Kashmir issue, India's engagement in Afghanistan and the probable resurgence of extremist elements in the next government in Kabul cast clouds over the future of further regional integration and cooperation. An assessment of these developments benefits from a triangular perspective which helps to understand the complex linkages between various state and non-state actors. Surprisingly, despite the importance and frequency of the 'triads' in the region, triangular phenomena remain poorly understood and largely underexplored. Among many significant trilateral relations, especially the India-Afghanistan-Pakistan Triangle is gaining momentum because of the nature and complexity of the multi-dimensional configuration of conflicts, interweaving international and domestic determinants. For decades India and Pakistan contended for favorable positions within Afghanistan with remarkable ups and downs for both sides. While India enjoyed warm relations and leverage before and during the Soviet invasion, Pakistan maintained close relations during the eras of Mujahedeen and Taliban governments. The US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the subsequent International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission leading to the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 leading to a massive presence of foreign troops have once again influenced the fortune of India and Pakistan in Afghanistan. In order to fully understand the momentousness of these trajectories, one has to take the two most entangled and problematic areas of conflict into account, namely the India-Pakistan rivalry and the Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions. Although these zones of conflict seem to constitute two independent facets of bilateral relations, one must not ignore the huge overlapping effects of these extremely intertwined nations. In this context, one should identify the India-Pakistan conflict as the major cause for antagonistic dynamics within Afghanistan as well as in the relationship

between Kabul and its neighbors, foremost the troubled Afghanistan-Pakistan ties. Furthermore, the hostility between Islamabad and New Delhi can also be held accountable for the ambiguous performance of the NATO/ISAF engagement in Afghanistan and subsequently for the derogating security situation and stagnation of the socio-economic conditions of large sections of the Afghan people. Of course the burning of copies of the Koran, killing of civilians especially woman and children, the desecration of dead bodies of adversary combatants by US soldiers is adding fuel to an increasingly uncontrollable fire. It is no surprise that these atrocities have lead to outrage and anti-western rhetoric within Afghanistan. As such, India-Pakistan hostility with its negative impact on Afghanistan-Pakistan relations

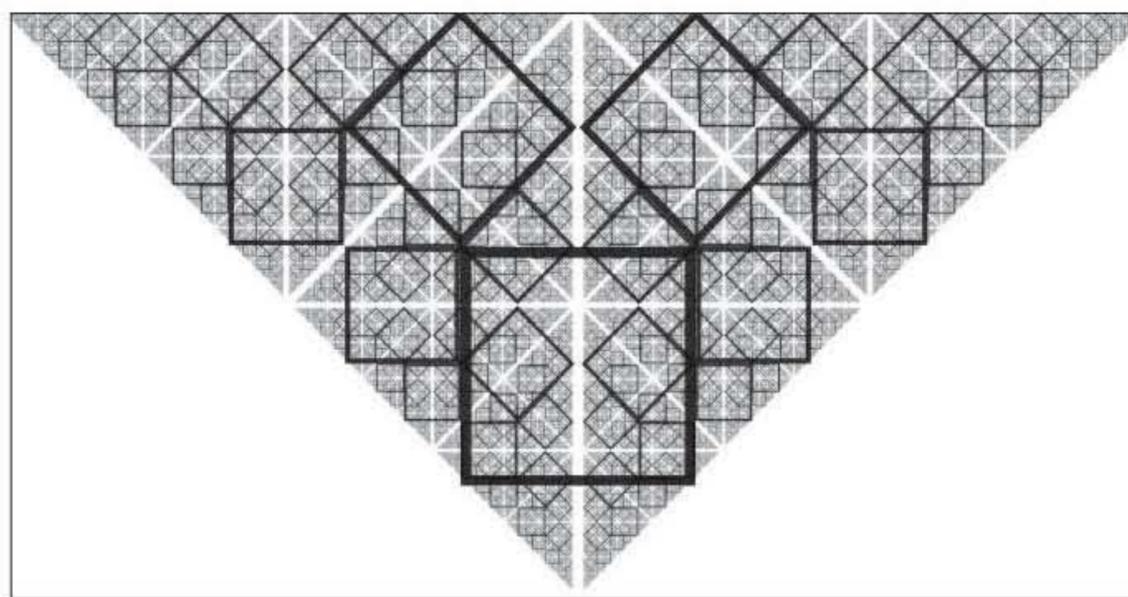
of a regular strategic dialogue further enhances the perception that India wants to extend its engagement in Afghanistan in order to encircle and contain Pakistan. Subsequently Islamabad's perception that India's Afghanistan engagement constitutes an essential part of a "pincer movement" and the establishment of a "second, western front" against Pakistan seems plausible. More concretely, Islamabad feels especially threatened by India's strong consular services within Afghanistan which are suspected of carrying out intelligence activities against Pakistan as well as establishing development projects in the 'Pashtun belt'. Pakistan views these projects aimed at promoting and supporting separatist notions within its own borders, e.g. in the province of Baluchistan.

port for countervailing forces. The decision by the US to form an alliance with Pakistan and at the same time trying to leave India out of the equation enforced antagonism and mistrust between Islamabad and New Delhi. It also made a 'peaceful coexistence' of Pakistan's and India's legitimate interests in Afghanistan during the last decade remarkably difficult. US resistance against an envisaged pipeline project, beneficial for all three countries, is just one of several unfortunate examples. Therefore, to many observers it seems obvious that both, Pakistani and Indians, continue to strive towards influencing various warring factions. It is interesting to note here that some Afghan leaders do not view this strategic game of "quid pro quo" between India and Pakistan as a stepping stone on

important actor in Afghanistan. Compared to Pakistan, India can build on credibility and a positive image among the current government in Kabul as well as the common people. A significant reason for this friendly attitude towards India can be found in India's strategy of implementing projects corresponding to the needs and demands of the Afghans which makes them much more sustainable than development efforts of other international actors in the country. Subsequently New Delhi was able to build the image of a credible partner for long term engagement and cooperation. But most importantly, India-Afghanistan relations are marked by an absence of serious conflicts which favors cooperation between both. This imbalance in esteem and other socio-economic advantages between India and Pakistan is currently clearly in favor of New Delhi, at least at the moment. However, as soon as tensions between both countries diminish substantially, Islamabad could benefit from India's approach in achieving a Pakistan friendly government in Kabul.

To sum up, there is no doubt that the critical dynamics of this stressed triangular relationship among Pakistan, Afghanistan and India will accelerate after foreign troops withdraw from Afghanistan and determine the future trajectories of the political, social and economic developments in the region. Only after a sustainable rapprochement between New Delhi and Islamabad is reached, a smooth transition towards national reconciliation, including constructive roles of further regional players such as Iran, will become a realistic scenario. But in assessing the last decade one has to state that India and Pakistan - even though they share common interests - have not been able to overcome their individual strategic ambitions yet. If these hostile sentiments remain, the Afghan people have to face a long, bitter trail towards national sovereignty.

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must be recognized as one of greatest hurdles standing in the way of a successful transitional period, in which foreign troops would ideally hand over security responsibility to the Afghans until 2014, followed by a decade of international commitment aimed at stabilizing Afghanistan, the so called period of transition from 2015-2024. Having this in mind, two more specific flash-points are attaining prominence: India's engagement in Afghanistan and Pakistan's security and strategic perception of Afghanistan. Both phenomena are interlinked, mutually re-enforcing and act as a catalyst for conflict within Afghanistan. Confronted with growing Indian activity in Afghanistan and rapidly improving ties between Kabul and New Delhi, concern in Pakistan is at the rise. The fact that the India-Afghanistan partnership agreement includes a security dimension in the form

Therefore, until today a Pakistan-friendly government in Kabul is a pivotal element of Islamabad's security concept of achieving and preserving 'strategic depth'. There is no doubt among several analysts that Islamabad still might identify the Taliban as being the most significant instrument in achieving this goal.

Nevertheless, while this troubled triadic constellation between Islamabad-Kabul-New Delhi is largely responsible for hampering development efforts it could also have the potential to enhance peace and the national reconciliation process in Afghanistan, especially after the withdrawal of foreign troops. But therefor Pakistan and India have to start reevaluating each other's Afghanistan engagement. These two South Asian states should not merely analyze their counterpart as the ultimate threat to security. This would also mean to end sup-

the path towards Afghan security and sovereignty. Playing the blame game solely with India and Pakistan however does not seem the only way to interpret the current situation. There is an undeniable habit in Kabul to use the US presence in Afghanistan to settle historical scores with Islamabad - a phenomenon which complicates the Pakistan-India relationship even further.

However, at the moment, it seems that Pakistan has lost much ground in Afghanistan during the last decade after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Regarding many political analysts, Pakistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan is marked by misperception, misinterpretation and a couple of serious failures in decision-making processes. But most of all it is the lack of sustainability and a long term perspective. In contrast, New Delhi was able to manifest itself as a unique and

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