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 establishment of a regular strategic dialogue between India and Pakistan seemed promising indicators for stability and security in South Asia and beyond. However, a growing struggle over resources, the unresolved Kashmir issue, India's engagement in Afghanistan and the probable resurgence of extremist elements in Kashmir cast doubts on the future of regional integration and cooperation. An assessment of the situation faces us 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 'tr' in the region, triangular phenomena remain poorly understood and largely underexplored. Among many significant triangular elements, 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 closer relations during the era of Mujaheddin and Taliban governments. The US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the subsequent International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission helped to open the door to the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 leading to a massive presence of foreign troops which have once again influenced the fortune of India and Pakistan in Afghanistan. In order to fully understand the menacing nature of the adversarial conflict, 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 facsimiles of bilateral relations, one must not ignore the huge implications for the stability of these two 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. For most of 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 deteriorating 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 women 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 led to outrage and anti-western rhetoric within Afghanistan. As such, India-Pakistan hostility with its negative impact on Afghanistan-Pakistan relations must be recognized as one of the 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 2013-2024. Having this in mind, two more specific flashpoints 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 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 of India's Afghan 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 and as such raising development projects in the Pakistan belt. Pakistan views these projects aimed at promoting and supporting separatist notions within its own borders, e.g. in the province of Baluchistan.

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 triad 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 therefore Pakistan and India have to start revitalizing each other's Afghan engagement. These two South Asian states should not merely analyze their counterpart as the ultimate threat to security. This would also mean to end up 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 important actor in Afghanistan. Compared to Pakistan, India can build on credibility and a positive image among the Afghan people. A significant reason for this friendly attitude towards India can be found in India's strategy of investing in economic development projects corresponding to the needs and demands of the Afghans which makes them much more sustainable than political efforts to influence political developments in the region. Consequently, the US-Iranian relationship might eventually become a realizable 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. If these hostile sentiments remain, the Afghan people have to face long, bitter trials towards national sovereignty.

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