Trapped in old patterns?
The future of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations

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The Afghanistan-Pakistan nexus is one of the most significant South Asian flashpoints. This bilateral relationship will have an immense impact on future political and socio-economic developments in the region and beyond. Despite the fact that both countries share multiple commonalities in culture, religion and civilization, their bilateral relations have always been tense and antagonistic under all governments; especially due to specific historical circumstances. Although some improvements have been achieved in the past, the lifespan of these positive developments was never long enough to substantially change the attitudes the countries have towards each other. Deep mistrust, suspicion, resentment and bitterness between Kabul and Islamabad have remained constant attributes of this political deadlock. This is surprising because Pakistan claims that its major interest - since independence - is to work towards a unified, peaceful and friendly Afghanistan.

It seems that this three-in-one strategy, proclaimed by Islamabad as the cornerstone of its Afghan policy, has been eroded by competing interests, poor implementation and mutual misperception. Instead of opening an avenue towards friendly and constructive cooperation, the two neighbours have been blaming each other for decades of interfering in their respective internal affairs, hampering social, economic and political development. Afghanistan is accusing its eastern neighbour of supporting militant oppositional forces in order to destabilize inconvenient governments. In contrast, Pakistan is blaming Kabul of reinforcing insurgencies in its resource rich borders province Baluchistan as well as being responsible for the deterioration of the security situation in Waziristan. These fears in particular, are gaining momentum, because Pakistani security circles are convinced that Afghanistan is hosting intelligence of its arch-rival India. Not only to improve their own capabilities in this direction but also to be able to carry out activities times. These issues have determined the development of the Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, which can broadly be categorized into two periods: First, the

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in the country's internal affairs. Basically one can state, that Pakistan's foreign policy outlook and behavior on the international stage is guided by its search for security and power in an as hostile, insecure and highly competitive perceived environment.

However, one also has to emphasize that it was not only Pakistan's anxiety a second, western front at the Afghan border which could lead to an enticement by 'Hindu India' that motivated the decision-makers in Islamabad to intervene in Afghanistan. Pakistan's Afghan policy over the last decades is not merely influenced by external factors. The influence of domestic considerations should not be sidelined. In times of weak and unstable civilian as well as military governance, Afghanistan was regarded as a welcome issue. Focusing on Afghanistan was often used as a strategic tool, shifting the attention towards its internal and external critics towards its neighbour state.

Today it seems quite obvious that the attempts to use the Afghan policy as an instrument not only against New Delhi but also within its own political theatre in Islamabad backfired. Today, India's engagement in Afghanistan as well as the positive perception among Afghan towards New Delhi is at a historical peak.
In contrast, mistrust aimed at Pakistan is constantly increasing, creating a worst-case scenario for Pakistan’s political strategists. Subsequently one can observe that Islamabad is trying to establish a Pakistan-friendly Afghan government has failed. Pakistani have to re-evaluate the importance and core element of the trinity of its Afghan policy in creating a Pakistan-friendly government, and/or establishing a co-operative scenario. Pakistan’s policy in Afghanistan has been deeply fragmented, with the country being caught between a desire to promote consensus and unity; on the other side, its activities were perceived as the greatest sources for instability in Afghanistan. Having this in mind it is not surprising that the current government in Kabul is concerned that Pakistan continues to identify the Taliban or other militant groups as a “strategic asset” to maintain its influence in the region, especially after the withdrawal of foreign troops.

The claim made by protagonists of this argument is that Pakistan will utilize the deeply fragmented and anarchical state of Afghan society to undermine any peace process which could lead to an unfavorable situation for Islamabad. However, taking the current political conditions into account, it would be naive to think that Afghan security forces will develop the capabilities necessary at least not in the early 2014 post-withdrawal scenario, to stabilize the security situation as well as maintain law and order. Despite remarkable progress, the Taliban still retain a substantial influence in major cities such as Kabul and Herat. The government will continue to rely on robust military support from outside, not only including hard power but also foreign military manpower.

Until new Pakistan's military and security establishment does not want to allow India or any other regional actor to fill a power vacuum in Afghanistan. Pakistan’s hawkish observers would interpret increasing Indian involvement in Afghanistan as a direct threat, which would consequently lead to a deterioration of Indo-Pak relations. As a recent high level bilateral talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan indicate, it seems that differences between the civilian government and the military and the ISI are becoming more evident in Pakistan. This is not surprising to note, since the influence of Pakistan’s security sector forces on the country’s foreign policy decision-making is identified by many analysts as responsible for the complexity of and a deadlock in the bilateral relations of both countries. An empowerment of civilians in Pakistan’s Afghan policy could prepare the ground for a new and perhaps much broader dialogue including economic and trade issues for the future. At the same time, the current civilian government is trying to step outside the box of its own Afghan policies, thus searching for a new strategy. But the latest failed attempts to gain Islamabad’s support for convincing the Taliban to take part in the Afghan peace and reconciliation process seem to falter. That the relationship between the civilian and military government in Pakistan is far from being reached. Even though, a new wave of realistic and pragmatic re-thinking has reached the Pakistan military leaders and strategic thinkers. However, it seems that the main political forces in Pakistan are still well ahead, especially between the Supreme Court, the Government, and the Armed Forces. Nevertheless, the probability of political change in Islamabad has never been higher than now. A window of opportunity which could lead to the strengthening of civil society and the political system, which would allow a more robust stance towards the increasingly powerful military.

Through this process Pakistan may seek to adopt a new and more human-oriented paradigms, such as its hostile relations towards India. This process is supported by an increasing awareness, that the influx of Afghan refugees is reaching the breaking point. In Afghanistan proved to be a mess for Pakistan. In its support for the Mujahideen against the Red Army or for the Taliban or any other group in Afghanistan, Pakistan has always been instrumental for the course of Pakistan’s political evolution and its military and strategic thinkers. In this context the view of the current leaders is that Pakistan will utilize the deeply fragmented and anarchical state of Afghan society to undermine any peace process which could lead to an unfavorable situation for Islamabad. However, taking the current political conditions into account, it would be naive to think that Afghan security forces will develop the capabilities necessary at least not in the early 2014 post-withdrawal scenario, to stabilize the security situation as well as maintain law and order. Despite remarkable progress, the Taliban still retain a substantial influence in major cities such as Kabul and Herat. The government will continue to rely on robust military support from outside, not only including hard power but also foreign military manpower.

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