

# 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 cornerstones 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 east-

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

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 of a second, western front at the Afghan border which could lead to an encirclement 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 of 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 Afghans towards New Delhi is at a historical peak.



ern 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 border 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

on Pakistani territory.

The fact, that none of the several regimes in Afghanistan has ever recognized the legitimacy of the British imposed Durand Line as an international border between the two countries further complicates the bilateral relationship. Territorial claims to the Pashtun and Baluch regions of Pakistan are just another facet of the Afghan dispute with Islamabad which can be traced back to colonial

war of resistance against the Soviet occupation, the rise of the Taliban, and the subsequent intergroup Afghan civil war with the Northern Alliance and Other Militant Forces (OMF). Second, the post-Taliban politics and the ongoing insurgencies in Afghanistan. In both phases, there is no doubt that Pakistan played and is still playing a major role in Afghanistan's political development; constantly increasing involvement

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In contrast, mistrust aimed at Pakistan is constantly increasing, creating a worst case scenario for Pakistan's political strategists. Subsequently one must state that Islamabad's aim to establish a Pakistan-friendly Afghan government has failed. Pakistanis have to re-evaluate the importance and core elements of the trinity of its Afghan policy, especially its interpretation of a 'friendly Afghanistan'. Friendly should at least mean cooperative, but it does not imply subservience as some hard liners among the political elites view it. In this context the view of Afghanistan as the 'little brother' and/or a 'Pakistani outpost' in a greater strategic game has to be abandoned. Furthermore, Pakistan's policy to capitalize on the frictions among different Afghan groups heavily undermined its notion of creating a unified Afghanistan and lead to

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a paradox situation: On one side, a major aim of Islamabad was 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 country, 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 permanent setbacks like whole units deserting and/or defecting, the infiltration of terrorists among their own rank-and-files etc., the government will continue to rely on robust military support from outside, not only including hardware but also foreign military manpower.

Until now 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 as well as Af-Pak relations. But as 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 Islamabad. This is most interesting to note, since the influence of Pakistani 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 related issues. Taking the increasing international pressure into account, the current civilian government is trying to step outside the box of its old Afghanistan politics, thus searching for an 'exit 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 seems to prove that a consensus 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 Pakistani (military) leaders and strategic thinkers, latent distrust and hostility between the main political forces in Pakistan are still well

alive, 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 ever so powerful military.

Through this process Pakistan might be able to overcome historical paradigms, such as its hostile relationship towards India. This process is supported by an increasing awareness, that in the end, the whole involvement in Afghanistan proved to be a messy affair for Pakistan, its support for the Mujahideen against the Red Army or for the Taliban or any other group in Afghanistan during the civil war never actually produced satisfying outcomes. The contrary occurred. Instead of gaining influence in Afghanistan

Pakistan had to struggle in order to maintain control over vast areas in its border regions. Therefore, the current debates circling around potential Islamabad support for the Afghan Taliban and/or the likelihood of Kabul's assistance for the Pakistani Taliban are standing in the way of a sustainable rapprochement between Afghanistan and Pakistan. One thing should be blatantly clear to political observers: there will no peace in Afghanistan without a substantial improvement of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

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