



Afghanistan: the view from Pakistan

by Eva Gross

Pakistan will arguably be the most crucial regional player in post-2014 Afghanistan. Close religious and cultural links notwithstanding, its links to the Taliban give Islamabad considerable leverage and influence over any peace process. However, the protection and support granted to insurgent groups operating in Afghanistan over the past decade has had unintended domestic consequences for Pakistan, with the growing number of terrorist attacks now posing a significant threat to the country's internal stability. Failure to reach a political settlement in Kabul is therefore likely to have a spill-over effect that would further weaken Islamabad's ability to contain extremist groups operating inside Pakistan. Despite the complexity of US-Pakistan relations, a complete US withdrawal by the end of 2014 – with the concomitant risk of a security vacuum developing along Pakistan's border – is not in Islamabad's interest. However, the implications of even a reduced transatlantic footprint are bound to contribute to a reckoning with extremism, and the forces that encourage it, inside Pakistan itself.

The bilateral dimension

For decades, Pakistan has wielded influence over Afghan politics through its backing of the Taliban. The Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) had a hand in the movement's creation; and Pakistan was one of three countries – alongside Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – to officially recognise the Taliban government. Since the ousting of the Taliban

after 9/11, Pakistan has been accused of assisting the Taliban insurgency. This applies in particular to the Quetta Shura, the leadership of the Afghan Taliban that has been based in the Pakistani city of Quetta since 2001. Unsurprisingly, such support – reciprocated by Kabul through its refusal to legally recognise the Durand line which demarcates the border between the two countries – has contributed to a lack of mutual trust between the two countries.

Bilateral relations have improved, particularly since the end of military rule in Pakistan and the return of an elected civilian government in 2008. In 2011 the two countries launched a 'Joint Commission for Reconciliation and Peace in Afghanistan' and official visits have also intensified. Following the election of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in May last year, reciprocal visits to Islamabad and Kabul took place in August and November 2013 respectively. During these visits, Sharif announced Pakistan's support for the process of reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban and later stated that meetings between Karzai's representatives and Taliban commanders would be encouraged by his government. Pakistan has also released a number of Afghan Taliban prisoners: a gesture of good will which is hoped will incentivise the Taliban to negotiate a settlement.

Afghanistan and Pakistan are also connected by strong social and commercial ties. In what remains the largest protracted refugee situation worldwide, Pakistan hosts around 1.6 million registered – and an estimated 1 million non-registered – Afghan refugees, mostly

in the border provinces of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Balochistan. Although some 3.8 million refugees have returned to Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban government, the number of those returning could dwindle or even reverse if the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorates. This would strain already limited local resources, and Pakistan is reluctant to accept additional refugees as a result.

In economic terms, Pakistan is Afghanistan's largest trading partner and Kabul's principal access route to foreign markets. The Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA), which entered into force in June 2012, facilitates the export of Afghan agricultural products via Pakistan. According to recent trade figures, Pakistan exports \$1.5 billion worth of goods to Afghanistan and imports \$111.5 million worth of goods in return. Yet despite their importance, these social and economic links have, so far, been unable to challenge the supremacy of the security dimension and provide an alternative foundation for bilateral relations.

Catch-22?

The rationale behind Pakistan's policy of 'strategic depth' was to use the Taliban as a proxy to destabilise Afghanistan and thus hedge against Indian influence. Reality, however, has turned out to be more complex. Not only has Islamabad been unable to control the *Afghan* Taliban, it now faces a serious threat to its own security due to the emergence of the *Pakistani* Taliban in 2007. This has led to a change in thinking in certain quarters of the policy establishment – and a shift towards emphasising Afghan stability.

A continued US presence in region, however, also presents additional dilemmas. After 9/11 the US enlisted Islamabad as a partner in the War on Terror, turning the country into both a frontline state and a recipient of significant bilateral aid. But relations have not been easy. Anti-American sentiments in Pakistan have fueled the radicalisation of Taliban elements, and the population at large remains resentful of the Western military presence in the region, particularly with regard to the use of drones by the US to hunt down extremists in border areas. Bilateral relations have become increasingly fraught as a result of several diplomatic spats, although the January 2014 strategic dialogue between the US and Pakistan – the first to take place since 2010 – is an indication of attempts to establish a more constructive relationship for the years to come.

Many of the problems affecting Afghanistan and Pakistan are intertwined and should be addressed

simultaneously. This applies in particular to economic cooperation and cross-border issues such as refugees, but also safe havens for insurgent groups operating in both countries. On another level, however, the aim should be to disentangle 'AfPak' by working towards a change in strategic calculations that would encourage Islamabad to play a constructive role in Afghanistan. Resolving the contradictions in Pakistan's Afghanistan policy entails not only changing long-held geostrategic calculations *vis-à-vis* India: it also requires the Pakistani government to address internal extremism more effectively.

The premiership of Nawaz Sharif could provide such an opportunity. His party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), has strong business links and has proven to be more open to improving relations with India as well as to mounting a more forceful assault on the Pakistani Taliban – although domestic pressures make this a contentious strategy. In addition, the future position of the ISI remains unclear: while some elements continue to advocate support for the Taliban, there also is growing weariness within the service of the proliferation of extremists inside Pakistan.

Opportunities for the EU

International interlocutors could work to strengthen those elements within the Pakistani state that can play a constructive role. This also means placing greater emphasis on structural assistance in order to increase economic and administrative capacities in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. When it comes to Pakistan, the EU can leverage its political and economic weight to provide assistance and counteract state weakness and insecurity. Such aid would be welcome in those areas where tensions are highest, such as border management and refugees, and the Union should continue joint programming to coordinate as closely as possible its own 'AfPak' activities.

There is also additional scope for involvement at a political level in the framework of the EU's five-year-engagement plan. Launched in March 2012, it includes strategic/political issues but also covers security, democracy and governance, human rights, and socio-economic development. High-level visits as well as appropriate sectoral dialogues can be used to address relations between Islamabad and Delhi and Pakistan's future role in Afghanistan. The planned EU-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue, which is due to take place in March 2014, presents one such opportunity.

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