

The United States and Pakistan Need Each Other for Stability and Peace in Afghanistan

By Riaz Khokhar

A fundamental point underlies the US-Pakistan relationship: Washington seeks Islamabad's support in the honorable exit from Afghanistan. After 17-years of war, the interests of the United States and Pakistan seem to have aligned in pursuing a negotiated settlement of the Afghan conundrum.

This reality presents to the new government in Islamabad with what Michael Kugelman of the Wilson Center characterized as a golden opportunity to convince the Taliban to commit to the peace talks and become part of the political process in Afghanistan. Toward that end, the Pakistani government believes it will play a constructive role, including using its influence over the Taliban. Indeed, Islamabad considers peace and stability in Afghanistan as "vital for its own long-term stability and progress," as emphasized by Pakistan Foreign Minister Qureshi.

Fortunately, both the United States Departments of State and Defense have begun to acknowledge Islamabad's important role in the negotiated settlement of the Afghan dispute. Secretary Pompeo described the cooperation of the two countries as "mutually beneficial and a factor for stability in South Asia." Apparently, this marks a considerable departure from the harsh US stance against Islamabad since the Trump administration took the reins in the White House.

The positive signalling notwithstanding, the US administration has more often than not looked askance to the alleged safe havens and the patronage of Afghan insurgents in Pakistan that are predominant factors in the insurgency's resilience. In this regard, the United States expects Islamabad to cease support of, and take military action against, terrorists that carry out attacks on US servicemen and Afghan security forces in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has denied the allegation categorically, saying that it had destroyed the terrorist network from the country and there was no safe haven for terrorists whatsoever. Regardless, Washington has adopted various coercive diplomatic tactics against Islamabad.

For instance, in 2016, the United States Congress removed the Financial Military sales subsidy for Pakistan's purchase of F-16 fighter jets because some US senators questioned Islamabad's behavior. After two years, on August 1, 2018, the US Congress passed National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which significantly reduced security assistance for Pakistan (which was previously a part of the Coalition Support Fund) from \$750 million a year in 2017 to \$150 million a year for FY2019. On August 10, 2018, the United States barred Pakistan's army and naval officers from participating in the US International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. Pakistan had been the largest participant in the IMET program between 2003 and 2017, symbolizing the program as a trademark of the bilateral relationship and a touchstone of mutual trust.

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Research Officer at
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The two parties must recall that there have been some crucial precedents for mutual cooperation in the recent past. US drone strikes in the past killed many terrorists that were believed to be a threat to Pakistan. The drones killed some of the leading terrorists such as Baitullah Mehsud, Hakimullah Mehsud, Qari Hasan and Said Khan Sajna. The latest of the terrorists killed by drones included Mullah Fazlullah and four other senior commanders of the TTP. These counterterrorism strikes by the United States had the potential to ease tension in the US-Pakistan relationship and lead them to advance their counterterrorism cooperation against common enemies in the region.

In another significant move, in April 2017, the United States dropped the Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) — the most powerful non-nuclear weapon in the American arsenal — on the stronghold of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan, the very IS faction which claimed responsibility for the recent terrorist attack in Mastung, Balochistan, during the 2018 election campaign. In September 2017, Pakistani commandos rescued a Canadian-American family from terrorists with the help of US intelligence. The intelligence sharing and military cooperation against terrorists in these instances testify to the strong military-to-military and intelligence ties between the two countries. No wonder, then, that military cooperation is considered foundational in the US-Pakistan relationship overall. Both countries need to work on these areas to move the needle forward on bilateral cooperation.

The need of the hour is to channel the cooperation toward securing peace and stability in Afghanistan. Moeed Yusuf of the United States Institute of Peace suggested recently that besides bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table, both of the countries need to alienate and counteract those elements within the Taliban that seek to scuttle the peace process.

Likewise, both countries share a long-term commitment that the enduring outcome in Afghanistan must entail preemption of the Afghan territory from becoming a safe haven for transnational terrorists. It is perhaps also in the interest of Islamabad that the American forces stay in Afghanistan until the security situation stabilizes, or else the 1990s-like instability and civil war might resurface, resulting in negative spill-over effects in Pakistan.

The apprehension regarding the probable nightmarish return of the uncertain security environment was the predominant reason behind Islamabad's hedging strategy with the Taliban. In this regard, the revised US South Asia strategy is likely to assuage Islamabad's anxiety by ensuring that US forces would stay in Afghanistan until the conditions of peace and stability in the country are fulfilled to a considerable degree.

Additionally, denying Pakistan a considerable role in Afghanistan and instead advocating the same for its rival India would dampen Pakistan's passion for the reset in the relationship. Both Pakistan and the United States need each other. Pakistan needs the US military presence and financial assistance in Afghanistan for the latter's stability, while Washington needs Pakistan's ground/air lines of communication to carry on its peace efforts. In this regard, it is remarkable that in the recent National Defense Authorization Act for FY2019, the United States deemphasized India's role in Afghanistan, ostensibly to attend to Pakistan's security apprehensions. This development suggests that only by working concertedly with Washington can Islamabad have a chance to secure its strategic interests in Afghanistan.

Taking all things into account, for longstanding peace and stability in Afghanistan, both Pakistan and the United States need to appreciate each other's strategic interests instead of pandering to recriminations and the resulting decoupling that eventually will undermine the prospects of any favorable outcomes for both sides — and Afghanistan.

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