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India and Pakistan in Afghanistan: Hostile Sports

India and Pakistan share deep cultural and historic ties with Afghanistan but have for decades had competing strategic agendas there. For India, Afghanistan was an important albeit passive geopolitical constraint on Pakistan, as well as the gateway to Central Asia. Pakistan saw Afghanistan as part of a threatening Indian pincer movement, a source of fuel for Pashtun separatism inside Pakistan, and during the Taliban years, a source of “strategic depth” against the Indian threat. These mutual suspicions make it difficult to get Afghanistan’s neighbors to pull together in stabilizing the country. With a new government in Pakistan determined to convince its people that Pakistan is defending its own interests rather than following a U.S. lead, U.S. policy will need to respect the Pakistan government’s need for political space. At the same time, a fine balancing act is needed between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan to ensure its smooth transition, peace, and economic growth.

For Pakistan, a stormy history: For half a century, Pakistan had a kind of “estranged family” relationship with Afghanistan. The same Pashtun clans lived on both sides of the border, and Pashtun nationalism often expressed itself as a demand for a “Pashtunistan” separate from Pakistan. Afghanistan never recognized the border with Pakistan, the Durand Line and pre-1979 Afghan governments encouraged Baluch separatists in Pakistan. India’s place as Pakistan’s major strategic threat made its long-standing friendship with Afghanistan appear in a particularly sinister light. The end of the Soviet invasion brought the hope of turning this hostility into a strategic asset. This was a major factor in the support Pakistan gave to the Taliban government.

The attacks of September 11 led to a reversal of Pakistan’s Afghan policy, but the fall of the Taliban still looked to many in Pakistan like a strategic disaster. The Northern Alliance, which formed the core of the new Afghan government, had been close to the Indians and hostile to Pakistan’s Taliban contacts. The Pervez Musharraf and Hamid Karzai governments tried to put relations on a better footing, but geopolitics, history, and eventually the two leaders’ personal dislike for each other undermined this goal. Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan soured further with the intensification of the Taliban insurgency. While Pakistan

charges Afghanistan’s government with turning a blind eye to the arms and drug trade, Afghanistan charges that the Taliban operates out of safe havens in Pakistan.

For India, a friend in the West and a bridge to Central Asia: India, on the other hand, has wanted to protect and expand its stake in Afghanistan in order to prevent the consolidation of an anti-India bloc extending westward from Pakistan. It had been blindsided by the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan in 1979 and was determined to remain closely involved and avoid another unpleasant surprise. It opened consulates in Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kandahar, and Jalalabad, participated (as did Pakistan) in the Bonn conference that established the new government, and took an active part in reconstruction efforts. India has also expanded its relations with the Central Asian countries to Afghanistan’s north and west, a move that has sparked some of the competitive impulses within Pakistan.

This Indian presence stoked Pakistan’s fears. Pakistan charged that the Indian consulates provide cover for Indian intelligence agencies to run covert operations against Pakistan. India attributed a grenade attack on its Jalalabad consulate a few years ago to Pakistan-backed militia. In recent years, Pakistan has accused India of intriguing in collusion with the Afghan Ministry of Tribal Affairs and the Afghan intelligence service to fund and arm rebels of the Baloch Liberation Army who are carrying out a separatist insurgency in Pakistan. During Afghan president Karzai’s visit to Pakistan last year, Musharraf presented him maps of locations with suspected Indian activity and urged him to rein in the Indians. Pakistan’s fears of encirclement by India have been compounded by the Indian Air Force’s new facility in Farkhor, Tajikistan, which may house MI-17 helicopter gunships. The air base follows up on a hospital and logistics depot constructed by the Indians in the region some years ago.

Reconstruction aid: In the last six years, both countries have provided reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan. India has promised \$750 million in aid in the seven years since the Bonn conference, representing its second-biggest foreign aid commitment. Pakistan in turn has committed \$200 million in the same period and is still hosting over 2 million Afghan

refugees. Both countries have focused on infrastructure reconstruction. India has been active on more fronts than Pakistan, partly owing to its closer ties with the former Northern Alliance members of Karzai's government. Indian aid has supported road reconstruction, communications, and expansion of the services sector. Public perceptions of aid to Afghanistan are quite different in India and Pakistan. In India, the media has vocally supported the country's growing role and presence in Afghanistan. Pakistan's media has an embittered view of its involvement, saying that its aid is wasted on an ungrateful Afghanistan, which has become the root of Pakistan's national security problems.

India's most prominent investments have been in building the road that connects Dilaram in western Afghanistan with Zaranj in Iran and another road linking Kandahar with Spin Boldak, an important town on the border with Pakistan. Even in projects carried out by American or European contractors, such as the Kabul-Kandahar highway, it has become commonplace to see Indian subcontractors being engaged, creating positive perceptions among the local Afghan populace. India's role in the reconstruction has thus acted as an exertion of its soft power. Pakistan views these projects with much concern.

Economic rivalry: Both India and Pakistan have economic stakes in Afghanistan. One of the fallouts of Afghanistan's reconstruction and foreign aid has been rampant inflation compounded by the replacement of food crops by poppy cultivation. This has probably made it easier for Pakistan to sustain the elimination of its own narcotics production. But it has also raised wheat prices to twice the level prevailing in Pakistan, prompting large-scale smuggling of food and essential commodities into Afghanistan and contributing to nationwide shortages of wheat flour in Pakistan. Estimates of the annual volume of gray market trading run as high as \$10 billion—five times the official volume of trade between the two countries. A strong parallel economy run by Afghan Pashtuns has also emerged in Baluchistan. This is adding to disenchantment about Afghanistan among the Pakistani public. India would like to expand its trade with Afghanistan, but Pakistan continues to block the overland transit of Indian goods through its territory.

For both countries, Afghanistan is a potential route for access to Central Asian energy. A pipeline from Turkmenistan across Afghanistan to Pakistan and India could benefit both countries, but instability in both Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as supply issues in Turkmenistan have put this idea on ice. Given China's growing investment in Central Asian energy, India will be looking for other ways to secure access to these energy supplies. Meanwhile, India is building a port in Chabahar in Iran, which among other things, could connect to the Iranian hinterland and thereby transport Indian goods to Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan completely. Pakistan sees Chabahar as a rival that could drain business away from

Pakistan's new port at Gwadar being built with Chinese assistance.

If stability is restored to Afghanistan, it may become possible to take advantage of other mineral resources there, which would benefit not only Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan but also other countries. China recently won rights to mine the world's largest undeveloped copper field, located near Kabul, for about \$3 billion. If implemented, this would be the biggest foreign investment in Afghanistan's history. In addition, China promised the Afghans a power plant and a railroad running from Tajikistan into Pakistan. Under present circumstances, however, this type of major project seems a long way off.

The security equation: The difficult relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have made a Pakistani role with the Afghan security services impossible. India has offered security assistance and has provided some training for the Afghan national army. Given Pakistan's resistance, the United States had turned down India's offers to send troops to Afghanistan. However, after the murder of an Indian engineer by the Taliban in 2006, India sent in a company of paramilitary troops to protect the engineers working on the road construction projects. This placement of Indian troops close to its western frontier troubles Pakistan.

The Taliban connection: The greatest controversy centers on the role of Pakistan in facilitating the Taliban insurgency that has steadily expanded in Afghanistan over the past two years. Pakistani officials strongly deny any continuing involvement with the Taliban, pointing out that the movement's Pakistani counterparts have been mounting a devastating series of suicide bombings against Pakistan government targets. Pakistan has even contributed to the creation of an intelligence establishment in Kabul to monitor its border areas with Afghanistan along with the Afghans and NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). However, both private observers and U.S. intelligence estimates note that key members of the Afghan Taliban leadership are based in Quetta in Pakistan's Baluchistan Province. Ironically, the Taliban have also found it necessary to deny that any of the Afghan group's leaders, including Mullah Omar, are based in Pakistan.

Controlling the porous and disputed border between Pakistan and Afghanistan is key for dealing with this problem, and it is the central issue for the United States. In fact, border coordination centers are being set up on either side of the border to monitor the movement of people. Pakistan itself has tried various approaches, including a military effort to bring the largely ungoverned tribal areas under control, an agreement with the tribal and Taliban leadership in the border regions, an aborted effort to mine the border, an unsuccessful attempt to fence the border at points most vulnerable to illegal infiltration, and the institution of modern border-crossing

documentation. Most of these measures were unacceptable to the Afghan government but also, more importantly, to Pashtun nationalists on both sides of the border.

From Taliban to Kashmir? When the Soviet Army left Afghanistan in 1989, some of the mujahideen groups that had been active in Afghanistan turned their attention to Kashmir and contributed to the insurgency against Indian rule there. Today, India and Pakistan are maintaining a four-year-old peace dialogue, and infiltration by militant groups into Kashmir is well below the level of earlier years. India has a strong stake in Pakistan's efforts to suppress terrorist groups, including those that are active in Afghanistan and those that have been attacking the Pakistan government. A convergence of interests to fight extremist violence has thus emerged between India and Pakistan for the first time. However, it is unlikely that the two countries will be able to turn this into any kind of active cooperation against terrorism given their long-standing animosity.

The other neighbors—Iran and China: Stabilizing Afghanistan would be a more feasible goal if its neighbors were able to make common cause. Despite the fact that all its neighbors would benefit from a more peaceful and somewhat better-governed Afghanistan, competition among the neighbors will impede this result.

Iran has conflicting goals in Afghanistan. It had bad relations with the militantly Sunni and Pashtun-dominated Taliban, whom it accused of fomenting insurgency in Iran, and it also has difficult relations with Pakistan. Iran also has cultural ties with Tajiks and ethnic and sectarian linkages with the Hazaras. The Taliban's massacre of Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998 still rankles Iran. This should provide the basis for a constructive Iranian role. However, Iran will also want to avoid a U.S. success in its neighborhood.

China, on the other hand, has very close relations with Pakistan and deep concerns about the Uighur militancy in its Xinjiang province. Some of the Uighur rebels are known to have trained with the Taliban and are linked to al Qaeda. China thus feels that defeat of the Taliban can bring stability to Pakistan, which in turn will help stabilize Xinjiang. This puts Chinese policy in line with Pakistan's officially stated policy but out of step with those in Pakistan who might view an arrangement with the Taliban as the second-best solution.

The stakes for Washington: For the United States, managing the conflict in Afghanistan remains the most urgent issue in its relations with Pakistan. The top priority has been management of the border area, where it has sought to obtain some freedom of action to respond to major security threats. The United States believes that militant successes in Pakistan's tribal areas could have a domino effect elsewhere in Pakistan and Afghanistan. It has made strenuous efforts to create liaison mechanisms bringing together U.S., Pakistani,

and Afghan military authorities, and it is poised to begin a major effort to train Pakistan's forces in counterinsurgency. These U.S. interests are shared by both India and Pakistan. But it is Pakistan that is completely intertwined with the Afghan conflict, and as a result, the United States has given far greater weight to Pakistan's sensitivities than to India's.

The installation of a new elected government in Pakistan will add a new factor to U.S. policymaking in the region. President Pervez Musharraf's party was decisively rejected in the February 18 election. The new prime minister Yousaf Raza Gillani and his party leader Asif Zardari will exercise far more power than the previous government did. They and all Pakistan's other political leaders want to craft a policy for fighting terrorism that they can defend as their own. In practice, this means they need to put some daylight between themselves and the United States.

The new government's concepts of Pakistan's interests, both in Afghanistan and in dealing with domestic militancy, are not very different from those of the previous government. Pakistanis strongly reject suicide bombings and do not want the Afghan conflict to spill over into their country. But the new government may have quite different ideas about what to do about it, including a much larger scope for dialogue with Taliban-friendly forces. The United States will need to find new, more subtle, and less publicly prominent ways of pursuing its goal of stabilization of Afghanistan.

India too will need to tailor its Afghan policy to the new situation in Pakistan. If it can find even modest ways of working in harmony with the Pakistani government, it could reap substantial benefits in its relations with both countries. The new "great game" may continue, but it will be more of chess, less of tug-of-war.

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