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Balancing US Interests in India and Pakistan

Rudra Chaudhuri

On 6 November 2010, during his maiden visit to the sub-continent, President Barack Obama delivered what came to be seen in both India and Pakistan as a disappointing speech.¹ Opposition leaders in India claimed that the president did not go far enough to reprimand Pakistan to dismantle terrorist hubs ensconced within its borders. Indeed, he did not once mention Pakistan. This was considered unacceptable. He was, after all, giving the speech in Mumbai, a city that had been witness to devastating attacks in November 2008.² The attackers all hailed from Pakistan. In Pakistan, the entire US administration was berated for warming up to India, and this, when Pakistan serves as a frontline state in the war against terror.³ Further, the fact that the president's following address to the Indian Parliament did not mention Kashmir did little to inspire confidence amongst an elite who have long advocated third-party intervention to resolve this age old conflict.⁴

In many ways, the reactions to Obama's visit to India exemplify the difficult task of balancing US interests and relations with South Asia's two nuclear giants. In the current milieu, this undertaking has taken on an all important dimension – Indian and Pakistani rivalry in Afghanistan. A key aim of US foreign policy has been to convince Pakistan to focus on anti-Coalition insurgent groups along the Durand line rather than the Indian army to its east. This is essential if the US and its allies are to achieve some degree of progress in 'degrading' the Afghan Taliban along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. As is widely believed, campaign progress against insurgents on one side of the border is at least partially dependent upon progress on the other.⁵

Given the implicit significance of the role played by India, either in its bilateral relations with Pakistan or because of its expanding presence in Afghanistan, the

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¹“Obama Speech at the Taj Hotel: Full Text”, *Hindustan Times*, 6 November 2010.

²“Why Obama Made No Mention of Pakistan on Terror Issue”, *Economic Times*, 6 November 2010.

³“Obama Backs India's Drive for UN Power”, *The News*, 9 November 2010.

⁴For a short account, see Chari *et al.*, *Four Crises and a Peace Process*, 13–38.

⁵Pakistan Policy Working Group, *The Next Chapter*, 1.

key question for US foreign policy in South Asia remains: what can be done to reconcile India–Pakistan relations? This question is especially potent since it underlies Pakistani calculations *vis-à-vis* its approach to the war in Afghanistan.⁶ As importantly, an answer is required to instill confidence in a relationship marred by deep-seated mutual suspicion. This is the primary question this article sets out to explore, in four parts. First, it briefly traces attempts made by successive US administrations during the Cold War to balance its relations with India and Pakistan.⁷ Second, the article outlines the initiatives – and the tensions therein – adopted by the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations in the past two decades. Third, it provides an account of India–Pakistan relations since the terrorist attacks in Mumbai. The conclusion sets out current efforts to encourage dialogue, and what more can be done to assist this process.

The Cold War

For much of the Cold War, US foreign policy imperatives in South Asia were designed to balance Washington's relations with both India and Pakistan. This of course proved difficult, and at times, even impossible. Whether by design or otherwise, the Truman administration's position during the First Kashmir War (1947–49) irked the Indian leadership.⁸ Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, felt let down when Washington failed to recognise Pakistan as the aggressor and decided, instead, to treat both the newborn states as victims of aggression.⁹

By the early 1950s, the US' attention firmly moved to Pakistan. In May 1954, the US entered into a mutual defence pact with Pakistan. For Nehru, the Cold War had been brought to South Asia.¹⁰ From this point on, at least till the end of the Cold War, successive Indian governments remained suspicious and anxious of US national security policy in South Asia. Conversely, following the 1954 alliance with Pakistan – 'America's most allied ally in Asia'¹¹ – US attempts to reconcile differences with India led to growing unease in Islamabad. To assuage Pakistani anxieties, in the early 1960s, the Kennedy administration pressed both India and Pakistan to resolve the Kashmir dispute. Yet, six rounds of talks later, the American's realised the futility of trying to mediate between the contending parties.¹² Indian

⁶ Rashid, "Pakistan on the Brink".

⁷ The article does not provide a profound historical narrative. For further reading, see: McMahon, *Cold War on the Periphery*; Schaeffer, *Limits of Influence*; Kux, *India and the United States* and *The United States and Pakistan*.

⁸ For a detailed discussion, see: Raghavan, *War and Peace*, chap. 4; Schoefield, *Kashmir in Conflict*, 49–126.

⁹ Raghavan, *War and Peace*, 122.

¹⁰ "US Aid to Pakistan is Intervention", *Times of India*, 2 March 1954.

¹¹ Ayub Khan, Chief of the Pakistani Army Staff, made this statement when the pact was signed. McMahon, "United States Cold War Strategy", 812.

¹² *Ibid.*, 862–5.

representatives refused to accept third-party arbitration and flatly turned down US and UK-led efforts to mediate in the dispute. Conversely, the Pakistani delegation, led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, consistently pressed for outside intervention to ‘internationalise’ the dispute.

Barring the short-lived interest in Pakistan, and more specifically, President Yahya Khan, in the early 1970s – when President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were said to ‘tilt’ in favour of Pakistan – US followed a semi-detached approach to South Asia. Whilst the Indian nuclear tests in 1974 occupied the attention of the Ford White House, the question of balancing Indian and Pakistani interests remained fairly mute for much of the 1970s.

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a key US objective was to elicit the support of the Pakistani government – led by President Zia-ul-Haq¹³ – to host, train and support the various *mujahidin* and Taliban factions in their *jihād* against Soviet troops and the puppet regime in Kabul.¹⁴ Much like in the 1960s, a key question for the US was what more could be done to convince the Pakistani military to shift its attention from the Indian border “facing a nonexistent threat of Indian aggression” to “a much more plausible one coming from Soviet-occupied Afghanistan?” Unsurprisingly, the answer lay in “reorienting India’s policy in regard to Pakistan”.¹⁵ That India refused to heed Western pressure was hardly surprising.

Post-Cold War

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Pakistan’s carrot and stick policy *vis-à-vis* US policy and Kashmir lost its *raison d’être*. In the meantime, military-to-military contacts between India and the US began to increase for the first time in fifty years.¹⁶ In 1998, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power, India’s changing approach to the US and the US’ altered perspective with regard to India – viewing India outside of the India–Pakistan tinder box – gained momentum. Indeed, despite the fact that India tested five nuclear devices in May 1998, followed by Pakistan, thereby escalating tensions in the sub-continent, the BJP’s engagement-based approach to foreign affairs gained traction in Washington.

Between May and July of 1999, India and Pakistan fought a limited war in the Kargil district of Kashmir. While the details of this conflict are not pertinent to this

¹³ De Riencourt, “India and Pakistan”, 433.

¹⁴ For a first-hand account of how these factions operated alongside Pakistani support, see Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn, *My Life with the Taliban*, 21–47. It is a widespread misperception that the Taliban emerged at the beginning of the 1990s. As this book makes clear, Taliban factions operated alongside the mujahidin during the Soviet jihad.

¹⁵ Riencourt, “India and Pakistan”, 434.

¹⁶ Talbott, *Engaging India*, 1.

article, the US administration's reactions to the conflict certainly are.¹⁷ Having accepted that the Pakistani army, led by General Pervez Musharraf, then the Chief of Army Staff, used covert means to infiltrate Indian territory, for the first time in history an American president unequivocally took India's side in an India–Pakistan conflict. When pressed by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to apply pressure on India to resolve the crisis, Clinton and his inner coterie made it clear that the Pakistani military, and not the Indian army, were the aggressors. Hence, the responsibility to end the impasse lay squarely with Pakistan. It would have to withdraw its troops behind the so-called Line of Control (LoC) that divides *Azad* Kashmir from the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Following Sharif's return from Washington, this is exactly what Pakistan did.¹⁸ According to Stephen Cohen, "Indians were flabbergasted that we [US] supported them".¹⁹

The conflict finally ended on 26 July 1999. Less than a year later, President Clinton visited India, injecting fresh energy into India–US ties. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee claimed that the visit "marks[ed] the beginning of a new voyage in the new century by two countries which have all the potential to become natural allies".²⁰ The seemingly objective position adopted by the Clinton White House in the Kargil dispute went some way in 'normalising' relations with India. However, the following presidency of George W. Bush would take the relationship to a whole new level.

De-hyphenation and the Bush years

Unlike previous administrations, the Bush team decided on a path defined by what came to be called the 'dehyphenation strategy'. Rather than supporting one party or the other, the Bush administration sought to follow a policy centered on "a decoupling of India and Pakistan in US calculations".²¹ The policy of de-hyphenation was to be followed even though America's efforts in the war in Afghanistan were dependent upon Pakistani support and cooperation. Bush's South Asia team worked hard to engage New Delhi and Islamabad individually, refusing to revert to the Kashmir dispute or India–Pakistan tensions to elicit Pakistani support. Conversely, whilst the Kashmir dispute was placed on the back burner, the US made clear to India that it would have to play a much smaller role in Afghanistan. Interestingly though, side-lining the Indian presence in Afghanistan – at least in the initial phase of the war – was balanced by an incentive-based scheme at the strategic level. That is, whilst the US worked closely with

¹⁷ For details, see Malik, *Kargil: From Surprise to Victory*; also: Musharraf, *In the Line of Fire*.

¹⁸ See Chari *et al.*, *Four Crises*, 119–48.

¹⁹ Author's interview with Stephen Cohen, 11 September 2008, Washington DC.

²⁰ Talbott, *Engaging India*, 203.

²¹ Tellis, "The Merits of Dehyphenation", 22.

the Pakistani leadership with regard to Afghanistan, at the same time, Bush sought to engage India in a dialogue of strategic importance: finding a way to resume nuclear related trade – suspended since India tested a nuclear device in 1974 – and increase military to military contacts. However, convincing India to diminish its role in Afghanistan would not be easy.

Following the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, the Indian government “communicated to the American mission in New Delhi it would extend whatever support the United States wanted, including military bases, in its global war against terrorism”.²² Many within the Indian foreign policy establishment believed that the US’ declaration of ‘war on terror’ created strategic opportunities for New Delhi. Accordingly, the logic went, the US would now be forced to pay attention to the terrorist networks within and around Pakistan. This of course was a matter of priority for India, a country that faced the wrath of terrorist attacks in Jammu and Kashmir.²³

Further, the Taliban, supported by the Pakistani military and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) harboured Osama Bin Laden and the Al Qaeda leadership.²⁴ India, on the other hand, supported the Northern Alliance whose leader, Ahmed Shah Masood, was the deputy president and defence minister of the UN-recognised Islamic Government of Afghanistan.²⁵ Following Masood’s assassination on 9 September 2001, his forces – the Northern Alliance cadres now led by General Mohammed Fahim – served as the cavalry in the war that was soon to ensue. This was all good news for India, which thought it had thrown its lot with the right faction in the coming war.

However, whilst those in India were happy to point fingers at Pakistan, the fact remained that for the US, and for any number of reasons, Pakistan was and continues to be the more important strategic actor with regard to military operations in Afghanistan. Not least because Pakistan, and not India, shares a 2250 kilometer border with southern and eastern Afghanistan. The key to eliciting Pakistani support apart, of course, from the billions of dollars the Bush administration would have to sanction to the Musharraf regime²⁶ – most of which remained invisible to the ordinary Pakistani – was making sure that India was kept out of the fray.²⁷ In the end, Indian overtures to support US-led operations were turned down.

Conversely, and in tandem with the de-hyphenation policy, between 2001 and 2008, US relations with India improved considerably. As noted by C. Raja Mohan,

²² Mohan, *Crossing the Rubicon*, xi.

²³ Swami, *India, Pakistan and the Secret Jihad*.

²⁴ Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, chap 14.

²⁵ “Masood Sees no Military Solution”, Interview with Ahmad Shah Masood on 13 August 2001, *The Hindu*, 12 September 2001.

²⁶ Between 2002 and 2008, the Bush administration provided Musharraf with little over USD 11 billion. For details, see Pakistan Policy Working Group, *The Next Chapter*, 28–9.

²⁷ Rubin, “Saving Afghanistan”, 69.

the Bush administration “reconceived the framework of US engagement with New Delhi”.²⁸ Making sure not to isolate India whilst increasing the amount of support to Pakistan, “Washington and New Delhi quietly began a sustained two-year conversation that would ultimately result in a breakthrough diplomatic achievement”: the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) in 2004.²⁹ The NSSP created the framework for close-quarter interaction focusing on civilian nuclear energy, civilian space programs, high-technology trade and missile defence.

In September 2008, the US Congress authorised President Bush to sign into law a bill that permitted the US government to enter into nuclear related trade with India.³⁰ Suffice it to say that by the end of 2008, US–India relations had been transformed.³¹ In the case of Pakistan, the war on terror brought with it economic dividends unavailable since the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.³² Bush agreed to the sale of F-16 fighter aircraft to Pakistan after successive US administrations had ‘frozen’ the deal for well over a decade.³³ In 2004, Pakistan was labeled a major-non NATO ally.

From the outset, the Bush administration appeared to have done the unthinkable: simultaneously improving relations with India *and* Pakistan. Kashmir no longer served as the lynchpin for Pakistani cooperation. India was freed from the bug-bear of the non-proliferation regime that had served as a thirty odd-year stumbling block. Yet, on a closer look, the policy of de-hyphenation was very successful as far as India is concerned, but less so when it comes to Pakistan.

The entire de-hyphenation construct appeared feasible because no one in the Bush administration focused efforts on the war in Afghanistan. It made strategic sense to develop an instrumental relationship with a regime that sought – at least in rhetoric – to target Al Qaeda leaders in Pakistan. However, the deeper-seated problem of the sheer policy failure in Afghanistan appeared to matter little to an Iraq-obsessed administration.

Rather than a crafty or innovative approach to South Asia, the de-hyphenation policy seems to have been sustainable because in a sense, the Bush administration de-hyphenated itself from the war in Afghanistan. According to Barnett Rubin, the Bush administration “tolerated the quiet reconstitution of the Taliban in Pakistan as long as Islamabad granted basing rights to US troops” and “pursued the hunt for Al Qaeda”.³⁴ Thus, minimum strategic goals led to minimum strategic demands.

By way of deduction, when strategic expectations remain minimal – as they clearly were for the Bush administration in regard to Afghanistan and Pakistan

²⁸ Mohan, “India and the Balance of Power”, 27.

²⁹ Tellis, “The Merits of Dehyphenation”, 30.

³⁰ For a comprehensive review of the ‘N’ Deal, see Chari, *Indo-US Nuclear Deal*.

³¹ Kapur and Ganguly, “Transformation of US-India Relations”.

³² Kronstadt, “Pakistan-US Relations”, 92–3.

³³ Tellis, “The Merits of Dehyphenation”, 31–2.

³⁴ Rubin, “Saving Afghanistan”, 70.

post 2002 – the boundaries delimiting failure and success appear all the more blurry. To be sure, if the Bush administration had made Afghanistan a priority, thereby increasing expectations with regard to Pakistan's role and cooperation in the war in Afghanistan – as was the case when President Obama came to power – the trade-off would no doubt have demanded a return to the line of argument used in the 1960s or 1980s: cooperation, at least various degrees of cooperation would depend upon improved relations with India. History attests to this. Indeed, this was appreciated by those behind President Obama's first sixty-day review that produced the AfPak strategy of March 2009.

Obama and the AfPak approach

On 22 January 2009, only two days after Barack Obama was sworn in, late Richard Holbrooke was officially named Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan. He was apparently supposed to have been named the Special Representative to Afghanistan, Pakistan *and* India. Between November 2008 and January 2009, the transition period for the new US administration, however, the Indian government lobbied hard to make sure that India was kept outside of Holbrooke's expected brief.³⁵ For the US administration, it was essential to apply diplomatic pressure on India to improve relations with Pakistan, even convince India to enter into a dialogue on Kashmir. This was the only way to assuage Pakistani anxieties, allowing its military to train its guns against anti-Coalition insurgents along its western borders. Hence, and notwithstanding Indian resistance, as Holbrooke put it, "I will deal with India by pretending not to deal with India."³⁶ The key was to turn up the diplomatic heat on New Delhi.

The logic, at least for this US administration, seemed fairly simple. If India began a series of discussions on Kashmir, Pakistan would feel more confident about relocating the bulk of its troop formations from the border with India to that with Afghanistan.³⁷ This, no doubt, was one of Pakistan's demands.³⁸ Hence, the Kashmir dispute was placed squarely in the middle of what might be called the 'AfPak-India' strategy.

This approach appears to have been driven by a calculation based on a somewhat obscure and even ungrounded reading of Indian strategic behaviour: that the goodwill generated in India as a result of the passage of the nuclear deal with the US increased Washington's leverage with New Delhi. As Bruce Riedel remarked,

³⁵ "India's Stealth Lobbying Against Holbrooke Brief", *The Cable - Foreign Policy.com*, 24 January 2009.

³⁶ Woodward, *Obama's War*, 86.

³⁷ Quoted in C.R. Mohan, "Barack Obama's Kashmir Thesis", *Indian Express*, 3 November 2008. Also see Obama, "Renewing American Leadership".

³⁸ For a comprehensive review, see Cohen, S. P., C.C. Fair, S. Ganguly, S. Gregory, A. Shah and A. J. Tellis, "What's the Problem with Pakistan?" *Foreign Affairs* roundtable, 31 March 2009, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/discussions/roundtables/whats-the-problem-with-pakistan>

“the opportunity for diplomacy is riper than usual in this new era (2008 onwards)”.³⁹ Similarly dubious was the calculation that the US would be able to leverage this goodwill at a time when India’s elite pressed the government of the day – the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance – to bring senior members of the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), who had masterminded and executed the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, to book. How could India be expected to engage Islamabad when the top LeT leadership was found to be freely ensconced on Pakistani soil?

With regard to the assertion that the ‘N’ deal increased Washington’s leverage over India, Obama’s South Asia specialists might have paid more attention to India’s historic record when it comes to the Kashmir dispute. Contrary to the view that the nuclear deal had made India diplomatically vulnerable, the Indian government made it abundantly clear that it will not dance to the Obama tune. As Ashley Tellis warned the US Congress well before the N-deal gained sway, even if US–India relations were “successfully consummated . . . India will likely march to the beat of its own drummer”.⁴⁰ This indeed seems to be the case. Since the first Kashmir War, India has maintained that Kashmir is a bilateral issue between New Delhi and Islamabad. This was agreed to in principle by both sides in 1972. To be sure, unlike Pakistan, which maintains a territorial claim over Jammu and Kashmir, Indian elites are content with internationalising the existing LoC. US pressure on this issue is expected to push New Delhi into creating a common administrative space in Kashmir, a plan often written about by Washington insiders.⁴¹

Mumbai and after

From the outset, India may agree to such a solution. However, the government of the day can agree to do so only when the terrorist infrastructure within Pakistan is dismantled. At the present time, the anti-rapprochement sentiment in India following the Mumbai attacks is a genuine stumbling block to improving India–Pakistan relations.

Both governments have worked towards breaking the impasse, but with little success. Since 2009, the prime ministers, foreign ministers and foreign secretaries have met on four occasions. In the summer of 2009, at Sharm-el-Sheikh, the Egyptian resort town, the two prime ministers even crafted a joint statement. Seen as a major breakthrough in the strategic thaw, the statement read that terrorist acts should be uncoupled from the dialogue process.⁴² This was, however, recanted

³⁹ Riedel, “South Asia’s Nuclear Decade”, 125.

⁴⁰ A. Tellis, “The United States and South Asia”, Testimony to the House Committee on International Relations, US House of Representatives, 14 June 2005, <http://www.carnegicendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=17070&prog=zgp&proj=zsa>

⁴¹ Riedel, “South Asia’s Nuclear Decade”.

⁴² G. Parthasarthy, “Sell out at Sharm-el-Sheikh”, *Business Line*, 23 July 2009.

as a result of domestic opposition in New Delhi. It was read by political leaders and critics alike as making major concessions whilst gaining nothing in return, especially since LeT suspects were yet to be convicted.

Pakistan argues that, much like in any other state, convictions depend on evidence, which its courts have not yet found. Notably, Hafiz Saeed, who India alleges masterminded the Mumbai operation, was placed under house arrest following the attacks, but ultimately freed.⁴³ On his part, Saeed made a plea to the Indian government to 'free Kashmir' or 'face jihad'.⁴⁴ Statements like this continue to enrage Indian elites. The strategic chill was re-enforced on the floor of the UN General Assembly (GA) in September 2010. Former Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmud Qureshi once again brought up the issue of Kashmir; while Indian Foreign Minister S. M. Krishna made clear that the atmosphere precluded meeting his counterpart on the sidelines of the GA.

In February 2011, the respective foreign secretaries met again in the Bhutanese capital, Thimpu. This was yet another attempt at paving the way for a 'bigger meeting' between the foreign ministers or even the respective prime ministers.⁴⁵ While principals from both sides appear to be 'cautiously optimistic', few believe that a formal dialogue process can re-start in any meaningful manner until some, even nominal, action is taken by the Pakistani government against the LeT. Indeed, that dialogue is dependent on Pakistani actions was made clear by PM Singh who, standing next to President Obama, told reporters that dialogue could resume when the 'terror machine' in Pakistan is stopped.⁴⁶

Inside Kashmir

Beyond the politics underlying AfPak, the burst of discontent on the streets of Jammu and Kashmir further complicates the prospects of dialogue. Processes of dialogue *on* Kashmir – between India and Pakistan – and *within* Kashmir – between New Delhi and the people of Kashmir – do not necessarily compliment one another. This is not to say that the two lines of discourse do not overlap, they certainly do, but politically, India's willingness to negotiate Kashmir with Pakistan is unlikely to materialise unless the current gridlock *inside* Kashmir comes to an end. What then explains this gridlock?

In the summer of 2010, local Kashmiris took to the streets protesting against Indian police brutality, poor infrastructure, growing unemployment, corruption and, most of all, the lack of political dialogue with New Delhi. While

⁴³ "Govt. Fails in Bid", *The Dawn*, 26 May 2010.

⁴⁴ "Free Kashmir or Face Jihad: Jud", *Indian Express*, 6 February 2010.

⁴⁵ Quote of Indian Foreign Minister S. M. Krishna, "Resumption of Talks with Pakistan", *Times of India*, 11 February 2011.

⁴⁶ "Highlights of PM-Obama Joint Press Meet", *Hindustan Times*, 8 November 2010.

New Delhi has begun a process of reconciliation by creating and authorising interlocutors to gain a sense of the ‘street’, the tenuous and volatile situation acts as yet another spoiler for Indian-Pakistani talks. The Indian government would find it easier to enter into discussions once the situation within its own borders has been tempered.

Further, unlike the early 1960s, when the US and UK missions in India and Pakistan were somewhat familiar with the intricacies of the Kashmir dispute, at present, the intellectual investment in finding a solution to the Kashmir dispute is wanting at best.⁴⁷ For instance, specialists agree that a common administrative zone could serve as a first step towards a solution, but the important question is how would this happen? Having an ‘end state’ in mind is unhelpful when the question of means remains largely unexplored. This is not to say that the US administration needs to craft detailed policies for all conflicts. However, it would be prudent to do so in an issue of recurring importance.

From Kashmir to Afghanistan

By August 2009, the Obama administration realised that the rhetoric on the Kashmir dispute had proved counter-productive. While American principals continued to encourage dialogue, Kashmir no longer appeared to serve as a central piece in the AfPak puzzle. The American administration now seems to have given up on the idea that traction on Kashmir can encourage Pakistan to focus more of its resources against the Afghan Taliban and affiliated groups like the so-called Haqqani Network.

To be sure, Pakistani attention has steadily moved towards India’s increasing footprint in Afghanistan. In many ways, Afghanistan has “replaced Kashmir as the main arena of the still-unresolved struggle between Pakistan and India”⁴⁸ and this has become the rallying cry for not only Pakistani officials and commentators,⁴⁹ but also Western commentators and officials.⁵⁰ Yet, and unlike in 2001, Indian involvement in Afghanistan promises to grow rather than diminish.

As Ahmed Rashid points out, the Pakistani army’s strategic interests are driven primarily by two concerns: First, “to ensure that a balance of terror and power is maintained with respect to India”, hence, maintaining at least a tenuous link with *jihadi* groups who can be deployed when the time comes. Second, the rationale underlying direct or indirect support to groups like the Afghan Taliban or the Quetta Shura (QST) is to ‘hedge’ against a US withdrawal from Afghanistan

⁴⁷ This assessment is based on extensive interviews held by the author with South Asia specialists within and outside the present and previous US administrations.

⁴⁸ Rubin and Rashid, “From Great Game to Grand Bargain”, 1.

⁴⁹ Rashid, “Pakistan on the Brink”, and “Trotsky in Baluchistan”.

⁵⁰ For a brief outline of this argument, see S. Raghavan and R. Chaudhuri, “Steering our own Path”, *Indian Express*, 7 October 2009.

and against “Indian influence in Kabul”.⁵¹ This line of argument appears to have strengthened, given what many in Pakistan see as India’s growing influence with Tajik elites, who were once at the core of the Northern Alliance and remain vehemently anti-Pakistani. Further, unlike the 1990s, when India was forced to close its embassy and missions in Afghanistan, currently, the Indian government has made Afghanistan a priority.

Today, India is the fifth largest international donor in Afghanistan and the third largest importer of Afghan goods. It has developed deep contacts with Afghanistan’s many line ministries, supporting large infrastructural and capacity-building projects.⁵² Such efforts are seen as a direct affront to Pakistan’s sense of propriety in a country it has historically treated – although unsuccessfully – as a client state.

Since the beginning of 2010, both India and Pakistan have sought to prepare for what might be called the ‘end game’, the scenario when US-led NATO troops begin – even in small measure – their exit from Afghanistan. The London Conference in January 2010 made clear that transition from ISAF to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) was a key objective for almost all NATO countries. This was confirmed in the NATO Lisbon Summit in November 2010. The expected security vacuum in a post-NATO Afghanistan, or at least in most of rural Afghanistan, is likely to be filled by proxies belonging to one regional actor or the other. Indeed, with this in mind, Pakistani military elites led by General Ashfaq Kayani, the Chief of Army Staff, have reached out to both the US and the Afghan government. The idea is for Islamabad to serve as an interlocutor in a peace deal between the older members of the Afghan Taliban movement, led by Mullah Omar, and the Karzai administration. A central aim for Pakistan’s military tsars is to make sure that the future political make-up in Afghanistan does not allow India to expand its security or even development footprint.

That this hypothesis is already in motion was most evident in the summer of 2010. Amrullah Saleh, head of the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS), and Hanif Atmar, minister of the interior, were both sacked by Hamid Karzai. They were openly hostile to both Pakistan and Pakistani objectives in securing a peace deal with the Afghan Taliban. Importantly, Saleh was and continues to be considered a key ally of India, which no doubt supports leading Tajik’s like the former NDS chief in the hope of maintaining the internal balance of power in Afghanistan. Further, and unlike the 1990s, India has chosen also to engage Pashtun elites in the south and east of the country.⁵³ In short, the early etchings of proxy rivalry between India and Pakistan appear to be underway. Little doubt then,

⁵¹ Rashid, “Pakistan on the Brink”.

⁵² For details, see Aikins, “India in Afghanistan”.

⁵³ S. Gupta, “India Shifts Afghan Policy”, *Indian Express*, 29 March 2010.

that Afghanistan increasingly represents the key battleground in conflicting Indian and Pakistani interests in the region.⁵⁴

India has two main concerns with regard to the future of Afghanistan, each of which counters Pakistani objectives. First, to make sure that the Afghan Taliban do not occupy a dominant political position in the future make-up of the Afghan body-politic. Increasingly, there is a realisation that the so-called Quetta Shura will return to parts of the south and the east, but the objective is to disallow this group to completely usurp power. Interestingly, this is the very faction that promises to serve Pakistani interests. This is not to say that the Afghan Taliban can serve as mere proxies of the ISI, but that the latter does hold some amount of leverage with the QST, steering its actions once in power. Second, Indian security elites are afraid that the south and east of Afghanistan may serve to host training camps of the LeT in its war against the Indian state. The LeT was after all established in Afghanistan in the early 1990s. Given that the LeT enjoys some amount of official support from the rank and file of the Pakistani security services, its activities in Afghanistan, indeed, its very existence, is a constant threat to India, as is evident from the Mumbai attacks.⁵⁵

A proxy war in Afghanistan?

These opposing objectives make the case for a proxy war all the more likely, threatening not only the security situation within Afghanistan, but further exasperating the already tense relationship between Delhi and Islamabad. Yet, it is not too late to stem the proxy tide. The Obama administration, especially the State Department, has understood the dire consequences of this enmity-laden dynamic. Yet, the key question is what more can be done to balance Indian and Pakistani interests in Afghanistan. US officials appreciate that the option of closing Indian consulates – a Pakistani demand – or pressuring New Delhi to cut back its development aid programme is unlikely to work. Correspondingly, dealing with Pakistani anxieties *vis-à-vis* India's so-called encroachment close to the tenuous Durand Line, the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, is an all important objective. As already discussed, the tactic of easing relations by encouraging a Kashmir dialogue has failed. This, however, does not mean that a proxy conflict is all but inevitable.

While the competing interests outlined above do little by way of encouragement, what is increasingly clear is that neither country would want to invest in a large-scale proxy campaign. Discussions during back-channel and track two dialogues

⁵⁴ Rubin and Rashid, "From Great Game to Great Bargain".

⁵⁵ Aikins, "India in Afghanistan".

since 2009 suggest that both countries could work towards an agreement on neutrality – between each other’s interests – in Afghanistan. Indian officials admit that Pakistan is the more important diplomatic actor in the Afghan end-game. On the other hand, there appears to be a change in approach – at least a debate – within the military and intelligence services in Pakistan about the utility of supporting groups like the LeT. Creating ‘red’ and ‘green’ lines in Afghanistan will take skilful diplomacy, but it is not outside the realm of possibilities. Track two meetings between senior Indian and Pakistani elites suggest that modest measures such as greater attention to trade, joint inspections of Indian development projects in Afghanistan and greater transparency in Indian and Pakistani support to the ANSF may help bridge the trust deficit.

As far as US interests go, more might be done to change the focus from Kashmir, which although muted for the time being continues to exercise the US’ South Asia policy, to regional cooperation in Afghanistan. This will require a change in mindset amongst dyed in the wool American bureaucrats, diplomats and, equally importantly, Washington insiders. Yet, it has every potential to increase the level of contact and buttress transparency between Indian and Pakistani principals who have, so far, seldom held meaningful discussions on their respective roles in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

This article argues that in the current milieu, the task of balancing US interests in South Asia must necessarily involve encouraging dialogue between New Delhi and Pakistan with regard to the conflict raging in Afghanistan. The erstwhile strait jacket approach of looking for a peace deal on Kashmir to balance US interests in South Asia has failed. The early etchings of the ‘AfPak-India’ approach, which somewhat clumsily looked towards a dialogue on Kashmir as a confidence multiplier for the Pakistani military was hijacked by the Mumbai attacks and later denounced by Indian elites.

Quiet diplomacy on the part of the US, rather than loud and ham-handed policy imperatives with little real meaning, has a greater chance of bringing Indian and Pakistani principals to the negotiating table. Further, and in tandem, US interests in focusing Pakistani attention on the Afghan Taliban could be aided by investing greater political capital in a regional dialogue on the future of Afghanistan. No amount of economic incentives is likely to convince the Pakistanis that a proxy war in Afghanistan is unlikely. However, and as Pakistani officials concede, greater transparency between Indian and Pakistani interests in Afghanistan could at least stem the possibility of a civil war supported by respective regional actors. Balancing US interests between India and Pakistan requires fresh thinking and new incentives. A regional peace dialogue supported by the US in Afghanistan has every

opportunity to build confidence, which may even help bridge the trust deficit with regard to Kashmir. The opportunity exists now, before India and Pakistan cement the idea that proxies are in fact the best bet for securing their respective national objectives.

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