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Pakistan's Afghan Dilemma: Seeking that Elusive Sense of Security

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While visiting my senior colleague, Ambassador Qazi Humayun, in September 1995 when he was recovering from a mob attack, with broken teeth and with stitches on his head, after the Pakistan Embassy in Kabul was ransacked on 6 September, I asked him, 'How is it that, every government in Kabul starts with public declaration of friendship with Pakistan but relations sour within six months?' The attacks were allegedly supported by the Rabbani Government helped into power by Pakistan after deposing the Najibullah regime. He did not answer. The question has continued to intrigue me.

Following the bonhomie shown during President Hamid Karzai's visit to Pakistan last month, tensions have again risen between the two countries especially on the border that runs alongside the restive Afghan provinces of Kunar and Nangarhar. Afghan villagers claim being bombarded with hundreds of rockets. News reports indicate that people in these Afghan provinces are calling for 'death to the Pakistani invaders.' The Pakistan army spokesperson, Maj.Gen. Ather Abbas, says that 'the Afghan provinces of Kunar and Nuristan have become sanctuaries and launching pads for attacks on Pakistan...'

Pakistan spent 12 years between the Soviet withdrawal and 9/11 clamouring that Pakistan was left to itself handling Afghanistan and its consequences. The United States (US) obliged this time. Its massive military infrastructure in Afghanistan is not going to be given away easily.

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As the US prepares to partially withdraw from Afghanistan by the middle of next year, recent events point to dangers looming ahead. Feeling the need for strategic depth Pakistan wants to fill in the space, which other regional players are not prepared to allow. History seems to be taking full circle again.

The Durand Line treaty (1893) that divides Afghanistan from Pakistan was signed between the then British Foreign Secretary Sir Mortimer Durand and Afghan Amir Abdul Rehman. Though reaffirmed subsequently the Afghans renounce the treaty. Not even the Taliban government considered closest to Pakistan recognised the Durand Line as an international frontier between the two countries. Hamid Karzai, the current Afghan President called it, ‘a line of hatred that raised a wall between the two brothers.’

At independence Pakistan inherited a major irritant on the western border while feeling insecure on its eastern border with India.

Pakistan’s dilemma, as Aparna Pande has put it in her recent book ‘Escaping India- Explaining Pakistan’s Foreign Policy,’ is that Pakistan views each of its major relationships, including that with Afghanistan, through the prism of Indian threat. ‘These relationships have been designed to secure strategic depth against India,’ she adds.

Much of the problem can be traced back to Pakistan’s narrow geographical shape and perception that India is a mortal enemy out to undo Pakistan. In 1965, when Indian forces crossed the BRB Canal, built partly in defence of Lahore, Pakistan acutely felt the need for strategic depth if it was to fight a conventional war with India. The Afghan posture of neutrality eased Pakistan’s concern that it will be constricted at the western border in case of trouble at the eastern. During this war, the Shah of Iran allowed Pakistan to park its planes in Iran, which further underscored the advantages of space to Pakistani military planners.

General Zia Ul-Haq, the Pakistan military ruler, took the concept further when he aligned with the US against the Soviets, hoping to install a pliant regime in Kabul and in the process secure geographical advantage for Pakistan in any future confrontation with India. The result so far has been the opposite of what Pakistan has hoped for.

Continued pursuit of this policy makes Pakistan unpopular with large segments of Afghans. Covertly interfering in Afghanistan’s affairs to secure strategic advantage is met with resistance. Afghans resent the exclusivity of influence sought by Pakistan. Given the nature of Afghan society, the policy breeds suspicion and consequent violence between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Pakistan continues to miss a key lesson of history that it is the proud people of the north, areas now comprising Afghanistan and central Asia, who descended into the sub-continent instead of the other way round.

People who have never been colonised resist interference from outside powers. That is perhaps the answer to my question left unanswered in 1995.

Pakistan is justifiably seeking to position itself as the major player in Afghanistan post the withdrawal of the foreign forces. Conflicts will erupt if Pakistan aims to deny space to other regional powers.

A stable, friendly Afghanistan is of paramount importance to Pakistan if it does not want a repeat of what Ambassador Qazi Humayun went through on a national level. Pakistan should allow Afghans their space and accept that there are other countries with legitimate interests in Afghanistan. India can be the biggest contributor to this elusive sense of security, which Pakistan so badly needs to focus on its growth and help build a regional economic alliance that should include India, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and beyond. Regional economic interdependence then, is Pakistan's real strategic depth.

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