

ISAS Brief

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The Afghanistan Enigma: Jostling for Influence will Jeopardise Peace

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Political grandstanding aside, the message after United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Islamabad later in October indicates that the two sides are prepared to work together over a plan of action to engage Taliban (read Afghan resistance) in creating a post-US withdrawal structure in Afghanistan.

When Pakistan ruled out military action, both privately and publically, Secretary Clinton could only acknowledge on Fox TV upon return to the US that 'help with a negotiated settlement is perhaps the best the US can hope for from Pakistan'. Though publically insisting upon the policy of 'fight, talk and build', the US is now ready to let Pakistan use its contacts in getting the Afghan resistance groups, including the latest American nemesis, the Haqqani network to the table.

In a volte face from the earlier threats of 'consequences' if terrorist-safe heavens are not dismantled, a message from Secretary Clinton to the US Congress on Friday urges the Congress to continue providing financial assistance to Pakistan. The report accompanying the message admits that disengaging Pakistan 'would undermine America's national security interests'.

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As the US grudgingly comes round to Pakistan's approach, stark differences still remain. Pakistan reportedly believes that a ceasefire must precede negotiations. Following the Vietnam template, the Pentagon wants to fight and talk simultaneously, hoping to force terms on the Afghans. The US wants the Afghans to renounce violence and accept the Afghan constitution as a pre-condition for talks to which Pakistan remains resistant. The Afghan resistance, on its part, wants withdrawal of foreign forces before talks on restructuring begin.

President Barack Obama, struggling with an all-time low approval rating and looming presidential election next year, needs to urgently demonstrate progress in Afghanistan. The Americans are rattled by recent heavy weapons attacks on their Embassy in Kabul Red Zone, and the suicide car attack, killing 17 people, 12 of them Americans. Attacks, such as these, raise alarming doubts regarding the ability of Afghan forces to sustain a security system left behind by the US.

Pakistan's fears on being marginalised in the post-US Afghanistan are exacerbated by the recently signed Indo-Afghan Strategic Agreement that provides for security training to Afghan personnel by India. Refraining from any meddling comments, Pakistan's security establishment fears that this collaboration can lead to encirclement of Pakistan.

The just concluded Istanbul Conference called to map out Afghanistan's future arguably confirms the fears that the US desires to control Central Asian energy resources through longer term military presence. Instead of focusing on the Afghan peace process, the US being the principal promoter of the conference, put up with Turkey a draft which suggests a security mechanism under western leadership, complete with a 'contact group' to mediate intra-regional disputes. Any suggestion of deeper American engagement is viewed with suspicion by regional power brokers, Russia and China. A much whittled down Russian draft got these two countries together with Iran and Pakistan and became the basis of final declaration that only rhetorically 'vows to respect Afghanistan's sovereignty'. The Istanbul results cast a serious doubt if the Bonn meet of 90 countries and 15 United Nations (UN) agencies, scheduled for early December, on the 10th anniversary of the first Bonn conference on Afghanistan, will be of any substance.

For a country that has the most to gain or lose, Pakistan's interest lies in winning the trust of all stakeholders both within Afghanistan and outside, especially India. With an unsettled Afghanistan, India's dream of a trade corridor into Central Asia will not materialise. Pakistan's natural advantage of contiguity and culture should be able to neutralise the perceived threat from India. Forcing a choice on Afghans works to Pakistan's detriment. It has proven to have poisonous effect on Pakistan and, remains so. And, Pakistan with an unsettled frontier in the west will remain an epicenter of extremism with its consequent effects on the region and afar. While individually Pakistan and India do not have the ability to force peace in Afghanistan, each has the ability to act as a spoiler. However, as partners they become a formidable force for stability in the region.

The reconciliation process should be Afghan-led with outside powers acting only as facilitators. Pressurising the Afghans to suit their interests remains unacceptable to them. Given the past tendencies, Pakistan and the US should specially guard against this temptation.

Given the battle-scarred region, the international community, led by the UN agencies, should join in supporting the settlement process that should focus on reconstruction and economic rehabilitation efforts. It is in the interest of all parties that they exit Afghan imbroglio with a degree of prestige and security, leaving the Afghans to fashion their own lives. Jostling for advantages will keep the area up in arms.

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