

# THE CRISIS IN PAKISTAN—UNITED STATES RELATIONS

## AN ANALYSIS OF RECENT EVENTS

*Looking beyond the 2011-12 crisis in the relations between the US and Pakistan, following the November 2011 NATO attack on a Pakistani border post, this article analyses the broader issues at stake between the two states and points out that the real conflict is waged over the future control of Afghanistan. While the Pakistani government tacitly accepts drone strikes carried out by US forces on its territory against tribal guerrillas, it wishes to prevent India, Iran and Russia becoming predominant in Afghanistan following the departure of NATO troops. The author proposes various initiatives that Islamabad could take to bring about a peaceful outcome, acceptable to all main parties.*

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### BACKGROUND

On 26 November 2011 in a brazen incident, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces attacked the Salala post on the Pakistan–Afghanistan border in which 24 Pakistani soldiers were killed. Pakistan was shocked at the incident since it was unprovoked and the government reacted by immediately closing the ground lines of communications (GLoCs) for NATO supplies into Afghanistan from the Karachi port. It also, demanded an apology and

an investigation from the United States of America (US) into the incident. An investigation conducted by NATO suggested that mistakes had been committed on both sides. Pakistan however, firmly rejected this version, insisting that NATO was solely at fault and characterised the incident as “unprovoked, deliberate and planned” (*Dawn*, 5 July 2012). While the US initially seemed receptive to the demand for an apology, it later backtracked because of another terrorist attack in Kabul blamed on the Haqqani Network based inside North Waziristan, Pakistan. As a result, relations between Pakistan and the US became severely strained reaching their lowest ebb in history. It was only seven months after the Salala incident that US Secretary of State Hillary R Clinton apologised and on 3 July 2012, Pakistan and the US reached an agreement to reopen the closed GLoCs. However, the US still characterised the incident as the result of mutual mistakes and did not touch upon the key Pakistani demand of cessation of drone attacks inside North Waziristan (*ibid*). Nonetheless, Pakistan was assured by the US that such an incident would not be repeated. The closing of the GLoCs cost the US at least \$700 million (the final bill may have been significantly higher) as it had to reroute supplies across the more expensive northern route (*Dawn*, 7 July 2012).

Pakistani Prime Minister Raja Pervaiz Ashraf on 5 July 2012 said that the decision to open the GLoCs was taken in the national interest and in light of parliamentary recommendations. Proclaiming the agreement as a “turning point”, Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar stated, “the progress achieved so far would now help the two countries engage seriously on other issues” (*Dawn*, 5 July 2012). The prime minister added:

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“As the drawdown of NATO and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) forces got underway, Pakistan wanted to facilitate the process in the interest of regional peace and stability, because peace and stability in Afghanistan was closely linked to peace and stability in Pakistan... Pakistan was a partner of the international community, playing a leading role against terrorism as a frontline state... The prolonged deadlock over the issue of supplies could have hurt the country’s relations with the NATO countries, including friendly and brotherly Muslim states such as Turkey, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates... It was for the first time in the country’s history that a bipartisan parliamentary consensus was evolved on the broad contours of foreign policy... Pakistan made it clear that its red-lines should be respected and in the same context the new terms of engagement as approved by parliament, visibly heeded to by the US and NATO countries” (*The News International*, Friday, 6 July 2012).

Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain, the Pakistan Muslim League (Q) leader and coalition partner of the ruling Pakistan People’s Party also supported the government’s decision to open NATO supplies. He said:

“No country could afford international diplomatic isolation... (and) the presence of US, NATO and ISAF forces in Afghanistan represented 50 countries under the UN mandate... The diplomatic impasse over the issue could have created problems for Pakistan at the UN... Foreign policy decisions needed to be taken in a dispassionate and cool-headed manner as the stakes were too high to be left at the mercy of emotions and irrational behaviour” (*ibid*).

Clinton held a three-way meeting with Khar and Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmi Rassoul in Tokyo, Japan on 8 July 2012. Among other topics, the discussions covered “stalled Afghan reconciliation efforts... (and) enhancing US–Pakistani economic ties to make it a relationship defined more by trade than aid”. Without going into details Clinton “acknowledged the lingering difficulties hindering US–Pakistani cooperation” and expressed hope that Pakistan’s reopening of the GLoCs

would lead to a “broader *rapprochement* in US–Pakistani relations after a difficult period for the reluctant allies” (“Clinton Looks for Better US–Pakistani Cooperation”, *Dawn*, 8 July 2012, available at <http://dawn.com>). Clinton added:

“We are both encouraged that we have been able to put the recent difficulties behind us so we can focus on the many challenges ahead of us. We want to use the positive momentum generated by our recent agreement to take tangible steps on our many shared, core interests. The most important of these, is fighting the militant groups who have used Pakistan as a rear base to attack American troops and jeopardise the future of Afghanistan... (and) focus on the necessity of defeating the terror networks that threaten the stability of both Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as the interests of the US... A challenging but essential relationship... I have no reason to believe that it will not continue to raise hard questions for us both... but it is something that is in the interests of the US as well as the interests of Pakistan”.

#### POLITICS OF THE PAKISTANI OPPOSITION

Islamic radicals, nationalist groups and opposition parties in Pakistan were angered at the reopening of the GLoCs—a reaction anticipated by the government. The *Difa-e Pakistan Council (DPC)* announced a protest march from Lahore to Islamabad on 8 July 2012. Headed by Maulana Samiul Haq of the *Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI)*, the *DPC* is allegedly supported by the Inter Services Intelligence and composed of a group of Islamist parties and other Rightwing groups, including but not limited to the *JUI*, the *Jamaat-e-Islami* and the banned *Jamaat-ud-Dawa* headed by Hafiz Muhammad Sayeed,

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Sheikh Rasheed Ahmed, Hameed Gul and Hafiz Rehman Makki (*Dawn*, 5 July 2012). According to Haq, the Asif Ali Zardari government “defied parliament which had clearly decided not to resume the supply as long as drone attacks were

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not stopped” (*ibid*). Condemning the restoration of the GLoCs, main opposition parties like the Pakistan Muslim League (N) and the *Tehrik-e-Insaaf* called it a “violation of the parliament’s resolutions” and announced protest marches as well. Thus, the popular outcry against the US was immense and given the high anti-American sentiment in the country, the

marches attracted a large number of people. The opposition simply rode the wave of popular antipathy against the US.

Did the reopening of the GLoCs lead to a breakthrough in Pakistan–US relations as depicted by the government and its coalition partners? Did the stalemate end leading to a new beginning? Clearly, the Government of Pakistan was in damage control mode and the reality was aptly captured by the *Wall Street Journal* (“The Latest US–Pakistan Deal: Islamabad backs down as its anti-Americanism exacts a Diplomatic Price”, 4 July 2012, available at <http://online.wsj.com>).

“Pakistan is spinning the deal with the US to reopen NATO supply routes to Afghanistan as a triumph of its diplomacy. But it was Islamabad that climbed down from its extortionate demands and accepted the *status quo ante*. That is a big change from previous situations when it was able to extort more aid out of Washington. The deal ended a seven month-long diplomatic standoff that began with a NATO incident on the Pakistan–Afghanistan border in November and led to the closing of land routes through Pakistan. Islamabad sought a full apology from the US for provoking the firefight in which 24 Pakistani troops died. But Washington says the Pakistanis opened fire first in the border clash and even now it offers a carefully worded statement that it is ‘sorry for the losses’... Pakistan’s demands were

partly bluster from the military, which has been looking to salve its pride since the Osama bin Laden raid, but the Obama administration was not exactly eager to make nice with a country Americans increasingly believe is acting in bad faith. The generals also noticed that Defence Secretary Leon Panetta last month reached out to their traditional rivals in New Delhi and their usual paranoia probably kicked in. It is useful to remind Pakistan that it is not indispensable. The other reason Islamabad adopted such a stance and stuck to it for so long is more worrying. The ruling party—beleaguered at home—had whipped up so much jingoism that it feared a political backlash if it backed down easily. Opposition politicians, mostly from religious parties, are now threatening protests against the government, so Islamabad could yet try to back out of the deal. Pakistan's leaders find it convenient to open the Pandora's Box of radical Islam and anti-Americanism for short-term gains. However, it is Pakistan itself that has paid the highest price for that ugly bargain".

Despite all the politics and spin of the so-called breakthrough in Pakistan–US relations, the reopening of the GLoCs was overall a positive development for both countries. Contrary to the impression given by the Pakistani government and the opposition political parties, drone attacks occur with the permission of both the government and the army, though neither is willing to admit it for fear of political backlash and they therefore publicly turn against the US. In some ways, drone strikes are a phony issue. In fact, there is a convergence of national interests between the Pakistani government and military on allowing the strikes inside Pakistan. Thus, the lingering issue of drone strikes in North Waziristan may be resolved by

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the sharing of responsibility. The real sticking point in Pakistan–US relations and the main divergence of national interests is not the war on terror inside Pakistan but the one in neighbouring Afghanistan. This problem is real and remains. The conflictual issue is the playing out of the so-called endgame in Afghanistan after US/NATO/ISAF troops depart by the end of 2014.

The Government of Pakistan would prefer to see the *Taliban* in power in Afghanistan. This at least seems to be the present thinking in the corridors of power.

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Whether this actually happens or not depends on a number of factors especially on how the endgame plays out—will Washington and Islamabad join hands or not. In the interest of regional peace, both countries should unite and earnestly plan for a viable endgame. Nothing would be more significant for both Pakistan and the US than a “doable” Afghan endgame strategy. Is Pakistan ready for the challenge? Unfortunately, the government is preoccupied with internal economic and political crises to do much

in the area of foreign policy. It also does not have the capacity to take meaningful action. Given the control of the army over foreign and security policy, little can be expected from the government. In addition, the Foreign Office does not have a viable strategy in place to deal with the situation. Thus, peace in Afghanistan remains a formidable challenge.

#### AFGHANISTAN POST-2014

The departure of US and allied troops from Afghanistan by end 2014 does not suggest that there will be peace in the country—there is a real danger of a civil war erupting. The country is weak and fragmented on ethnic lines and its politics are complex. The Afghan *Taliban* are supposedly supported by Pakistan, the Northern Alliance by India and Russia and the Hazaras by Iran. With the eventual departure of

foreign troops, the *Taliban* will bid for power in Afghanistan, but will face resistance in Hazara, Tajik and Uzbek areas. Today, the *Taliban* only control southern Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the US has signed a strategic partnership agreement with the Afghan government to assist in building-up Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to the strength of 230,000 at a cost of \$4 billion. Given the reality of Afghanistan, the chances of a half-decent national army are slim. The present Hamid Karzai government is not only corrupt but also weak and ineffective. It is not expected to last long after foreign combat troops leave, when it will assume responsibility for its own security.

The past performance of the Karzai government has been dismal. In all Afghanistan has received nearly \$60 billion in civilian aid since 2002. According to the World Bank, foreign aid nearly equals the country's gross domestic product. On 8 July 2012, international donors pledged \$16 billion in a major donors' conference in Tokyo, Japan attended by about 70 countries and organisations. The conference aimed at setting aid levels for the crucial period through and beyond 2014, with the American portion expected to be about a billion dollars as compared to \$2.3 billion in 2012. The total amount of international civilian support represents a slight decline from the current annual level of about \$5 billion. Japan, the second-largest donor, said it would provide up to \$3 billion through 2016 and Germany announced it would keep its contribution to development and rebuilding at its current level of \$536 million a year, at least until 2016. The \$4 billion in annual civilian aid would be on top of \$4.1 billion in yearly assistance pledged last May at a NATO conference in Chicago to fund the ANSF from 2015 to 2017. However, the flow of aid is expected to diminish sharply after international troops withdraw, despite the ongoing threat faced by the country from the *Taliban* and other militants.

Along with security issues, donors have become wary of widespread corruption and poor project governance. Aid is intended to provide a stabilising factor as

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Afghanistan transitions to greater independence from international involvement, but it will come with conditions. The pledges are expected to establish a road map of accountability to ensure that Afghanistan does more to improve finance and governance management and safeguard the democratic process, rule of law and human rights, especially of women. Meanwhile, although Karzai has vowed to “fight corruption with strong resolve”, he still faces international wariness with the war and frustration over his failure to crack down on corruption. Clinton acknowledged that corruption was a “major problem”. The donors plan to set up monitoring and review measures to ensure aid is used for development and not wasted by corruption or mismanagement, which has been a major hurdle in putting aid projects into practice (“Afghan Donors Meet offers \$16 Billion in Development Aid”, *Dawn*, 8 July 2012, available at *ibid*).

#### THE NEXT STEPS

Events in Afghanistan must be analysed from the perspective of different stakeholders, especially Pakistan. The Pakistani military is worried about India's inroads into Afghanistan and its desire for a role in the future of the country. More importantly, it believes that the US has encouraged India in this development. The military leadership is apprehensive of any Indian role in Afghanistan and firmly believes that these developments are at the cost of Pakistan. The reality however is different.

#### *Joint actions Pakistan and the US should undertake in Afghanistan:*

1. Join hands to broker a power sharing arrangement and different power groups especially the *Taliban* and the Northern Alliance should be brought to the negotiating table. Intense and coordinated diplomatic activity would be required for any meaningful intra-Afghan dialogue. These negotiations would be tedious but are needed nevertheless.
2. Pakistan must facilitate a *Taliban*–US deal to the extent possible and Washington must work with Islamabad on this issue.
3. Both countries should hold a series of meetings in Islamabad to chalk out the contours of a viable endgame in Afghanistan. Later, other regional players like the Central Asian Republics China, India, Iran and Russia should be invited to contribute in finalising the endgame.

*Actions Pakistan should undertake immediately:*

1. Convince the US that it knows Afghanistan better than any other state and therefore be trusted to play a key role in the endgame. Confidence building measures should include:
  - i. Renouncing the old discredited policy of “strategic depth” and “friendly western border” propounded by the Pakistani army. The Zardari government must wrest control of the Afghan policy from the hands of the military and immediately stop supporting the Haqqani Network and the *Lashkar-e-Taiba*.
  - ii. Engaging with the US, which is counting on Pakistani help to convince the *Taliban* and other groups fighting the Afghan government to halt violence and enter a political dialogue.
  - iii. Stopping the *DPC* from going overboard in protesting against the US.
  - iv. Joining American efforts to tackle the Islamic extremist problem.

*Actions the US should undertake immediately:*

1. Stop covert Central Intelligence Agency activity in Pakistan.
2. Reach out to Pakistani civil society in an effort to “win hearts and minds” and acknowledge that some past actions have been responsible for animosity among Muslims.
3. Openly support Pakistan in a final and decisive military campaign against terrorist hideouts in North Waziristan. The Pakistani army is exhausted and cannot do this alone.
4. Release stuck Coalition Support Funds to Pakistan.

Before the reopening of the GLoCs, Pakistan–US relations had reached their lowest ebb but there are signs that these could be repaired. Both sides must resolve their differences with a new determination. They have a convergence of national interests in seeking a peaceful and stable Afghanistan and should work as real partners rather than rivals. There is

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no reason for the deep mistrust to be prolonged. However, the US does have adversaries inside Pakistan. Certain Islamic radical and other nationalist groups are convinced that the US is their perpetual enemy. They see America as an opponent of Islam—negative experiences and history have sharpened these perceptions. Nonetheless, just as circumstances can change, so can perceptions. The people of Pakistan oppose certain official US state policies and are not just anti-America as such. Media reports exaggerate

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negative perceptions on both sides. However, misperceptions should not come in the way of sensible policymaking. Both nations need each other to build lasting peace in the region. Dreams of a peaceful, prosperous and secure Pakistan–Afghanistan are the aspirations of all Pakistanis and Afghans. However, such dreams will not be realised without sustained efforts—

proper planning and wise policymaking are required. Prudence and not emotion is the need of the hour. Pakistan will lose more if the Afghanistan endgame falters and therefore must act immediately.

#### PAKISTAN–US RELATIONS AND THE ISSUE OF AFGHANISTAN

The events of 2011–12—primarily the logjam on the Afghanistan issue—strained the Pakistan–US relationship. A lack of vision and straight thinking in both Pakistani and American leadership circles was mainly responsible for the sharp deterioration in relations. Continuing American drone strikes inside Waziristan have caused a swell of anti-American feelings in the country. However, it seems unlikely that the Obama administration will stop them any time soon and mutual distrust has created a crisis situation. The shortcomings of the Zardari government are that it is incompetent and too preoccupied with domestic political disorder to take bold decisions on the Afghan issue. Unfortunately, the military establishment still calls the shots on matters of foreign policy and national security. This may be by default as the civilian government is too weak to take charge. The government has failed to give

reasonable direction on foreign policy or national security. Foreign troops will pull out of Afghanistan in 2014 and future power arrangements in Kabul are a major bone of contention between Pakistan and the US. Furthermore, negotiations between Washington and the *Taliban* in Qatar have stalled. The US has also lost patience with Pakistan as it continues backing the Afghan *Taliban*, who fight NATO/ISAF military forces in Afghanistan from safe havens inside Pakistani territory. This is now an open secret though still denied officially by Pakistan.

Why is Pakistan hedging its bets on the Afghan *Taliban*? This is primarily because of its legacy in Afghanistan, especially during the Soviet occupation in 1979 and eventual ouster in 1989. Pakistan and the US had a convergence of interests then and both supported the *Mujahedeen* against the Soviet occupation force. This helped create the *Taliban* in the mid-1990s and these connections matter given the presence of the large Pakhtun population in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province on the Pakistan–

Afghan border. Moreover, the Pakistani military believes in the doctrine of “strategic depth” inside Afghanistan as a national interest priority, part of a larger strategic plan in its combat posture against arch enemy India. However, things have changed and the old doctrine is no longer valid. India–Pakistan relations have improved and Pakistan is less threatened than before. It is a nuclear power and has enough military muscle to deter India from any adventure against it. Reportedly, Pakistan has the fastest development in nuclear establishment in the world. Many

believe that considering Pakistan’s military might India would not attack for fear of unleashing a “nuclear “Armageddon” in South Asia. Pakistan has thus attained a stage where it is reasonably protected against India and other enemies. Therefore, it has the luxury of shifting focus to human security and development areas. The economy faces formidable challenges, requiring immediate attention. Pakistan has achieved a great deal in the military area and must now focus on the welfare of its people.

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Massive corruption, endemic bad governance, mismanagement and misperceived priorities have wreaked havoc on the country. The issue of human security, as opposed to military security, must now be the strategic priority of the government. This would require a paradigm shift as the military establishment is still obsessed with military security issues. Will the military establishment of Pakistan realise that the country has weakened from within because of the governance crisis engulfing it today? Will the military establishment cut its share of the budget and divest scarce resources to solve the serious energy crisis? More importantly, will the military establishment give up its policy of backing the *Taliban* in Afghanistan? Unfortunately, answers to all three

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questions remain in the negative. The problem with the Pakistani military establishment is that it fails to see the people's aspirations as legitimate. Given its great power, as it is still in charge, the military has lost vision of true national interests. The people want economic opportunities, national peace and stability. They also want peace in the region, which includes both Afghanistan and India. To facilitate the US pullout in 2014, the Pakistani government must repair Pakistan-US relations.

There is a convergence of national interests between Pakistan and the US on the issue of peace and stability in Afghanistan after the pullout. The Pakistani government must desist from "playing favourites" and reach out to Northern Alliance and other non-Pakhtun groups in a bid for reconciliation. The role of India in Afghanistan should also not become an issue. Afghanistan is a member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and India has legitimate interests in Afghanistan. However, Pakistan must negotiate an end to Indian interference in Baluchistan by severing its own links with *jihadi* entities in India. A *quid pro quo* could be worked out through diplomacy and with patience. It is in Pakistan's national interest to have peace and stability in Afghanistan by working out a power arrangement

that includes the *Taliban*. Islamabad must have a proactive foreign policy and take the initiative to arrange negotiations for a transfer of power after the 2014 pullout. China, India, Iran, Russia and the US must be included in this diplomatic initiative and all concerned stakeholders brought in to settle a power-sharing arrangement.

In Lebanon, different ethnic groups have devised a formula for sharing power and this formula could be applied in the case of Afghanistan. General elections would have to wait until after a formula was worked out. While a Pakhtun could become the president, other important positions could be given to non-Pakhtuns. A sort of balance of power arrangement could be worked out prior to general elections.

The American model of democracy may not work but a new democracy of ethnic groups sharing power may be more applicable. There is little time left, as these negotiations would be prolonged and tedious at best and unworkable at worst. In the interest of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, it is certainly worth a try. Only Pakistan could host such negotiations, as no other country would have more at stake in a post-Western Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the Pakistani leadership is too inept and ineffective to take this needed diplomatic initiative.

**In Afghanistan a sort of balance of power arrangement could be worked out prior to general elections. The American model of democracy may not work but a new democracy of ethnic groups sharing power may be more applicable. There is little time left, as these negotiations would be prolonged and tedious at best and unworkable at worst.**

The region will surely lose if timely action is not taken to secure Afghanistan after US and NATO troops leave in 2014—a new peacekeeping force may have to replace Western troops. It would be best if an Organization of Islamic Countries peacekeeping force were to be deployed to secure Afghanistan for some years. Pakistan could be instrumental in setting up a Muslim peacekeeping force for eventual deployment in Afghanistan. However, Pakistan must first get its own house in order and resolve its own serious governance issues. A future of peace, prosperity and stability in Afghanistan would beckon only if both Pakistan and the US build a true partnership for the purpose. Nothing else will do. Meanwhile, the clock is ticking—Pakistan does not have much time to change direction. ❏