

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind

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Why the End of Afghan War is Likely

The US and western countries have given hundreds of millions of dollars during the past seventeen years to Afghanistan to reconstruct and build its security infrastructures. However, low troop morale, widespread corruption among commanders and officials, and nefarious intervention by multiple external countries has kept large parts of Afghanistan unstable. The stalemate of war has frustrated both sides because no winning horizon is foreseeable for the warring parties. This situation made the US President Donald Trump's administration sent veteran Afghan-born diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad to Afghanistan with a clear mission: Finding an end to America's 17-year-long war with the Taliban.

Thus, there are several key factors making some form of ceasefire and/or peace possible, if not necessarily fully probable in the war torn Afghanistan. First, according to the military experts, the Afghan Special Forces are actually fairly effective. Though they do not constitute a large percentage of Afghan forces, they are well trained and well commanded and they have played a key role in preventing Taliban to hold large towns or cities for long. Second, most of the country's thirty-five million people are not just tired of war, but they are expressing their discontent in novel ways. For example, the breakthrough ceasefire in June also coincided with a young-person-led "Peace Caravan" that traveled from Helmand province on foot to Kabul to demand a cessation to the conflict. Third, there is fresh evidence that many Taliban commanders and fighters have also grown weary of the carnage and they are not fully committed to the group as the past.

Fourth, the United States and its allies have not only increased their attacks on the Taliban as of late, but it has for the first time in the conflict engaged the Taliban directly at the negotiating table—with Washington also naming a special envoy for the conflict in the seasoned diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad. And he started direct negotiations with Taliban although the US had long maintained that it was proper for the Taliban to deal diplomatically only with the Afghan government.

Finally, what may prove most decisive of these factors, the notorious Great Game—in which outside powers have intervened in and jostled over Afghanistan for a century and a half—is proving surprisingly propitious in terms of a rare coinciding of the interests of these countries? Specifically, it appears that the stability of Afghanistan is now squarely in the interests of all of parties, including the US, Europe, Turkey, China, India, Russia, Iran, Pakistan and the Gulf countries.

For Americans and Europeans Afghan stability is obviously a stated goal and consistent pursuit, as well as the Turks and the Indians—and for the most part Saudi Arabia and its fellow Gulf countries, who have a shared interest in keeping insurgents at bay. Stability of Afghanistan is in the interest of Iran because her interests lie in trading as much as possible with all of its neighbors, coming out of sanctions and more recently being subject to them again. For example, Iran is working with both India and Afghanistan to build up its Chabahar Port, which is to connect to the latter by rail. In addition, eastern Iran is particularly prone to drought, and the rivers it shares with Afghanistan flow downhill from the Afghan side of the border.

Russia also gains no benefits from insurgencies and it is wary that, and feeding the insurgency in Afghanistan has led to part of it to spread to within what it defines as its sphere of influence in Central Asia. In fact, Russia, Iran, China and Pakistan all have encouraged the Taliban to join to the peace talks.

China is rapidly building its Belt and Road Initiative, as a strategic project, across the region, thought it did make a highly impactful decision to cut Afghanistan out of its immediate plans by choosing Pakistan to be the recipient of a massive road/rail/port network that has come to be called the Chinese Pakistan Economic Corridor. Yet the Chinese have recently come to realize that it is in their interest to build spurs off of CPEC into Afghanistan, so as to connect with the Central Asian states. Further, China may slowly be coming to realize that it is capable of accomplishing something than even the United States cannot, viz. pressuring Pakistan to end its support of the Haqqani network, one of the most fearsome elements of the Taliban network (due to CPEC it has enormous leverage over the Pakistanis).

Finally, Pakistan has long kept what it calls "a buffer zone" in place in Afghanistan by hosting and funding the Haqqanis and other Taliban leaders/forces. It has done this partially to achieve "strategic heft" against India, but primarily because it has not wanted Afghanistan to become stable and develop ahead of it. In light of Afghanistan's sizable deposits of oil and gas and rare earth minerals, Pakistani leaders primarily in its security forces have aimed to keep Afghanistan unstable. But now that Pakistan will almost certainly develop sooner than its northern neighbor due precisely to CPEC, it stands to benefit from a stable Afghanistan—not only from the diplomatic kudos it will receive for ending its Taliban support, but being energy-poor it needs oil and electricity from energy-rich Central Asia to transit in grid and pipeline networks across Afghanistan. The Afghans are particularly savvy at promoting energy and transport infrastructure projects with the Central Asians, which bodes well for Pakistan.

In a nutshell, the world powers and Afghan neighbors have always been interested to have a foothold in Afghanistan. As such they had their own national-security interests at stake in Afghanistan, and intervened there regularly whether invited or uninvited. But each of them now share, for the first time in history, joint interests in a stable Afghanistan.

Why a Regional Collective Security Mechanism (CSM) Shall Be Established

By: Mohammed Gul Sahibzada

Time has come for the Governments of Afghanistan, India and Iran, the Islamic Republic, to start discussion about formation of a Collective Security Mechanism (CSM) among the three countries against attacks and infiltration in their respective countries by terrorist groups harbored, trained and supported by military establishment of Pakistan. Recent suicide attacks in the Kashmir, India and in Iran, which killed more than seventy security personnel in total, are eye openers for countries bordering Pakistan with respect to prevention of future attacks from that country. Afghanistan has been victim of terrorist attacks and proxy wars since last forty years and they have linkages to Pakistan. This episode continues to take immense toll on social, economic and security sectors in the country. Emboldened by perceived successes in Afghanistan, Pakistan military is reportedly advancing its interests and agendas by using these terror groups as proxies in other countries, including India for a long time too, and now Iran. Pakistan has weak central Government and many centers of power, which include its powerful military and its intelligence agency ISI, militant groups and to some extent the civilian federal Government. History has proven it times and again that simply putting pressure through official channels on civilian Government of Pakistan by lodging complaints or summoning ambassadors will only give face value and scratch surface of the matter, but will not lead to any tangible results. It is, therefore, time to construct own or regional defensive mechanisms that can ward off any misadventure by terrorist elements harbored or originated in that country. Establishment of a joint, Collective Security Mechanism (CSM) among the security and defense organizations of Afghanistan, India and Iran can be the only effective way forward towards building defenses against such misadventures. Putting in place CSM, which might also include mutual cooperation, vision for collective and shared threats and rapid response mechanism to any terror attacks, will dampen ability of terrorist organizations and their supporters including state support and will force masterminds of such attacks to think twice before daring to proceed on such misadventure in future.

Upendra Baghel, a researcher on Afghanistan and regional security issues, is of the view that regional coalition consisting of India, Iran and Afghanistan should approach the United Nations Security Council to take necessary measures to maintain international peace and security, if they have reasonable grounds that situation in Pakistan is a serious threat to region and the current situation is creating international friction. India has accused Pakistan for sponsoring terrorism in Kashmir and the recent vehicle borne suicide explosion created massive anger and anguish at every level

in India urging the government to take revenge. Prime Minister Modi said that the time for talks with Pakistan was over and the "blood of the people is boiling". He said that the forces behind the terrorism will definitely be punished. Iran also warned Pakistan it would pay a heavy price for allegedly harboring militants. Afghanistan has already complained to the Security Council on the issue of travel of Taliban and their scheduled meetings in Islamabad, which had been put off. In 2017, US President criticized Pakistan for providing "safe havens to terrorist organizations" and warned Islamabad. Following it, the US administration withheld aid to Pakistan. The right to self-defense, including the right to combat terror, is a corner stone of international law. These countries may exercise this right and use proportionate force lawfully. These are sufficient for the Security Council to investigate the situation in Pakistan in order to determine further course to avert frictions and armed interventions in the region. The outcome of these may prompt the Security Council to resolve the dispute peacefully and support the international community in their resolve to fight terrorism.

Upendra elaborates that 'supporting Pakistan in recalibrating their anti-terrorism measures and launching reforms in Pakistan security sector followed by governance will reestablish international peace and security and pursuant to it, the Coalition may request the Council to establish 'monitoring mechanism' and 'support linked to reforms and sanctions for breach'. It is, therefore, time to act in alliance to keep our people, our country and our values safe. Though there might be some bumps on the road to achieving this goal, for example conflicting interests of our international partners including the US position on Iran, but these matters could be separated in a way that regional cooperation taken with a view to eliminate terrorism and clean up this whole region from the scourge of terrorist attacks and, which would eventually result in destruction of safe havens of these terrorist groups would bode well for all. It is advisable that Government of Afghanistan and India start looking at opening this discussion with the US, Russia, UK, France and China and NATO member countries. We, the countries of Afghanistan, India and Iran, can diagnose and act much better against our enemy, 'terrorism' in this region than our international partners, and the reason is that we are living here and understand the nature, tactics, geography and local knowledge. A regional CSM body intertwined with UN mechanism, which is tasked to protect and defend our three countries, is in the interest of the region in particular and the world in general.

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South Asian Geopolitics: Saudi Arabia: 1 Iran: 0?

By: James M. Dorsey

It may be reading tea leaves but analysis of the walk-up to Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit and his sojourn in Islamabad suggests that Pakistan may be about to fight battles on two fronts rather than just the Indian one in the wake of this month's attacks in Kashmir.

Prince Mohammed's expressions of unconditional support for Pakistan coupled with his promise of US\$20 billion in investments in addition to US\$6 billion in desperately needed financial aid raise the spectre of a shift in Pakistani efforts in recent years to walk a fine line in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

That fine line included a 2015 Pakistani refusal to send troops to the kingdom in support of the Saudi military intervention in Yemen.

Speaking to the Arab News this week, Major General Asif Ghafoor, head of the Pakistan army's media wing, suggested that Pakistan's commitment to Saudi Arabia was equally unconditional. "Pakistan is committed to standing by its Saudi brethren," Maj. Gen. Ghafoor said.

Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi seemed to fine tune the officer's statement by not mentioning Yemen in his remarks to the Saudi paper and limiting Pakistan's commitment to the kingdom itself. "If anyone would create chaos in or attack the Kingdom, Pakistan would stand by its brethren Saudi Arabia," Mr. Qureshi said.

The stakes for Pakistan that borders on Iran and is home to the world's largest minority Shiite Muslim community could not be higher.

Concerned that Pakistan's position may be shifting, Iran this week dialed up the rhetoric by warning that Pakistan would "pay a high price" for last week's attack in the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchistan that killed 27 Revolutionary Guards.

Like with India in the case of Kashmir, Iran asserted that the perpetrators, Jaish-al-Adl, were operating from Pakistani territory with at least the tacit knowledge of Pakistani authorities. In an unusual disclosure, Iran said three of the six perpetrators of last week's attack, including the suicide bomber, were Pakistani nationals.

In the past, Iran has by and large said that militants who had launched attacks were Iranian nationals rather than Pakistanis.

The tone of Revolutionary Guards chief Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari's statement holding Pakistan, alongside the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel, responsible for the recent attack reflected Iranian concern with what may flow from Prince Mohammed's visit.

"Why do Pakistan's army and security body ... give refuge to these anti-revolutionary groups? Pakistan will no doubt pay a high price. Just in the past year, six or seven suicide attacks were neutralized but they were able to carry out this one," Maj. Gen. Jafari said in remarks live on state television.

Initially, Iran had limited itself to blaming external powers rather than Pakistan for the attack.

Indications suggesting that Prince Mohammed's visit to Pakistan may have been about more than economic cooperation were severalfold and involved gestures that despite Pakistani denials would not have come without a price tag.

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan expressed in a little noticed declaration in their joint statement at the end of the crown prince's visit "the need to avoid politicization of the United Nations listing system."

The statement was implicitly referring to Indian efforts to get the UN Security Council to designate Masood Azhar as a global terrorist. Mr. Azhar is the head of Jaish-e-Mohammed, the group that has claimed responsibility

for the Kashmir attack.

China, which at Pakistan's behest has blocked Mr. Azhar's designation in recent years, this week rejected an Indian request that it lift its veto. China asserts that Indian evidence fails to meet UN standards.

The reference to UN listing in the Saudi-Pakistani statement seemingly failed to resonate in New Delhi where Prince Mohammed stopped after visiting Islamabad.

In another tantalizing incident, Mr. Qureshi, the Pakistani foreign minister, did nothing to distance his country from a statement in his presence by Saudi State Minister for Foreign Affairs Adel Al-Jubeir accusing Iran of being the "world's chief sponsor of terrorism"

Similarly, in preparation of Prince Mohammed's talks, retired General Raheel Sharif, the Pakistani commander of the Saudi-based, 40-nation Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), flew from Riyadh to Islamabad for talks with prime minister Imran Khan and Pakistani chief of staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa.

Pakistan agreed to General Sharif's appointment as commander despite its refusal to join the coalition in the belief that the 2017 Saudi request that he be seconded put the South Asian nation between a rock and hard place.

Pakistani military officials argued at the time that while the appointment would irritate Iran, refusal of the Saudi request would expose Pakistan to criticism from many more in the Islamic world.

Neither the Pakistani government nor the IMCTC gave details of General Sharif's discussions. The IMCTC, however, said in a tweet that "salient contours of IMCTC's domains and initiatives in the fight against #terrorism were discussed."

The tone and gestures during Prince Mohammed's visit contrasted starkly with positions adopted by Mr. Khan during his election campaign and immediately after he took office last year.

In his first post-election televised speech Mr. Khan made a point of discussing his country's relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran.

"We want to improve ties with Iran. Saudi Arabia is a friend who has always stood by us in difficult times. Our aim will be that whatever we can do for conciliation in the Middle East, we want to play that role. Those tensions, that fight, between neighbours, we will try to bring them together," Mr. Khan said.

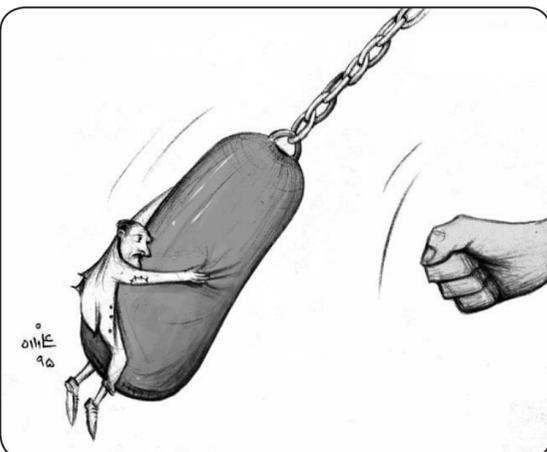
The geopolitical fallout, if any, of what for now amounts to symbolism will likely only be evident in the weeks and months to come.

Beyond Iran's toughening stance towards Pakistan in the wake of the attack on its Revolutionary Guards, tell-tale signs would be a closer Pakistani alignment with the Saud-led anti-terrorism coalition and the degree to which Pakistan-based militant launch attacks inside Iran.

Middle East scholar Michael Stephens, who heads the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) operation in Qatar suggested that reading the tea leaves may best be done with a grain of salt.

"Geography is what it is, and Pakistan will always have to maintain a relationship with Iran (economic and security) regardless of how much cash it gets from Riyadh... Pakistan will do what's best for Pakistan, and not Riyadh, the US or Tehran. Telling everyone what they want to hear is kinda how this all works," Mr. Stephens said.

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