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Overview of Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations

Pakistan – From Major Non-NATO Ally to a Battleground:

Seven years after terrorists struck at the symbol of American might – the World Trade Centre and Pentagon – and the start of the questionable war against terrorism on October 7, 2001, Afghanistan remains in the grip of intransigent Taliban and Al-Qaeda on the one hand, and in indirect control of major NATO nations, backed up by 71,000 troops on the other. Terrorists in neighboring Pakistan are also on the loose, with about 28 suicide attacks in the first eight months of the year so far. In his address to the National Defense University in Washington on September 9, the U.S. President George W. Bush resonated his defense establishment's conviction when he declared Pakistan as the new "battleground for the war on terror" and that "terrorists carrying out attacks in Islamabad and Karachi are planning attacks on targets outside Pakistan as well. Eliminating these people hiding in Pakistan's mountainous border regions is both in the interest as well as the responsibility of the government," Bush said.

The same day, at a press conference together with his Pakistani counterpart Asif Ali Zardari in Islamabad, the Afghan President Hamid Karzai underscored the need to "destroy terrorist sanctuaries whether in Afghanistan or Pakistan." No peace is possible without cracking down on these "enemies of our countries," Karzai emphasized. Hours later, the US Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen said he was already "looking at a new, more comprehensive strategy for the region" that would cover both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. "We can hunt down and kill extremists as they cross over the border

"The security situation is worsening day-by-day. The government is still in a deep sleep. There are no jobs, no good income, so it is obvious that kidnappings will increase," said Jawed Rashidi, a doctor in Kabul.

Lose-lose Situation in Afghanistan: During the current year, the spiraling violence in Afghanistan has taken some 3,800 lives including some 200 foreign troops in the first eight months alone. Violence overall in Eastern

Afghan military does not have the capacity to fighting the insurgents on its soil and there has not been any coherent effort from Kabul to take on Taliban while Pakistani military not only is capable of taking on them but also has done that in Swat and various regions of FATA.

Afghanistan has been up by up to 30% and to 50 percent in some areas, reckoned NATO and Afghan officials, if compared with 2007. Since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom, US-led coalition troops have lost about 955 soldiers topped by the United States with 583 casualties, followed by 117 of Great Britain, and 96 of Canada.

Generally, security is deteriorating, corruption running, food prices soaring, job market moving at a snail's pace, and inflation eating into the already meager incomes of the vast majority. These circumstances only add to poverty in a country which is already one of the poorest in the world, with life expectancy only around 44 years. (Reuters, Sep 7)

Some 130 people have been reported kidnapped in the last five months, the Afghan Criminal Investigation Department (CID) says, but the real number is believed to be far higher. Security analysts in the country say the situation has become "even direr." While not taking territory, the Taliban is terrorizing the population, targeting roads and restricting the government's ability to function.

Security on Ground: Currently, close to 71,000 foreign troops drawn from 40 countries, including 34,000 from the U.S, are based in Afghanistan to quell the Taliban insurgency, backed up by 60,000 strong Afghan National Army with 8000 under training, and some 76 000 national police, both inadequately trained though. Of the 34,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, 19,000 operate under U.S. Central Command, and the rest placed under the NATO-led international force. Major General Robert Cone, in charge of helping to train the Afghan army, says plans are afoot to raise Afghan army strength to a "122,000-strong structure, with a total of 134,000 personnel. "The extra 12,000 would allow keeping a lot of people in school and training,"

Cone said in Brussels early September. In addition to the combat brigade of about 3,500 to 4,000 troops being readied for deployment by end of this year, U.S. officials also plan to withdraw about 2,000 non-combat support personnel from Iraq and transfer about 1,300 Marines from Iraq's Anbar province to western Afghanistan.

Karzai – A Powerless Protégé’s Corrupt Government:

Though run by an elected president and a bicameral parliament, President Hamid Karzai's government remains beset as much by administrative and financial problems as by an almost direct control over governance by roughly 20 member Policy Advisory Group (PAG) comprising nine Afghan ministers/advisors with about an equal number of foreign diplomats and internationals (US, NATO and ISAF officials). The government remains hamstrung as far as vital security, financial and foreign affairs are concerned because the PAG, led by the US deputy chief of mission and assisted by Political Adviser to CIMISAF/ NATO, discusses and decides issues such security situation assessment, Auxiliary Police Initiative, update on joint security plan Kabul, ministerial visits abroad, updates on situation in Kandahar und Helmand, and sharing updated strategic communication messages.

The Afghan government relies on aid for about 90 percent of its total expenditure. Unemployment stands at around 40 percent with 80 percent of Afghanistan’s labor force employed in agriculture, and massive unemployment because of a staggering reconstruction process.

Early September President’s apparent unease over foreign interference came to the fore when he accused Great Britain for the resurgence of the Taliban and its growing activity in large tracts of the country. Talking to Afghan MPs, Karzai claimed Premier Gordon Brown had threatened to withdraw British troops from Helmand province, if the president reinstated Sher Mohammed Akhonzada, the former governor of the insurgency infected and drugs-rich Helmand province. Akhonzada was forced out under British pressure two years ago after nine tons of opium and heroin were discovered in his basement. (The Sunday Times September 7, 2008)

Some Western diplomats in Afghanistan suspect, however, that Akhonzada's reinstatement could actually lead to an escalation of fighting between rival drugs gangs, who have thrived off the conflict between Taliban militants and the coalition troops.

The money typically benefits local warlords, corrupt government officials and the Taliban, which once famously banned production of the crop. The UNODC statistics also indicate the amount of opium cultivated here has increased every year since 2001, with direct or indirect support and connivance of politically influential people in and outside the government.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime said Afghanistan now produces about 93 percent of the world's opium, yielding an estimated \$3 billion a year.

Relations with Pakistan: Although Presidents Karzai and Zardari exchanged vows of cooperation during their first encounter in Islamabad on September 9, yet the mutual mistrust is not likely to wane. Both the US and Afghan establishments mince no words in declaring Pakistan’s tribal areas spread over 27,000 square kilometers as “Al Qaeda Central.” And the latest US announcement of taking the war to Pakistani areas, certainly doesn't augur well, neither for Afghanistan nor for Pakistan. Physical invasion by US and NATO forces, even if selective surgical strikes, will likely stoke public resentment on both sides of the border. This will also provide the militants with a justification to expand their activities on both sides of the border as well as outside FATA. Pakistan, which fears Afghanistan might exploit the situation and seek to develop a bridge between 25 million Pashtoons living in Pakistani territory and 12 million Pashtoons on its side of the border, is also apprehensive of the growing Indo-Afghan ties. It suspects India might be trying to encircle Pakistan.

President Karzai also threatened Pakistan in June of attacking FATA. Afghan military does not have the capacity to fighting the insurgents on its soil and there has not been any coherent effort from Kabul to take on Taliban while Pakistani military not only is capable of taking on them but also has done that in Swat and various regions of FATA. Despite the greatest number of casualties because of the American war in Afghanistan, the Pakistani military has been criticized by allied forces and Kabul and the suspicions of Pakistan’s mighty military and intelligence establishment refuse to go. And until this goes, bilateral bickering and mistrust will keep dogging the relationship■