

Pakistan-Afghanistan relations: On the road to normalcy

Afghan President Hamid Karzai's visit to Islamabad and his presence as chief guest at the Pakistan Day Parade, indicates a steady normalcy and smoothness in Pak-Afghan relations. President Karzai, who, like Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf is an important ally of Washington in its "war against terrorism", faces an uphill task of rebuilding his war torn country.

Pakistan and Afghanistan signed five pacts and one protocol during President Karzai's visit to Islamabad, agreeing to launch a bus service between Peshawar-Torkham-Jalalabad across the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) and Kandahar and Quetta across the Balochistan border. Other areas of co-operation covered in the other four pacts were on information broadcasting, culture and tourism. The Afghan and Pakistan Foreign Ministers signed a protocol on regular consultation between the ministries of foreign affairs.

Another important issue discussed between the Afghan President and Pakistan Prime Minister was the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan gas pipeline. Other matters ranging from terrorism, rebuilding of Afghanistan and revitalising the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) were also discussed between Presidents Karzai and Musharraf.

Transforming Pakistan-Afghanistan relations for the better has long been an uphill task. The two countries share common religious, cultural and historical values, and also became victims of their geography and politics. Afghanistan, which falls within the region of Central, West and South Asia, has experienced the worst type of violence and war while Pakistan, situated at the crossroads of the three Asias, has suffered heavily because of the events in Afghanistan.

Before September 11, 2001, Pak-Afghan relations were entirely different in nature, as Islamabad was among the few countries of the world to have diplomatic relations with the globally isolated Taliban regime. But Pakistan's U-turn after September 11 and its readjustment to the new political changes in Kabul proved to be counter productive because of domestic opposition to Islamabad supporting the US-led war to oust the Taliban regime from power. Since the Taliban were considered pro-Pakistan and supportive of its policy on Kashmir, the formation of a Northern Alliance-led government in Kabul raised a sense of insecurity and fear in Islamabad. During the Taliban era, Northern Alliance had developed good relations with India, as compared to Pakistan, which supported the Taliban regime.

With the key ministries in the new power set-up in Kabul held by the Northern Alliance, Pak-Afghan relations were expected to witness another spell of tension. But the Musharraf regime's shrewd approach in dealing with new realities in Afghanistan prevented a Pak-Afghan standoff, particularly on the question of Islamabad's controversial role during the Afghan jihad and its previous support to various warlords. Fears of a new schism in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations were finally re-



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moved when President Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun, pledged to develop close relations with his eastern neighbour.

The U.S./Western military presence in Afghanistan, and Pakistan's crucial role in tracking down and weeding out *Al-Qaeda elements* prevented further unpleasantness in Pak-Afghan relations in the post-Taliban period. Most importantly, Pakistan's prompt readjustment of its priorities vis-à-vis Afghanistan and its offer to help re-build that war torn country also helped establish normal relations. Preconceived notions about Indo-Afghan nexus against Pakistan were removed with the passage of time and widening of relations.

Normalcy in Pakistan-Afghan relations gained impetus as Islamabad adopted a pragmatic policy in dealing with issues that are sensitive and central to the people of Afghanistan. However, decades of civil war have left deep scars in Pak-Afghan relations and the ordinary Afghan is bitter about Islamabad's intervention in support or opposition to various warring groups. The manner in which different governments in Pakistan, (particularly General Zia-ul-Haq), Haq, which used the Afghan jihad against the Soviet military intervention for seeking enormous military and economic assistance from the United States and other countries, have dealt with Kabul has also negatively impacted the future of Pak-Afghan relations.

While hundreds of Pakistani military, bureaucratic, religious and political figures benefited from the Afghan jihad, the ordinary people of Afghanistan suffered. Instead of improving the situation in Afghanistan, those at the helm of affairs in Islamabad tried to play one Afghan group against another. Even during the times of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, the "invisible" powers in Islamabad continued their policy of destroying Afghanistan to attain their own parochial interests. Such powers wanted a pro-Pakistan Afghanistan, which could provide them "strategic depth" and support for their Kashmir policy. The absence of a wise policy on the part of Islamabad for Afghanistan resulted in deepening suspicions and dislike among ordinary Afghans and making Pakistan vulnerable to the activities of terrorist groups related to Al-Qaeda. Attacks on the Pakistani Embassy in Kabul indicate the Afghans' level of anger against Pakistan's policy of direct intervention in the affairs of their country.

The normalisation of Pak-Afghan relations has much to do with stability and peace in the two countries. While Afghanistan is passing through a phase of uncertainty because of decades of violence and civil war, Pakistan is

also not stable because of political wrangling and other critical issues ranging from water, to sectarian and ethnic discords. Major structural changes will be required in policies particularly on political, economic and security matters, if Pakistan and Afghanistan want to live like friendly neighbours.

A strict policy of non-intervention and non-interference in the internal affairs of the other country is the key to a normal Pak-Afghan relationship. More than that, Pakistan must provide assistance to Afghanistan which can have substantial impact on the Afghan society.

Merely providing wheat or other consumable items to Afghanistan will not make a difference. Islamabad must think in terms of providing support to build the destroyed infrastructure; providing educational opportunities to Afghan students in Pakistani educational institutions; helping Afghanistan control its poppy cultivation; providing military training to the newly risen Afghan National Army and promoting people-to-people contacts. If the people of Afghanistan, who have suffered endlessly because of big power interventions and the role that has been played by power brokers in Islamabad, cultivate positive feelings about Pakistan, it will greatly help in removing the mistrust and suspicions of the past.

The launching of the bus service between the cities of Pakistan and Afghanistan will help bring the people of the two countries closer but more than that, Islamabad should help Kabul build its railways so that the people of Afghanistan can enter a phase of industrialisation and move towards development.

Normalising Pakistan-Afghanistan relations is in the interest of peace and stability of Central, West and South Asia, but it should not be seen as an alliance against any third country. As the rebuilding of the Afghan state and society passes through this critical phase, Islamabad and New Delhi would do well to co-ordinate their support for Kabul. India has launched various projects in Afghanistan but has complained that Pakistan is providing support to Kabul from its territory. Indo-Pak rivalry must not become a factor in Pak-Afghan or Indo-Afghan relations; both New Delhi and Islamabad must rise above their narrow interests and help the people of Afghanistan by providing assistance in education, communications and restoration of civil amenities.

There is also no point in blaming the Indian consulates in Afghanistan of being involved in subversive activities in Pakistan because such a charge can have a negative impact on Pak-Afghan relations. A normal Afghanistan, which is the dream of all Afghans, is in the interest of all its neighbours, including India and Pakistan. What's needed is to extend sincere help and assistance to that war devastated country, on a priority basis.