

## Pakistan's Objectives conflict with Peace efforts in Afghanistan

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While Pakistan kept affirming its commitment to the ongoing exercise of Afghan peace talks, its proclivity towards meddling in the internal affairs of another neighboring sovereign country with an inevitable desire to shape political dynamics there, contradicts its obligations and questions its dedication towards the peace process.

Peace and stability in Afghanistan are contingent on its evolution as a country with full independence and neutrality whereas Pakistan's objectives in the war-ravaged country seem to militate against the idea of Afghanistan for Afghans. In the recent turn of events, a series of videos surfaced displaying senior Taliban leaders meeting their followers and Taliban fighters in Pakistan as well as demonstrating how Pakistan's territory is being used by Taliban's top leadership. In this context, former Pakistan senator Afrasiab Khattak with his superior knowledge about the country's deep state and its nexus with militant groups, referred to Pakistan's strategy of using the Taliban as a "tool" for its dominance under the guise of strategic depth.

An independent and neutral Afghanistan would be in the interests of the South Asian as well as Central Asian region as it would not only enhance historical and cultural contacts between the two regions but both regions would also benefit from interregional trade and investment with Afghanistan acting as a bridge. However, Pakistan's efforts at driving a wedge between the regions by blocking transportation of goods from Afghanistan and Central Asia towards India and vice versa as well as its earlier reluctance to see Afghanistan as a member of South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) indicated that any kind of integration drive that seeks to interweave South Asia with Central Asian geopolitics and geo-economics would be resisted by the country.

On the other hand, Pakistan looked for strategies that could link it with Central Asia through communication networks. For instance, under

the government of Benazir Bhutto, its Interior Minister General Naseerullah Babur initiated steps at utilizing the Taliban in an effort to bring stability to southern and eastern Afghanistan and open routes and trade links to different resource rich Central Asian states. He foresaw greater alignment between the American and Pakistani geopolitical interests in Afghanistan in terms of opening of trade routes and forging links with different resource-rich Central Asian states. The fact that the Taliban consisted of many members drawn from the Central Asian states rather than representing exclusively the Pashtun Afghans pointed to its fabricated structure to cater to Pakistan's geopolitical interests.

Foreign Office spokesman Mohammad Faisal's curt response to a question whether India has a role in the conflict-ridden South Asian country that "India has no role in Afghanistan" in the beginning of 2019 clearly pointed to Pakistan's proclivity to weigh its strategic, economic and political gains in Afghanistan in zero-sum terms against India's similar loss in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Peace and stability in Afghanistan seems secondary to Pakistan's strive for a propped regime in Kabul which would not only allow and assist it in extending its sway into the Central Asian region for economic, cultural and diplomatic gains but would deny a similar space to India at the same time.

Pakistan's continued objection to India's non-military and developmental role in Afghanistan under the pretext that it is New Delhi's encirclement strategy also indicates its resistance to greater economic integration between New Delhi and Kabul. Pakistan's military and the intelligence wing (deep state) believed radical religious groups could be an asset in addressing its security dilemma posed by India – a much bigger power in terms of size, population and conventional army by making Pakistan more relevant to the American objectives, first, by pushing the Soviets out of Afghanistan and subsequently by bringing closer alignment between its interests and those of Americans in Central Asia. With the evolving circumstances in Afghanistan, as the US is forging ahead with peace talks and plans to withdraw from the country, Pakistan looks poised to influence the peace process in a bid to keep Afghanistan within its economic, ideological and political sphere of influence.

### **Economic, Ideological and Political/Diplomatic Influence**

The conventional idea about the concept of strategic depth and Pakistan's desire to cultivate it against India has been substantiated by the argument that military planners in Pakistan had struggled over the years to overcome the deficiencies of Pakistan's geographic narrowness and the presence of important cities such as Lahore and Karachi and communication networks within short striking distance of India. The concept is thus understood as Pakistan's desire for cultivating more territorial space to launch counter-offensive from Afghan territory. However, the concept defined exclusively in military and strategic terms which projects Pakistan's strive for gaining territorial space in case of war with India does not conform to the operational policy of Pakistan. Pakistan has so far responded to India's superiority in conventional military capabilities by raising proxy wars and building capacity as well as resorting to threat of deploying tactical/regular nuclear weapons.

Pakistan's Afghan strategy has been geared towards incorporating Afghanistan as well as the Central Asian region within its economic, ideological and diplomatic sphere of influence. For instance, Pakistan took concerted efforts at making Afghanistan overly dependent on it

for market so that its economic influence in the country did not get diluted. To realize this objective, Islamabad aimed at creating an overarching Islamic identity in order to displace the Pashtun ethnic nationalism because the demand for Pashtunistan, if conceded, would have granted Afghanistan the most desired route to the Indian Ocean.

Afghanistan was in the lookout for alternative routes for long that would have lessened its dependence on Pakistan. However, Islamabad took concerted efforts at creating such an Islamic identity by raising jihad against Soviet Union following its intervention in 1979 and later by propping up the Taliban during the civil war period in Afghanistan. Afghan governments tried to undercut Pashtun nationalism even before the jihad in the 1980s. For example, it was in 1973 that the then Pakistani Prime Minister Zulifkar Ali Bhutto provided sanctuary to Islamist leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar with a view to undermining the established government in Kabul.

Pakistan's desire for overriding ideological and cultural influence in Afghanistan as well as Central Asia encompasses the country's attempts at invoking the commonalities of Islamic region and tradition with a view to deepening its ideological space. For instance, instead of adopting peaceful Sufi tradition, Pakistan not only promoted radical teachings in madrasas in the Saudi Arabic deobandi tradition, many radical religious groups were trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan as well to destabilize Central Asian States and strengthen the opposition groups soon after they emerged as independent republics. Its foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi during his visit to Bishkek in May 2019, stressed on the commonalities of culture, religion and traditions that could bring Pakistan closer to Central Asia. Pakistan keeps overemphasizing its cultural links with the Central Asian region in its bid to reach out to the region while overlooking the South Asian continental ethos.

Desire for Political and diplomatic sphere of influence includes Pakistani efforts at strengthening its diplomatic position by mustering overriding support from the Islamic countries. Working in this direction, for instance, Pakistan not only mooted the idea of 'proportional representation' of Muslim countries in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), it has also sought support from the member-states on the Kashmir issue. Pakistan's desire for political/diplomatic influence in Afghanistan includes all the strategies that Islamabad adopts to shape political developments and peace process in Kabul with the objective of keeping the war-torn country within the parameters of its political and diplomatic influence.

To conclude, it can be argued that Pakistan's future role in the Afghan peace process would depend on how it perceives its broader economic, ideological and political interests in Afghanistan are protected in the post-peace deal scenario. While some experts on South Asian affairs like Michael Kugelman, South Asia senior associate at the Wilson Centre, a Washington D.C., based think-tank believe that Pakistan's leverage over the Taliban may not be as overwhelming as to compel it accept something against their willingness but he as well as many other experts believe that Pakistan would retain leverage over the Afghan peace process as long as Taliban leaders continue to be based in Pakistan.

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