

TURKISH INITIATIVE FOR PAKISTANI-AFGHAN DIALOGUE

By Haroun Mir (originally published 05/30/2007, CACI Analyst)

The Turkish effort to reinvigorate negotiations between the leaders of Afghanistan and Pakistan, after talks under the auspices of George W. Bush last October had failed, provides hope for building a constructive dialogue between the two nations. A further deterioration of relations between the two countries would only embolden religious extremists who threaten the stability of both countries. Both countries struggle to overcome political and economic problems and have little resources to dedicate to resolving the issues that have made them adversaries. The success of the Turkish initiative will be dependent on the international support it receives, and whether it is transformed into a continued arbitration process.

BACKGROUND: The rivalry between Afghanistan and Pakistan dates to the creation of Pakistan in 1947. The main cause of hostility between the belligerent countries has been the unresolved dispute over contentious territories, which dates back to the rule of British Empire in the region. Upon the partition of India and the creation of the new state of Pakistan, all consecutive Afghan governments have refused to recognize the Durand Line as the permanent and legitimate border with Pakistan.

The cold war has also had repercussion on Pakistani-Afghan relations. Pakistan became a member of U.S.-backed military pacts such as SEATO and CENTO in 1954-55, while Afghanistan sought to remain neutral and a member of the Non-Aligned Movement. Yet it gradually fell under the direct influence of the former Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Afghanistan became the ground for proxy wars among regional powers. Saudi Arabia and other wealthy Gulf Countries, in their attempt to counter Iranian influence in South and Central Asia, contributed in the creation of Sunni Islamic extremist movements through generous donations, which resulted in the creation of Taliban-type movements in the region.

Pakistan's meddling in Afghanistan's internal affairs, by supporting its surrogate warlords such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, ignited a bloody civil war and led to the decisions by other regional countries to intervene in the inter-Afghan conflict. Ultimately, Pakistan's support for the Taliban regime and continued assistance to the insurgents in Afghanistan after the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001 changed Afghans' view of Pakistan from merely a hostile country to that of its "worst enemy".

Afghans and Pakistanis, despite being neighbors, have limited understanding of each other. The majority of Afghan refugees in Pakistan have never traveled beyond the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan, and few Pakistanis have ever tried to visit Afghanistan. Mutual misunderstanding is the result of heated political rhetoric and misinformation, fostered by biased local media. Limited intellectual and cultural exchanges between the two nations have exacerbated the problem.

Against this background, the Turkish government's initiative this April to bring together presidents Hamid Karzai and Pervez Musharraf is important to the stabilization of this part of the world. In a late April meeting in Ankara, the two presidents signed a declaration where they "agreed to deny sanctuary, training and financing to terrorists and elements involved in subversive and anti-state elements in each other's country and initiate immediate action for specific intelligence exchanges in this regard." They also pledged to deepen cooperation in a number of areas, as well as to base their relations on non-interference in each others' affairs and respect for their mutual sovereignty.

IMPLICATIONS: The repercussions of the current crisis between Afghanistan and Pakistan are devastating well beyond the region's geographical borders. The tribal region straddling the two countries has become the most dangerous breeding ground for terrorism and religious extremism. Western countries have a higher stake in the stability of this region because the West is the prime target of both Islamist terrorists and narco-traffickers. And the fear of another 9/11 type terrorist attack in a major Western city has created a rare consensus among major NATO countries to avoid repeating earlier mistakes, which consisted of leaving Afghanistan in the grasp of regional countries after the Soviets withdrew in 1989.

Afghanistan is still a country in conflict with inexperienced and fragile democratic institutions. The border dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan is a very sensitive matter and has been causing a rift between the two countries. The recent clashes between the Afghan and Pakistani militaries over Pakistan's unilateral decision to fence a portion of the disputed border is likely only to further undermine Afghanistan's efforts to fight the insurgents. Due to continued clashes between Afghan and Pakistani forces near the border in the Paktia province, the Afghan military had to redeploy several units from the Taliban battlegrounds to the Pakistani border.

An unstable Afghanistan with wildly divided politicians and ethnic leaders is unable to tackle the controversial border dispute with Pakistan. The Afghan government has not even been able to advance on its own initiative to form a jirga (traditional council) among Pashtun tribes living across the border in Afghanistan and in Pakistan to discuss common security issues. Initially, this was scheduled to take place in Jalalabad last December, but after months of bilateral negotiations between the two countries, the joint "peace jirga" has been rescheduled for the month of August in Kabul.

Pakistan's position is not much better. General Musharraf's rule is increasingly contributing to domestic crises. Meanwhile, its regional policy, seeking to balance Islamist extremists and the West, is dangerous and increasingly untenable. Since the creation of Pakistan in 1947, its civilian leadership has been unable to challenge the policies spearheaded by the military. The recent revolt of Pakistani lawyers against the controversial removal of Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry, is a sign that the *de facto* military dictatorship is unlikely in its present format to function much longer in a Pakistan of the twenty-first century.

Warnings have been uttered in vain regarding the apparent tactical alliance between the Pakistani government and radical Islamists in view of the 2007 elections. Pakistani authorities are playing with fire by appeasing local extremist movements in the tribal region that favor the installation of a Taliban type regime in Islamabad. The recent suicide attack against Mr. Aftab Sherpao, Pakistan's interior minister, proves that Pakistan's appeasement policies vis-à-vis extremist groups is backfiring.

In addition, Pakistan's powerful military has been infiltrated by the religious extremist movements. While senior military officials are secular and highly educated, a substantial portion of lower-ranking officers and ordinary soldiers appear to share the religious and political beliefs of the Taliban.

CONCLUSIONS: The tribal region bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan has become a sanctuary for terrorism and religious extremism, which is off-limits for NATO and U.S. forces. While Pakistan could play an important role in cleansing the tribal region from terrorist bases and radical madrassas, there seems to be an absence of either political will or ability to do so. NATO countries are aware of the consequences of Pakistan's regional policies, but have refrained from overt criticism.

Meanwhile, the Taliban movement has gained strength both in Afghanistan and in Pakistan's tribal areas. Only if the two countries

work together to destroy this stronghold of extremism can the prospect of long-term engagement in a guerrilla war in Afghanistan be avoided. Certainly, most NATO countries would not keep a presence in Afghanistan under such circumstances. It is therefore time for other NATO members to put their weight behind the Turkish initiative. They should use their economic and political leverage to convince Pakistan's military leadership to abandon its relationship with the Taliban and in exchange demand the Afghan government to recognize Pakistan's legitimate strategic interests in Afghanistan. The issue of the disputed territories between the two countries, known as the Durand Line, could be resolved through comprehensive negotiations in the framework of a regional conference with the involvement of the 5 permanent UN Security Council members.

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