

On Pakistan, India And Afghanistan

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By The Editorial Staff.

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In November 2013 Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif appointed Raheel Sharif as the new Chief of Staff of the Pakistani Army. What is your understanding of the current state of relations between the civilian government and the military?

Both sides have approached this issue very cautiously and carefully because of the bad blood between the military and the former government of Asif Ali Zardari. There seems to be a rift developing as the military is increasingly frustrated with the civilian government's desire to open talks with the Taliban, while the military would like to go in and punish them much more severely. We have now a ceasefire, which was recently ordered by the Taliban, but has since been broken following an attack in Islamabad. As long as these attacks continue, the military's position is that they want to go in and punish these extremists and I think they are very frustrated - a marked difference from when the former Army chief, General Kayani, was in power and he took very little action against the extremists. He saw his enemy more as the US than with the militants. For about two years, at the end of his tenure, he did nothing. This chief looks much more committed to make sure that militancy does not spread.

Do you believe that Prime Minister Sharif is interested in coming to a negotiated solution with the Pakistani Taliban?

Ideally yes, but the big question is what would he negotiate? What is negotiable with a group that wants to overthrow the system? There is very little to negotiate. On the other front, the military keeps a veto on policy towards India. Prime Minister Sharif came in very adamantly wanting to improve relations with India immediately, and I think the Army vetoed that. Relations are improving with India, but very slowly. The Army also has a veto, and more direct control over Pakistani policy with respect to Afghanistan.

How would a victory for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the upcoming Indian elections affect the future of Indo-Pakistani relations?

Pakistanis are quite concerned about the BJP's rise in India because of the BJP's traditional hard line against Pakistan, and particularly Narendra Modi's (the party's prime ministerial candidate) attitude towards Indian Muslims. On the other hand, it has to be said that the big breakthrough with India in 2003 under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee did occur during a BJP government. So, it is not entirely doom and gloom. It all depends on how Modi wants to deal with Pakistan and the Indian Muslim population. If this election campaign is going to involve a lot of Pakistan-bashing and candidates trying to score points by being tough on Pakistan, that would be a big mistake and make it harder to forge better relations between the two countries. I think basically people are concerned but there is a sort of wait and see attitude. I do not believe that any improvement in relations could come until after the elections are over, so we are now in a waiting mode for at least another five or six months.

Suppose there was momentum on both sides for an improvement in relations. Do you think it would be a comprehensive one that addresses the core issues, like Kashmir, or a smaller-scale accord that helps India and Pakistan normalize their relations while leaving the big issues for future discussions?

I think both sides recognize the need for a step-by-step approach. I do not think the Indians or the Pakistanis are ready for a major agreement on issues like Kashmir. The most important issues right now are trade liberalization and Afghanistan, where there is a need for greater transparency between the two nations. After those, negotiators could try to tackle other issues such as cooperation on issues like water or non-Kashmir territorial disputes. A step-by-step approach is much more likely than anything dramatic.

Is Prime Minister Sharif interested in moving forward on those limited steps?

Yes. He was the one who invited former Prime Minister Vajpayee to Lahore in 2003, and right after that, Sharif was ousted by the military over the Cargill War. I am sure he [Sharif] remembers that very well and does not want to rub the military the wrong way or go too fast with India. I think he initially came into office thinking he could go very fast, at least on issues like trade. But even on the smaller issues, the military has reined him in.

Moving to Afghanistan. What is your understanding of President Karzai's vacillations over signing a Bilateral Security Agreement, specifically an agreement that would keep American troops in the country after 2014? Does he genuinely want the Americans out, or is he holding out for a better deal?

I do not think it is really about the agreement itself. First, he wants to remain a player until the elections, and if he signed the agreement, he would be a lame duck president, no longer required by either the Americans or the Afghans. He wants to mediate the elections, and make sure that the person that comes in after him is someone he approves of. Second, he is also thinking about his legacy. When he looks back at Afghan history, he does not want to be considered the stooge who allowed American forces to remain in Afghanistan indefinitely. I think there is no question that he recognizes that the agreement has to be signed, and that if it is not, international money for Afghanistan will quickly dry up. I think these two considerations are foremost in his mind.

And if he does manage to find a consensus Pashtun candidate, is there the potential for the sort of fraud we

saw in the 2009 elections?

I fear that very much. Many of the arguments that held in 2009 are still holding today. For example, there was a feeling among the Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group of which Karzai is a member, that the Pashtun vote was threatened by Taliban intimidation. If the Pashtun vote is threatened, it creates a temptation for officials to rig the elections in the Pashtun belt, to show a big turnout when in fact there was not one. This is what happened in 2009. Likewise, the Northern warlords may try to use fraud to inflate their own numbers. The main problem is that Obama has made a terrible mistake by announcing this date of withdrawal at this very critical moment, when what is needed is an international troop presence and possibly international mediation in the event of a contested election. Karzai has thrown all that away. Clearly, everyone is feeling the sense of a growing vacuum in Afghanistan. The Americans are leaving at this critical juncture, and the UN is there but it has been wound down.

If the elections were widely perceived as rigged, would that put Afghanistan on a path towards civil war?

If you ask anyone in the US administration or in Kabul about what is going to happen after the elections, nobody knows. The degree of uncertainty is enormous. This is a very tragic reflection of the American occupation of Afghanistan. 13 years, and no one is able to predict what will happen when the Americans leave. The worst-case scenario is certainly a multi-sided civil war, where Pashtuns are fighting non-Pashtuns, the Taliban is fighting the government, and there is infighting between the non-Pashtun warlords. This scenario is very grim indeed. We can guarantee that the elections will be controversial. Whether they are rigged or not, they will be controversial. Given that people don't trust Karzai's stamp of approval, who can certify the elections as legitimate in a way that all parties can accept? 2009 was stabilized because the Americans were able to mediate a solution, but that option will not exist this time around.

What are the prospects for the post-2014 US-Pakistan relationship? How does the US withdrawal from Afghanistan affect the US relationship with Pakistan?

I think the US-Pakistan relationship is definitely mending. There has been much greater intelligence cooperation lately. The US is frustrated, like the Pakistani military, by Prime Minister Sharif's refusal to go after the Pakistani Taliban. In the immediate term, we will not see a very marked retreat of the US from this region. But, I do believe that the era of the US giving Pakistan huge military and economic aid is now passed. The two countries are now looking at how they might build a post-Afghanistan relationship that will not involve the sort of cash handouts that characterized the relationship since 2001.

Are people in the region drawing analogies to the period after 1989, when US interest in the region dried up after the end of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan?

I think it is possible that it could become like that, especially if there is chaos in Afghanistan. If there is chaos in Afghanistan, the middle classes in both Pakistan and Afghanistan will blame the Americans for pulling out without a political settlement. My own view is that the Obama Administration is eager to turn its attention to other parts of the world, rebuilding ties with Iran and improving relations with India. This part of central Asia is not going to be viewed with the same importance. Both the Pakistani and Afghan governments now face the challenge of weaning themselves from dependence on American aid, which will not be easy. Both governments should be preparing for that effort.