

Question: Challenges in Pak Afghan relations after US withdrawal & way forward to keep the relations smooth and running:

Introduction:

The course of events that lead to the current situation in Afghanistan is studied with three major events i.e.; the Soviet war, Civil war and 9/11 event. These happenings proved unfortunate for Pakistan Afghanistan relations and together shape the fundamentals of these "Yes... But" relations according to the book "Pakistan at the crossroads". Specifically the involvement of Pakistan in US's war on terror against the Afghan Taliban was the reason for Pakistan's internal & border terrorism problem posed by the organisations such as TTP, Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan and ISK-P-Islamic state of Khurasan province. Going further deep in history, the bone of contention appears to be the Durand line and Pakhtoonistan narrative which continued to deteriorate Pak Afghan relations. In August 2021, the two decade long US hegemony in Afghanistan came to end but the event left Pakistan with no benefit, rather problems have increased since then.

Challenges in Pak-Afghan relations after US - Withdrawal:

After 9/11, US after failing to have ^{gotten} found Osama Bin Laden from the Taliban government attacked Afghanistan & toppled Taliban government and installed a pro US Hamid Karzai regime.

The US intervention in Afghanistan continued for two decades and finally after agreement at Doha, Qatar, decided to leave.

Background for development of current challenges:

In the wake of US's rivalry against Taliban government, Pakistan was asked to join US's war on terror which was basically an attempt to capture either Taliban leader Mullah Omar and Osama Bin Laden as the latter was believed by US to be mastermind behind attack on world trade centre. Pakistan due to multiple pressures such as those of the entire world's union against terrorism and Pakistan's special support to Taliban in the past, left Pakistan with no choice than to join hands with US against the next door neighbour. Pakistan military started the attacks and operation along with US against Taliban in Afghanistan. Pakistan's choice to side US gave rise to resistance inside Pakistan's own FATA and NWFP region where ^{some} the people share ethnicity with Afghan Taliban. Also the Taliban used to be provided safe havens in these areas. The decade of 2000 to 2010 ignited the resistance to such a level that Pakistan got threatened with by terrorist attacks by these people who consequently formed "Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan" under leadership of Baitullah Masood in 2009. Since then the issue of terrorism has been a top priority of Pakistan's national and internal security because the militancy of TTP operated from across the border as well as inside. Today after US withdrawal the same terrorist groups having their roots in Pak-Afghan history continue to threaten the internal security after

US withdrawal.

① Security challenge:

TIA and TTP friendship:

While US continued to wreak havoc in Afghanistan, the TTP continued to support Taliban which seems to have been developed into a strong bond having ethnic and historical roots. After US withdrew from Afghanistan, Pakistan government was quite hopeful of Taliban siding with it in the problem of terrorism, and as was decided in Doha accords that the Afghan soil will no longer be used for any terrorist activity. Instead the Taliban released nearly 3000 members of TTP as well as ISK and since then, the threat of terrorism has been ever increasing with the terrorist organisations feeling strengthened with Taliban arrival. Pakistan military had nearly brought terrorism to end before the withdrawal by kinetic operations on the ground of FATA & KP but after the withdrawal, the number of terrorist attacks has surged upto 70% till 2023 according to South Asia terrorism counter portal's statistics. Pakistan has taken Taliban government into trust and asked to curb the threat of TTP in Pakistan but the Taliban government at their maximum have mediated talks between TTP and Pakistan government and haven't till now seem to take the matter seriously.

ISKP:

The Islamic State Khorasan province is an offshoot of Al Qaeda which along with TTP has gained

momentum in Afghanistan, doubled in number and have been launching attacks. The attack on JUIF rally in Bajaur agency has been claimed by ISKP. ISKP are the salafi group while Taliban and TTP are the deobandi group; both differ in ideologies and hence the ISKP also poses a threat to Afghan Taliban themselves.

Fear of the past:

The decade of 2010 brought high profile terrorist attacks as close to parliament and secretariat of Pakistan as Lal Masjid, the attack on Wah ordinance factory and US consulate. The current wave of terrorist attacks each one of which comes with more destruction and terror, has refreshed and alarmed Pakistani masses about the extent of the wave in past. If the current wave of terrorism brought by TTP and ISKP isn't dealt with, the security challenge might rise to the level we experienced in past.

Possible threat of Indian intervention:

With ideologies sharing the same enemy, it is likely possible that they unite against it. Interventions of RAW have been quite obvious in past and now after US has left and terrorism grown, Pakistan's concerns regarding India's attempt to further exploit the situation have grown. RAW might strengthen and support the terrorist groups in their ideologies and also provide them weapons and direct their actions.

② Diplomatic challenge:

Challenges in recognition of Taliban government:

In 1998, when Taliban took over Kabul, Pakistan hurriedly recognised it the price of which it had to pay in future in the form of Pakistan being seen as a close ally of Taliban which always pushed Pakistan into a special position regarding any geopolitical development in its neighbouring countries. This time Pakistan government has been quite conscious of not recognising them solely and taking the weight of "Taliban Support to Taliban on its own shoulders secluded from the ^{current} world view. Before officially recognising Taliban there are few reservations that are needed to be addressed such as the issue of TTP. Both the Taliban and Pakistan government have laid down some demands before recognition.

Demands of Pakistan:

Pakistan has demanded before settlement of relations that Afghan government stands by Pakistan in TTP terrorism issue and don't let their soil be used against their neighbours, and that they endorse women rights.

Demands of Taliban:

The Taliban have laid down the demands regarding reversal of FATA & KP merger, release of TTP prisoners and implementation of law and Shariah throughout Pakistan and the demand of opening Taliban's political office anywhere in the world.

Dialogues with TTP:

what taliban have done to their fullest till now is that they mediated talks between Pakistan government and TTP. The first round of talks for settlement of the issue was cancelled because both sides saw the peace agreement being breached. The second round of talks in 2022 were disrupted by the news that US attacked the Al Qaeda leader Amr al Zawahiri in Afghanistan. Since Al Qaeda is a close ally of Taliban, ^{TTP} the taliban government asked & speculated if Pakistan had provided the aerial space to US drone. Since then there hasn't been any further talks and relations between both states remain the same.

③ Humanitarian challenge:

Currently 3 to 4 million Afghan refugees reside in Pakistan. The ^{common} Afghan people throughout the history have migrated to their ethnic brethren in Pakistan and ^{have been} supported by them. Out of these only 840,000 are the Afghan citizen card holder while rest of them are unregistered. These refugees are a huge responsibility for the already crippled economy of Pakistan. Their healthcare and earning is a responsibility of Pakistan. Also these refugees have become a security challenge with a lots of them staying unregistered in Pakistan. Pakistan also needs a settlement with taliban to direct the refugees back to their land.

④ Anti Pakistan sentiments of TTA:

The siding of TTA with TTP and a few incidents which although condemned by Taliban, shows possible presence of anti Pakistan sentiments among them. This relates back to history when Pakistan sided with US against the Taliban. History hasn't been forgotten by Afghanistan which is a big U-turn in normalisation of relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

⑤ Perception of legitimate war:

The entire Afghan struggle has been equated by Afghans and also Pakistani masses as to jihad and a legitimate war which regardless of being true or not, forms roots of TTP ideology. They perceived Pakistan as a hurdle in TTA's legitimate war & so started terrorising around in Pakistan and after US withdrawal they have found strength, space and support to deal with Pakistan according to their past perceptions.

⑥ Pakistan's crippled situation:

Pakistan had been busy supporting Afghans with aid when the floods of 2022 lead Pakistan to a dire state & hence stop the aid to Afghans. Also after that the talks between TTP & Islamabad didn't proceed further, so the during events like political instability & economic crunch also lead to Pakistan's focus diverted away from Afghanistan.

⑦ Challenge to Pakistan military:

The narrative that despite of dozens of intelligence agencies present in western borders, Pakistan has still been facing wellial terrorist attacks, has grown after the recent attack in Bajaur agency by ISKP. Pakistan military is ready and capable of dealing with rising terrorism but the state's foreign policy towards Taliban is not of aggression. Yet the current wave has sure has fingers being pointed at the military.

Way out for smooth relations:

① Settlement of security issues:

The first step to pacification of relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan is to address the elephant in the room. The greatest challenge that of TTP's terrorism should be dealt with. However with Taliban's cordial relations with them, it seem that Pakistan would have to deal with them solely.

The common threat: ISKP:

Since ISKP has been a threat to both states, Pakistan can persuade Taliban to stand by it in war against ISK-P.

Talks with TTP:

The talks with TTP halted at round-two should be continued further and a common ground must be agreed upon along with resolution of mistakes of the past and ^{settlement of} punishment for future breachings.

Internal counter terrorism policy of state:

In 2013, National counter terrorism authority was for the sole purpose of dealing with the problem

of terrorism, the authority should be revised & its rules acted upon. NCTA in 2017 presented the "National counter terrorism guidelines". These guidelines should be implemented with full force.

National counter extremism policy guidelines:

Summary of the guidelines is as follows.

- 1- Improvement of law and governance in conflict hit areas.
- 2- FATA given special mainstreaming.
- 3- Institutionalise "Madaris" as hubs of peace & fight against terrorism.
- 4- Provinces strengthened by resource allocation.
- 5- Educational reforms to promote importance of peace.
- 6- Involvement of media to promote peaceful narratives.

② Diplomacy:

Right after Kabul's take over by Taliban, Pakistan has been raising its voice in the international community for the aid of war hit Afghan soil. Pakistan arranged two OIC summits in 2021 and 2022 to raise the Afghan issue and attract foreign aid. Also Pakistan attended meetings at Beijing and Moscow for Afghanistan's support. Further use of soft power is required to make the relations smooth and gain Afghan trust. Pakistan should continue calling on to international support and should deal multilaterally rather than bilaterally. Also diplomatic relations must be enhanced with Kabul and more visits paid there to get the on ground information of

TTP settlements. Pak should involve Iran and China to raise voices against the use of Afghan soil for terrorism. Also Pakistan should put forth the Doha accord in front of Taliban and remind them the promises they made.

③ Settlement of boundary issue:

Though Pakistan can't resolve the reservations of Afghans regarding Durand line, but the problem can surely be addressed. Pak can make Kabul realize that states have continued to live peacefully with border disputes and also the people near the borders with whom Afghans share ethnicity will be uplifted. In wake of the fencing on Durand line, a 500 million dollar project had been launched that of fencing of the Durand line, which although unacceptable for Taliban still has been going on.

④ Economic incentives:

Pakistan despite its dire economic situation aided Afghanistan along with appeal ~~was~~ from international community. In 2021 alone Pakistan provided 1 billion dollar aid to Kabul. Also Pakistan faced the burden of Afghan imports which is also rendered as one of the reasons for rupee depreciation in 2022 and 2023. Pakistan allowed duty free trade with Afghanistan. Further economic incentives provided to Taliban government can help develop a soft image among Afghans of Pakistan.

⑤ Local pathans of KP; an asset:

The pathans of KP and FATA face the price of terrorism and really want it all to end. These people belong to Pakistan but are also ethnically linked to the terrorist groups. These people can be asked to have talks with them & persuade them in favour of peace & against terrorism.

⑥ Kinetic measures:

All the above mentioned strategies are those that relate to soft power but if the TTP & ISKP insurgency continues then the military would surely have to take kinetic measures & deploy forces there. It should be conveyed to Taliban government

either they control the use of their land or don't criticize Pakistan's internal way of dealing with terrorism. After the operations "Zarb-e-azb" and "Rad ul Fasad" lead by Pakistan military, terrorist attacks came down to mill level. The military should deploy more troops at the borders.

Conclusion:

In order to develop smooth relations with Afghanistan, diplomacy, talks and economic dealings can be a way out but first the major issue that is of security is to be addressed and solved because after only achieving peace, further efforts can be done to develop cordial relations. Peace at western borders is necessary for Pakistan having a big threat at eastern borders. Pakistan cannot choose to be encircled by threats, and in this regard focus is needed on this matter.