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US-Pakistan Row: Implications for Afghanistan end goals

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Synopsis

The ongoing war of words between the United States and Pakistan is a clash of diverse end goals of these countries in Afghanistan. It also represents a contest between a declining superpower and a country that believes it simply cannot lose.

Commentary

FOR ALMOST a decade, starting with the 2001 United States intervention in Afghanistan, US officials have described Pakistan as a 'frontline ally in the war on terror'. In the past several months, however, the bonhomie between the two countries has been replaced by mutual recriminations and diplomatic squabbling. How relations between these two countries evolve in the coming months would have far reaching implications for peace and stability in South Asia.

A Sudden Dip

Since the May 2011 killing of Al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden in the Pakistani cantonment city of Abbottabad, US-Pakistan relations have gone from bad to worse. Even though in public the US officials including then Secretary of Defence Robert Gates maintained that the high-level Pakistani officials possibly could not have been aware of bin Laden's whereabouts, the US went on to suspend military aid to Pakistan. In early September, Pakistan tried to make amends by arresting a senior Al Qaeda leader Sheikh Yunis Al Mauritan and handing him over to the US, thereby earning some brownie points from the US officials.

The 13 September attack on the American Embassy in Kabul, however, appeared to be the last straw. The US ambassador described the attack as 'a demonstration of weakness on the part of the insurgents'. Deep down, however, the 20-hour siege was a serious affront to the US psyche. The outgoing chairman of the US joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen not only accused Pakistan of complicity with the Taliban affiliate Haqqani Network in carrying out this attack, but also cited a number of previous attacks, which he said were carried out by Haqqanis with the Pakistani government's cooperation.

While these US charges against Pakistan are nothing new, recent reports have taken the lid off past Pakistani attacks on US forces in Afghanistan, going back to at least 2007. In one such incident, on 14 May 2007, an American major was killed and three American officers were wounded following an assault by Pakistanis. It is commonly known that Pakistan pursues a policy of seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has not only resisted US pressure to carry out military operations against the Haqqani Network in the North Waziristan area, but also wants the US to open a channel of dialogue with the Haqqanis, and not just the Taliban. The Pakistani leaders are on record as having said that leaving out Pakistan from a peace deal with the Taliban is not acceptable to them. Thus the recent attack on the US embassy could have been a logical extension of this policy.

While the US was still on the look out for the Al Qaeda chief it had reasons to keep the Pakistani linkages with the insurgents under wraps. Such pretences apparently are no longer required. As a result, the US is determined to push Pakistan. It's a last ditch effort by the Obama administration to seek Pakistan's compliance in acting against the Haqqanis, whom the US considers to be the main force behind the Taliban-led insurgency. The US is set on pulling out most of its forces from Afghanistan by 2014 and the continued empowerment of the Haqqanis does not augur well for that project. Each successful strike by the Haqqanis also acts as a dissuading factor for the Taliban, a large section of which, the US believes, is amenable to a process of reconciliation.

Pakistani Defiance

The US pressure tactics have not worked. Pakistan has not only scorned US efforts to corner it, but has initiated an array of diplomatic measures to fend off the possibility of a unilateral military action by the US on its soil. While a valid explanation is Pakistan's reliance on its allies China and Saudi Arabia and its expectation that these two powers will play a mediating role in the ongoing diplomatic row, from a strategic standpoint its defiance probably has to do with the growing clout and military might of the Haqqani Network within the Taliban-led insurgency.

Although the Haqqani Network has traditionally played a subservient role to the Taliban headed by Mullah Omar, some of the recent attacks, including the ones targeting the US Embassy and the British Council in Kabul, demonstrate its inclination to carry out operations independent of the Taliban. Unlike the Taliban leadership, part of which might have been inclined to enter into reconciliation with the US and Kabul, the Haqqanis remain opposed to the peace process. Hence, for Pakistan, seeking its strategic depth in its war-torn western neighbour, the Haqqanis remain a more trusted band of warriors compared to the Taliban whose allegiance might be wilting.

A Clash of Ideas

Pakistan still hopes to persuade the US to accommodate the Haqqanis in the reconciliation process. The US intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 had overturned Pakistan's growing influence in that country. Pakistan believes that a reconciliation process in Afghanistan on its own terms would actually bring back those halcyon years. However experts predict the onset of a civil war situation in Afghanistan if the international forces are to pull out completely from that war-torn country before it is stabilised.

The question now is whether the Obama administration will be able to make Pakistan accept the US version of the end goal in Afghanistan. In addition to addressing the problem of terrorism and stabilising Afghanistan, the issue is also about maintaining US influence over the region and dispelling doubts that the lone superpower is in a state of continual decline.

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