

US- Pakistan Relations: Chicago Summit and Beyond

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The April 15, 2012 attacks by the Taliban in Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan have significantly altered the security configuration in South Asia. While the region had assumed a key position in the global security matrix, the presence of NATO and other foreign forces under the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has changed the equations among the states in the region, especially between Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

Until the Abbottabad raid, the U.S enjoyed a fairly stable 'working relationship' with Pakistan. Post May 2, 2011 however, this working relationship suffered several compelling halts. The most irritating chapter in bilateral relations has been the Salala incident (November 26, 2011) following which Pakistan closed the supply lines to international forces in Afghanistan. Pakistan demanded an unconditional apology from the U.S for NATO attacks on two of its frontier posts along the Afghan border which killed 24 Pakistani personnel. While negotiations were on to find a mutually acceptable solution, the April 15th Taliban attack changed bi-lateral equations again.

The U.S and NATO blamed Islamabad for the deteriorating security conditions along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and accused the government for not being able to arrest the activities of the Haqqani network and similar terror outfits along the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). According to claims by the NATO officials the Taliban in Afghanistan had ceased to expand or offer any resistance to the efforts of the International Forces. It was in fact their Pakistani counterparts like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and such local groups that assisted the Taliban with resources, manpower, training and moral support. The U.S officially maintained that lest Pakistani authorities undertook a combing operation through FATA and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, security challenges would persist. Islamabad retaliated citing the issue of domestic compulsions for inaction and maintained that there would be no public support for such an operation in the absence of an open apology from the U.S. Thus, talks over the opening of the Ground Lines of Supply were caught in this stalemate.

NATO organized the Chicago Summit on May 20-21, 2012 to assess preparations to the exit plan from Afghanistan in 2014. As many as 85 countries and institutions engaged in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, with the exception of Pakistan, were invited to the Summit. Fearing isolation from the international community, Islamabad resorted to its diplomatic re-posturing to secure a seat at the summit. President Zardari eventually attended the Chicago Summit along with his Foreign Minister and Foreign Secretary. NATO's extension of the invitation however, did not indicate a softened U.S stance towards Islamabad. The administration echoed its previous posture vis-a-vis Pakistan when it thanked several states and institutions towards reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, without mentioning the role of Pakistan in the process. Contrary to expectation, Islamabad also could not accrue any financial or military assistance from U.S through the summit.

Pakistan naturally was fairly unhappy with the outcome of the Chicago Summit and continued to demand an apology from the U.S along with a fresh contract on transport facilities, while Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar maintained that negotiations with the U.S on ground supply lines were still underway. It is understandable that Pakistan expected a lot more from the Chicago Summit. The Zardari administration faced severe criticisms at home from its political opponents, the media and people for its vulnerable display of desperation to attend the summit.

It was not surprising therefore to see Islamabad take a stronger stand vis-à-vis U.S. It served to save the face of the government that dealt with bitter criticism from opponents like the PML-N or the Tehrik-i-Insaaf. Islamabad also sought to send a strong message to protest against the U.S and the NATO. Considering the popular mood in Pakistan following the Salala incident, it seemed inexpedient to think of rebuilding ties with the West at the expense of the party's (PPP) electoral fortunes prior to the elections next year.

Given the trend of reactions from Islamabad, the U.S could continue negotiations with the Pakistani government on the opening of the GLOCs and on the new contract for transport facilities. The transit charges per truck prior to the Salala incident were \$250 but have now shot up to a demand for \$5000 from Pakistan. While NATO has agreed to soar the charges up to \$500, \$5000 appears too exorbitant a standard to negotiate with. In the present grid, NATO could also explore other networks like the NDN (Northern Distribution Network) that passes through Russia, Latvia or Georgia (other less used routes are also there) and the Central Asian Republics. The NDN however, offers a lengthier option and stands to cost NATO \$87million (aprox.) more each month. As the U.S continues to negotiate with Islamabad, it has also signed contracts with countries on the NDN route. Islamabad thus, appears to have been caught in an unforeseen paradox again, exposing the government's weakness in bi-lateral relations.

On his tour of Asia following the Chicago Summit, the U.S Secretary of Defense Mr. Leon Panetta stated that Pakistan has not been delivering enough in the war on terror and also called India the 'lynchpin' in America's global security calculus. While in Kabul, Panetta reiterated that the U.S was *"losing patience in Pakistan"*. Islamabad naturally was displeased over the occurrence of such remarks and sought to downplay the statements domestically. Such statements however, vindicated Washington's intention to review the fundamental basis of its relations with Islamabad.

The developments over the course of the last year seem to have distanced Washington and Islamabad significantly. The relations between the two countries have moved a long way since the Cold War days of their proximity. In fact Pakistan remained a close U.S ally even during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Such dependence on Pakistan however, has changed since the collapse of USSR.

The liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991, its progressive growth through the 1990s alongside its political consolidation and military viability made India a more credible South Asian power. Successive governments in Pakistan have failed to re-orient themselves to this altered context of post- Cold War period. Although Pakistan strategically supported the U.S in its war against terror post September, 2001, its actions never testified the government's dedication to launch any offensive, politically, against religious fundamentalists at home or in Afghanistan.

While NATO has always been suspicious about the role of ISI in Afghanistan, it had little choice but to engage with Islamabad, given the presence of an already hostile Iran to the west of Afghanistan.

As the U.S prepares for a draw-down from Afghanistan, The Afghan National Forces (ANF) seems prepared to take on their fresh responsibilities. As NATO's primary stake behind engaging with Pakistan has diluted considerably, Islamabad is left with little elbow room to secure better leverage.

It is a fact that Pakistan's weakened dynamics stand to undermine the credibility of its government at home. The government should however celebrate the fact that a federal government has for the first time succeeded in presenting its fifth annual budget! It is also for the first time that Islamabad seems to be having a greater role in matters of foreign policy instead of Rawalpindi.

The importance of a democratically elected government can hardly be over-emphasised. While it provides a safeguard against the growth of fundamentalism, it checks the proliferation of unwarranted policy biases. As Pakistan continues to struggle with the influence of religious fundamentalists (for example the assassination of Punjab governor, Salman Taseer and the federal minister for minority affairs Shahbaz Bhatti), the continuation of an elected government remains a positive development not just for the state but also the region.

The international community must concede to the strategic criticality of Pakistan. A hostile Islamabad looks likely to impede a steady withdrawal from Afghanistan. It will also continue to threaten the dynamics within Afghanistan, owing to the porous border between the countries and the operation of groups like the Haqqani network. It will thus, be prudent for the global community to engage with Islamabad to thwart the possibility of security threats emanating from within the state.