

WHAT WENT WRONG WITH OBAMA'S AF-PAK POLICY?

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Introduction

Ever since US President Barack Obama unveiled his 'Af-Pak policy' on 27 March 2009 much has changed in the realm of the US-led war on terror in Afghanistan and Pakistan. More than three years after the proclamation of Af-Pak policy which outlined a proactive approach to deal with the threat of Al-Qaeda and other terrorist outfits perceived to be located in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the situation on the ground remains volatile. The massive terrorist attacks in Kabul and other parts of the country on 15 April this year⁽¹⁾ proves the failure of the US-backed Karzai regime to stabilize the situation before the deadline of US military withdrawal from Afghanistan.

In April 2012, after months of negotiations, Afghanistan and the United States finalized an agreement for establishing "strategic partnership" between the two countries. "The so-called strategic partnership agreement" (SPA) outlines how America will stand by Afghanistan after 2014, when most Nato troops are due to pull out, handing over the country's security to Afghans."⁽²⁾ The time-line of 2014 paving the way for the withdrawal of US and allied forces from Afghanistan after more than 13 years of their stay in that war-torn country raises numerous questions about the future of the Kabul regime and the threat of the return of "Taliban rule." Can SPA replace Af-Pak to a new security arrangement in Afghanistan and how Pakistan intends to deal with that situation in the months to come?

The term 'Af-Pak' coined by the Obama administration in 2009 is however not without forceful criticism. Islamabad views Af-Pak policy unfair

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and unjust in view of the fact that the two neighbours cannot be equated because both have different political, security and strategic positions. That the US strategy to deal with the insurgency in Afghanistan must take into account issues which tend to augment the level of violence in that conflict-ridden country instead of blaming neighbouring Pakistan of incidents which are the result of the incompetence of the Karzai regime and its failure to establish its writ in most parts of Afghanistan. Whereas, for the United States, the presence of what it calls ‘safe heavens’ of terrorist groups particularly in the tribal areas of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan requires a comprehensive strategy to protect American interests in the region. Who is right and who is wrong in the entire gamut of war in Afghanistan needs to be examined analytically and critically.

This paper will evaluate the pluses and minuses of President Obama’s Af-Pak policy by responding to the following questions:

1. What is the ‘Af-Pak’ policy and how it is *viewed* in the region and outside?
2. How the *fault lines* in Af-Pak policy deepens crisis and conflict in Pak-US relations?
3. What are the *perceptions* in Pakistan about the Af-Pak policy at the official and non-official levels?
4. To what extent Af-Pak policy can help execute the US ‘*exit strategy*’ and how Pakistan is relevant in this regard?
5. To what extent Af-Pak policy has been *successful* and what are its major *failures* in this regard?

Furthermore, this paper will also examine in detail the implications of Af-Pak policy on Pakistan and the perceived failure of Obama administration in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan; the surge of anti-Americanism in Pakistan and the worsening of law and order situation in that war-torn country. The role of a major player in Afghanistan, i.e. India, will also be covered in this paper. Finally, the gains and costs of Af-Pak policy in the US counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations will also be examined in some detail.

Afghanistan and Pakistan are neighbours and share common historical and cultural heritage yet the two are unable to bridge the “trust deficit” which exists between Islamabad and Kabul since quite long. Since the creation of Pakistan till today, the mistrust and animosity between the two neighbours continues and given their past and present acrimony there is no likelihood of resolving issues which since 1947 continue to impede the process of good neighbourly relations.⁽³⁾ The United States, under the Obama administration, realizing the significance of Afghanistan and Pakistan in combating terrorism, ventured on a policy to engage the two neighbours in pursuing a coherent approach in dealing with threats posed against the foreign forces in Afghanistan and also the security forces of Pakistan. Trying to act as a buffer between the two rather hostile neighbours, Washington made several attempts to seek cooperative behaviour from Islamabad and Kabul in dealing with the threat and terrorist attacks by forces backed by Al-Qaeda and Taliban leadership.

Established as a loose confederation of various ethnic tribal groups in 1747 by Ahmed Shah Durrani, the state of Afghanistan always lacked coherence, a unified state structure and an effective modest form of governance. In view of its landlocked geographical location, sectarian, ethnic and cultural heterogeneous position and a history of a weak central authority, Afghanistan since 1747 has failed to emerge as a modern state with stable societal and state institutions.⁽⁴⁾ Interestingly, Afghanistan is the only country which in the last 200 years experienced attack and occupation of British, Soviet and American forces and consistently resisted foreign interventions and influence. In view of the culture of defiance to foreign influence prevailing in Afghanistan, no external power was able to bring the local people under its tutelage. The current US-coalition forces deployed in Afghanistan since October 2001 are facing a similar predicament as was encountered by the British and Soviet forces: hostile local feelings and armed resistance against the occupation. The so-called “spring offensive” launched by the Taliban resistance groups against what they perceive as foreign occupation is described in a report in the 20 April 2012 issue of *The Guardian Weekly* as:

Dozens of fighters launched gun, rocket and suicide attacks on embassies, Nato bases, parliament and government buildings in the capital, as well as Nato targets in three eastern provinces, in what a spokesman called a spring offensive to demonstrate its strength.⁽⁵⁾

In retrospect, while the British and Soviet military invasions of Afghanistan took place because of different reasons, the US attack was triggered because of what Washington perceived as the role of Al-Qaeda leadership based in Afghanistan under the patronage of Taliban regime in launching terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, DC, on 11 September 2011.⁽⁶⁾ Unlike the British and Soviet occupations, the US military engagement in Afghanistan is of a longer duration and in the Nato summit held in Chicago in May 2012 it was made clear by the participants that even after 2014, when foreign forces plan to leave Afghanistan, Nato would maintain a semblance of its presence in that country as a deterrent against the resurgence of Taliban and Al-Qaeda and “ordered military officers to begin planning a post-2014 mission to focus on training, advising and assisting Afghan troops to ensure the government can ward off a stubborn Taliban insurgency.”⁽⁷⁾ The Nato summit on Afghanistan attended by 50 countries agreed to pay US\$4.1 billion as security assistance to the Afghan government out of which the United States committed to pay half the amount.⁽⁸⁾ It is another question that to what extent the financial package promised to Afghan government in the post-2014 withdrawal period can help sustain the status quo.

Af-Pak: Rationale or rhetoric?

Since March 2009 when President Barack Obama unveiled his Af-Pak policy the situation on the ground has changed drastically. As a brainchild of Richard Holbrooke, former US special representative for Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Af-Pak was considered innovative and a path-breaking

approach to stabilize the situation in the volatile areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. But after his demise in December 2010, Af-Pak lost its momentum as the two key countries holding pivotal position in that policy, Afghanistan and Pakistan, failed to develop a better sense of understanding on matters which formed the basis of that policy. Furthermore, tension and animosity between Islamabad and Washington deepened since the beginning of 2010 thus widening the gulf of mistrust and suspicion.

A close examination of 'Af-Pak' is essential in order to probe gaps in theory and practice.

The US-Nato military reverses in Afghanistan during the second term of Bush administration required a new approach to neutralize the growing Taliban-led resistance and prompted an early purposeful if not a humiliating exit from that war-torn country. Massive spending in Afghanistan after 2001 by the US-led coalition to restructure the state, eliminate causes which foment radicalization and terrorism and ensure the non-use of Afghan soil for extra-territorial terrorist attacks however failed to attain such objectives. By 2008, the writ of the Karzai regime further eroded with the rise in suicide and other terrorist/resistance operations against the Afghan/Nato/Isaf forces. When the Democratic Party took the charge of the White House and Congress after 2008 November elections, it was quite clear that a review of US Afghan policy was inevitable. But the new policy, articulated after weeks of consultation between Obama and his foreign/national security advisers, came up with an approach which amalgamated Afghanistan and Pakistan under one set of US policy termed as "Af-Pak."

During his election campaign in 2008, Obama had promised to withdraw US forces from Iraq but on the issue of Afghanistan he called for a policy of surge in American military presence so as to effectively deal with the threat of terrorism present in Afghanistan and in the tribal areas of Pakistan. For Obama, more than Iraq, the real security threats to the United States emanated from the Taliban and Al-Qaeda groups based in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. A further elaboration of the rationale of "Af-Pak" was given by an American South Asia analyst as:

When President Barack Obama assumed the US presidency in January 2009, he inherited an Afghan policy in disarray. After eight years of engagement in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Bush administration never convened an interagency assessment to develop a regional strategy for pacifying Afghanistan. The Obama administration identified what it believes is an achievable end state: a gradual, coordination-based transfer of responsibility to Afghans beginning in 2011, enabling the United States to begin downsizing the military effort and establishing a more normal diplomatic presence there that focuses on development, security assistance, and other forms of governance support.⁽⁹⁾

When President Obama outlined the salient features of his Af-Pak policy, it was certain that Washington wants to make a fresh start on its Afghan

policy by linking it with Pakistan. As without Islamabad's support to counterterrorism efforts it was rather impossible for the Obama administration to eradicate terrorist groups threatening US and foreign forces in Afghanistan. On the pros and cons of Af-Pak policy, Kavita Khory, an American expert on South Asian affairs argues that, "In March 2009, President Obama announced his administration's policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan. The product of an extensive interagency review of the nearly decade long US war in Afghanistan, the policy set out the new administration's central goal for Afghanistan and Pakistan: to disrupt, dismantle and eventually destroy extremists and their safe havens within both nations. The review proposed an integrated civilian and military strategy for tackling the insurgency in Afghanistan and recommended that Afghanistan and Pakistan should be tested as one theatre for diplomacy. President Obama commissioned the interagency study soon after his inauguration, and after several months of deliberations, he formally announced the new strategy at West Point in December 2009. Under the new plan, he committed an additional 30,000 US forces to Afghanistan."⁽¹⁰⁾ The so-called "surge" of US military presence in Afghanistan aimed to exert maximum pressure on insurgent groups and destroy their control and command structures inside Afghanistan and east of the Durand Line by launching periodic drone attacks. Four reasons which formed the basis of Obama administration's decision to amalgamate Afghanistan and Pakistan in the form of a comprehensive policy in order to neutralize and eliminate insurgent groups, terrorist outfits and sources of command and control were:

- Better coordination between Afghan and Pakistani security officials for sharing intelligence information about terrorist networks in areas bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- Involvement of US/Nato/Isaf officials with Afghan and Pakistani security agencies on monitoring the presence, planning, funding, training and activities of terrorist groups perceived to be located in the tribal areas of Pakistan.
- Sharing expertise and providing assistance to Pakistan in combating what the United States perceives as Al-Qaeda groups and their Pakistani supporters located in tribal and settled areas of the country.
- Encourage Afghan and Pakistani officials to take steps for re-radicalizing society and curb militancy through coordinated efforts.

To what extent the vision of Obama administration to jointly deal with Afghanistan and Pakistan in its broad objective to protect the United States and its citizens from future terrorist threats and attacks was realistic and produced results still remains to be seen.

More than three years of the launching of Af-Pak policy, Washington still believes that Al-Qaeda groups are operating from Pakistan and are a major threat to foreign and Afghan forces in Afghanistan. US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta during his visit to an Indian think tank in New Delhi said that the "US would continue to launch drone attacks against Al-Qaeda in Pakistan despite

complaints from Islamabad that the strikes violated its sovereignty.” He made it clear that, “this is about our sovereignty” arguing that “Al-Qaeda militants who orchestrated the September 11 attacks on the United States were in Pakistan’s tribal areas.”⁽¹¹⁾ Criticizing the remarks of Panetta on “insurgent safe havens in tribal areas,” a foreign office spokesman said in Islamabad that, “we strongly believe that such statements are misplaced in bringing about peace and stability in the region and the country’s fight against extremism and terrorism would proceed according to its own schedule.”⁽¹²⁾ Pakistan’s protests over the US drone attacks carried out in tribal areas for the last six years however failed to prevent such “breach of sovereignty” by a country which is considered a strategic ally of Pakistan in the war against terrorism. Many Pakistanis argue that what sort of an ally the United States is which frequently threatens its ally and kills civilian and military personnel in drone and other attacks in the name of counterterrorism? On the other hand, many in the United States resent the way Pakistan, its ally in the war on terror, provides space to various terrorist groups that make deadly attacks against the Afghan and US forces. For many Americans, Pakistan is an unreliable ally which has not done enough to prevent the use of its territory for cross-border infiltration and attack on American-coalition forces based in Afghanistan. Based on the soft and the hard approach shaping its Af-Pak policy, the Obama administration believes that still it is Pakistan, and not Afghanistan, from where the threat of terrorism against the US and coalition forces deployed in Afghanistan emanates. If soft measures fail to eradicate terrorist Al-Qaeda presence in the tribal areas of Pakistan, then hard power in the shape of drone attacks must be used regardless of protests from Islamabad about violation of its sovereignty.

Af-Pak: Challenges and Opportunities

What are the challenges and opportunities emanating from Af-Pak strategy and how the triangular partnership of the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan can cope with strategic and security matters worsened as by continued pressure on the Nato/Isaf forces caused by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda groups operating particularly in the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan? Expectations and hopes which prevailed in the Obama administration circles about stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan before implementing their exit strategy seem to have diminished now. According to a Pakistani scholar,

The Obama administration’s strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan offers peculiar challenges and potential opportunities for Pakistan. The challenges pertain to Pakistan’s alleged reliance on irregular warfare in South Asia as an instrument of national security policy, especially the continuing external perception regarding its security establishment’s dual approach of practicing toughness toward homogenous domestic terrorists and leniency toward home-based regional terrorists. The opportunities include the possibility of a long-term strategic relationship with the United States and the creation of a regional security environment addressing

Pakistan's pervasive sense of national security, especially vis-à-vis Afghanistan and India.⁽¹³⁾

Further elaborating his observations on Af-Pak policy, he argues that “the Obama administration's subsequent policy initiatives toward Afghanistan and Pakistan constitute major manifestations of the Af-Pak strategy. For instance, in November 2009, President Obama signed the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act, under which Pakistan would receive \$ 7.5 billion in US civilian assistance on a five-year basis. Then in March 2010, at the first ever ministerial level strategic dialogue in Washington, the United States and Pakistan signed a long-term partnership in ten areas of cooperation, including energy and water, defense and security, and science and technology.”⁽¹⁴⁾ In the context of Afghanistan, “in December 2009, President Obama announced a major revision in the Afghan war strategy. Then at the International Conference on Afghanistan held in London on January 28, 2010, the United States unveiled a plan to reintegrate low-level and mid-level Taliban.”⁽¹⁵⁾ So far so good, but what went wrong in Obama's Af-Pak policy also needs to be explored. Some of the salient features of Af-Pak policy as narrated by Ishtiaq Ahmed are as follows:

- It treats Afghanistan and Pakistan as two countries but one challenge. The reason Pakistan is bracketed with Afghanistan is because its tribal areas along side the Afghan border are perceived by the Obama administration to be a safe haven for al-Qaeda and its terrorist allies, fuelling Afghan insurgency and threatening to increase international terrorism. The Af-Pak strategy, there, focuses more intensively on Pakistan than in the past, calling for more significant increase in the US and international support, both economic and military, which are obviously linked to Pakistan's performance in counterterrorism in the region. Additionally, it aims to engage Afghanistan and Pakistan in a new trilateral framework at the highest levels and to foster their bilateral relationship in areas of political, economic and security cooperation.
- The Af-Pak strategy is based on a clear and focused “US strategic goal” for Afghanistan and Pakistan. To disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan and to prevent their return to either country in the future.
- The Af-Pak strategy supports reconciliation with those local Taliban and other insurgents who are ready to surrender arms and dissociate from al-Qaeda and its hardcore allies while implementing the components of the Af-Pak strategy, Obama signed the US Defence Bill on 28 October 2009. The bill contained a new provision under which the United States was to pay Taliban fighters who announced the insurgency for mainly protection of their towns and villages.⁽¹⁶⁾

If these salient features are evaluated, three conclusions could be drawn. First, the US focus on Pakistan to dismantle what it perceives as “safe havens” of Al-Qaeda groups in the tribal areas on the Pak-Afghan border failed

to materialize because even after three years of the proclamation of Af-Pak policy, drone attacks targeted inside the tribal areas of Pakistan continue and allegations by the high-level American officials blaming Islamabad of not doing enough to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure responsible for attacks made inside Afghanistan also continue unabated. Second, the “trust deficit” between Afghanistan and Pakistan on matters related to operations against the terrorist groups and their activities seem to have deepened in the last three years. The US role in coordinating Pak-Afghan efforts against terrorist groups has also not helped in seeking a better working relationship between Islamabad and Kabul on combating terrorism. There are frequent reports about allegations made by Afghan officials on the failure of Pakistan to prevent the incursion of the alleged terrorist groups attacking Afghan-foreign forces and the installations. Yet, the two countries periodically held meetings on security matters and counterterrorism strategy. In early 2009, Pakistan and Afghanistan agreed on a comprehensive “action plan” to “flush out terrorism, organized crime and drug trafficking and plan to form a joint border security force. The two countries also agreed to help each other by sharing information and improving border control management. They will also hand over to each other criminals and other anti-state elements.”⁽¹⁷⁾

Third, as far as reconciliation with Taliban groups is concerned, there is no headway because a segment of Afghan society is against holding talks with the Taliban or accommodating them in the country’s power structure. Even the Taliban groups who are pitted against the Afghan-US-Nato-Isaf forces have expressed their unwillingness to enter into talks with the Kabul regime unless their demand, i.e. the withdrawal of foreign forces, is met. Michael Semple, a Taliban expert based at the Harvard University, rightly assessed the Taliban phenomenon in Afghan insurgency by arguing that,

If the Taliban fight on, they are simply involved in a violent power struggle over who gets to take over after the US departure. Pragmatists in the Taliban movement want to settle this at the negotiation table rather than on the battlefield, which is why they have left the door ajar for resumption of talks. But they are still not convinced that the Americans are serious about these talks, which is why they have decisively bounced the ball back into the American court.⁽¹⁸⁾

The notion of “good” and “bad” Taliban has failed to catch the imagination of those who want to see an end to fighting in Afghanistan and peace in that country. All the three players in the Afghan conflict, United States, Pakistan and Afghanistan, in principle want an end to fighting in Afghanistan but the three lack a cohesive approach, vision and strategy to deal with issues which are responsible for violence and instability in that West Asian country.

Why equate Pakistan with Afghanistan?

Since the launching of Af-Pak policy by President Barack Obama in March 2009, it has been a source of criticism by different circles. The fundamental criticism emanates from the argument that Pakistan and

Afghanistan are quite different in terms of their security, political, economic and military positions and the two must be dealt differently instead of being equated with each other. One such criticism narrated below proves a degree of reservations on equating the two neighbours by the United States in order to effectively deal with the threat of terrorism and the activities of what Washington calls Al-Qaeda and its supporters holed up in the “safe havens” of the tribal areas of Pakistan.

Shahid Javed Burki, a well-known economist, who is originally from Pakistan but lives in the United States, in one of his columns published in a national English daily of Pakistan came up with the proposition on Af-Pak that,

Pakistan is not Afghanistan. By comparing the two countries together and calling it 'Af-Pak', the United States' intention was to make policy making simpler. It may have the opposite effect. The idea was that by lumping Afghanistan and Pakistan into one analytical framework, Washington and its allies would be able to focus on one geographic entry and would be able to use the same strategy to counter the threat posed to the West by the risk of Islamic terrorism.⁽¹⁹⁾

Tracing internal faultlines in the Afghan society partly responsible for decades of chaos, disorder and instability in Afghanistan resulting into foreign interventions, he further argues that “they (Afghans) don't have an interest in creating an Afghan state that would work for bringing economic development or improving the welfare of the common man. Women in particular remain suppressed. The few that have benefited from some openings in the system that accompanied the overthrow of the Taliban regime once again fear for their lives and their social status. But Pakistan is different. When it emerged as an independent state in 1947 it already had a functioning state with functioning institutions put in place during the long British rule. Although there is not much resemblance between the Pakistan of today and the one at the time of independence, it has the making of a modern state. Two things set it apart from Afghanistan: it has a large well-organized military with 650,000 men and women in uniform and a large and growing middle class. Treating Pakistan in the context of the Af-Pak strategy would be a colossal mistake. The West under the leadership of President Barack Obama needs two different strategies, one for Pakistan and the other for Afghanistan.”⁽²⁰⁾ It is perhaps the feeling in Pakistan that a country like Afghanistan which lacks central authority and with weak state and societal structures cannot be compared with Pakistan which despite its faultlines is better than its western neighbour. Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari in an interview to the *Financial Times* rejected the Obama administration's strategy of linking the policy on Pakistan and Afghanistan in an effort to end a Taliban insurgency and bring stability to the region. According to him, “Afghanistan and Pakistan are distinctly different countries and cannot be lumped together for any reason.”⁽²¹⁾ But, one thing that needs to be noted while examining the internal and external dynamics of Pakistan and Afghanistan is their inability to detach each other from the implications of crises which cause instability in the two countries.

On the positive side of equating Afghanistan and Pakistan in Obama's Af-Pak policy, it is argued that "Obama can be credited with fully realizing the close interconnection between Pakistan and Afghanistan and with giving greater importance to the Pakistani side of the Afghan crisis. To this end, his administration has attempted to build a wide-ranging bilateral relationship with Islamabad which includes enhanced intelligence cooperation, continued military assistance, and greater investment in training in counterinsurgency warfare. The administration has also developed measures to address the long-term problems in Pakistan that breed extremism, thereby giving greater attention to non-military assistance for education and poverty alleviation, as evidenced by the Kerry-Lugar Act passed in Congress in October 2009 and the proposal to create Reconstruction Opportunity Zones (ROZs) in the border areas along the Durand Line."⁽²²⁾ Yet, despite such measures taken by the Obama administration since its launching of Af-Pak policy, relations with Pakistan remained strained and devoid of mutual trust and understanding. Back-to-back events commencing from the arrest of CIA official Raymond Davis from Lahore on charges of murder in January 2011, the US navy Seals attack on the Osama Bin Laden compound in Abbottabad on 2 May 2011, and the attack on Pakistan military's Salala checkpoint in late November 2011 leading to the suspension of Nato supplies caused a major dent in Pak-US relations.

However, the abovementioned events were not the primary reason for the rupture in their bilateral relations. Rather, it was the diminishing level of trust and Washington's failure to maintain a degree of neutrality in Pak-Afghan schism on cross-border infiltration that did the greatest harm. The US not only failed to prevent repeated allegations from Kabul about the perceived role of Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) in destabilizing the Karzai regime but it also launched its own tirade against Islamabad about the existence of "safe havens" responsible for what it termed suicide attacks and other terrorist acts against the US and coalition forces.

Af-Pak and the exit strategy?

How Af-Pak strategy could have set the stage for an honourable exit of US-Nato forces from Afghanistan? What are the successes and failures of Af-Pak policy and why the United States has deviated from its original stance of working closely with Pakistan and its security agencies to deal with terrorist outfits and networks particularly in the tribal areas? What went wrong in Af-Pak policy in the recent past?

When the Af-Pak strategy was unveiled by the Obama administration in 2009, the idea was to defeat insurgents by pursuing a three-pronged strategy: First, to increase the number of US forces in Afghanistan so as to effectively combat the threat from Taliban-Al Qaeda groups. By increasing the number of US forces under its forward policy, the Obama administration hoped to neutralize the insurgent groups leading to the ultimate withdrawal of US-coalition forces from Afghanistan. Second, to make it clear to Pakistan that its military operations along the Afghanistan border cannot be separated from its policy to stop cross-border infiltration of Taliban-Al Qaeda groups alleged to be

based primarily in the tribal areas. The launching of drone attacks to target Al-Qaeda elements manifested the application of 'hard power' under the Af-Pak policy. Pentagon and White House assumed that by getting tough on Pakistan it might be possible to prevent attacks on Afghan and US-coalition forces. That assumption however proved to be wrong because it is not only the role of Taliban-Al Qaeda groups who have taken hard on foreign forces in Afghanistan but the failure of the Afghan regime and its western backers to eradicate the causes which have fomented insurgency. Deep-rooted misgovernance, corruption, lack of accountability and the absence of ownership on the part of Afghan elites to solve grave problems caused frustration and anger particularly among the Afghan youth against the Foreign-backed Karzai regime. Furthermore, collateral damage in US/coalition-led attacks on suspected targets also added to the anger among the Afghans. Third, to strengthen the Afghan national army as a counter to meet local resistance. Washington, like Moscow, had calculated that by better training and equipping the Afghan forces, resistance groups could be tackled effectively. Like the Soviets, Americans also think that in the absence of their military presence, their supported Afghan military can fill the vacuum and maintain the political status quo. Such a wishful thinking which was devoid of any pragmatic and logical reasoning failed to prevent the collapse of the Kabul regime once the Soviet forces pulled out of Afghanistan in 1988-1989 and the United States may face a similar predicament despite its best efforts to sustain its supported regime in Kabul in the post-withdrawal period.

Unfortunately, no lessons have been learned by foreign powers militarily involved in Afghanistan about the culture of resistance in the Afghan society against foreign occupation especially of Western/non-Muslim powers. It is true that unlike the British and the Soviet military interventions when resistance against their occupation was launched by all segments of Afghan society regardless of their ethnic affiliations, the resistance against the US-coalition forces is waged primarily in the Pashtun-dominated south and the eastern parts of Afghanistan.

One may ask is it possible for the Obama administration to pursue a successful exit strategy for Afghanistan particularly when this is an election year and the surge of resistance against foreign forces launched by different Afghan groups, including Taliban, can cause more casualties? Insurgent groups will try to step up their pressure on US forces by carrying out more attacks particularly in Kabul so as to embarrass the Obama administration and raise political cost for the Democratic Party. In fact, Obama's exit strategy lacks a strategy which can "bail out" the United States from more than a decade of military involvement in Afghanistan. Obama can claim to have made strides in war on terror by launching "Operation Gerimino" which successfully killed the most wanted target, Osama bin Laden. He can also claim of successfully targeting and eliminating highly valued Al-Qaeda targets and limiting the scope of insurgency in Afghanistan. On 4 June an unnamed CIA drone attacked Pakistan's remote tribal area of North Waziristan, apparently killing Al-Qaeda's deputy leader Abu Yahya al-Libi.⁽²³⁾ Following Libi's presumed death, perhaps the only significant

figure believed to be left there is Ayman al-Zawahiri, group's leader since Bin Laden's killing.⁽²⁴⁾ American interests, and for that matter, the interests of the Western world in Afghanistan are: to prevent Al-Qaeda from gaining foothold in Afghanistan and using that country for its terrorist operations; to prevent the surge of Taliban for taking over control by force. But, the smooth sailing of Af-Pak and the "exit strategy" cannot materialize without tangible support from Pakistan. It is this "grey area" which is a source of serious predicament for the Obama administration because its entire strategy to seek an "honourable exit" from Afghanistan and prevent the return of Taliban to power depends on to what extent Pakistan can cooperate in this regard.

Successes and failures of Af-Pak

Three years are enough to judge if, and to what extent, Obama's Af-Pak policy has been able to deliver positive results or is an utter failure. For the first two years, Af-Pak managed to sustain the triangular partnership of Afghanistan-Pakistan and the United States in regular meetings on security and counterterrorism matters but beginning with the year 2011 things went wrong for the reasons mentioned earlier in this paper. Success of Af-Pak policy can be measured keeping in view the following observations:

- The neutralization of insurgent groups in terms of their attacks on coalition forces and targeting of Afghan government installations.
- The imposition of the writ of the Karzai regime in providing security to its people.
- Better coordination and cooperation with Islamabad in eliminating what Washington calls "safe havens" of terrorist groups in the tribal areas and other parts of Pakistan.
- Meaningful steps for the de-radicalization of Afghan and Pakistani societies, particularly its youth, which is essential in order to neutralize groups who use the younger people for their ulterior motives.

To what extent these conditions have been met needs to be gauged. From a realist perspective, Af-Pak policy merely succeeded in giving strategic depth to American policy in post-9/11 Afghanistan and making sure that Pakistan is on board while eliminating terrorist threat perceived to be coming from Al-Qaeda and other militant groups.

About the failures of Af-Pak, you can come up with four propositions. First, the strategic axis which the United States was trying to evolve including Afghanistan, Pakistan and US was unable to materialize. Except for trilateral meetings of officials from Washington, Kabul and Islamabad no concrete headway was made on institutionalizing anti-terror mechanism. Second, de-radicalization and counter-extremism which formed important features of Af-Pak also remained unattainable because enormous funding provided by foreign powers to help eradicate militancy, extremism and radicalization in Afghanistan and Pakistan was unable to neutralize groups fomenting violence and terrorism in the two neighbouring countries. The conservative youth of Afghanistan and

Pakistan, which is vulnerable to the influence of hardline groups, continue to augment the predicament of foreign, particularly American forces in Afghanistan. Anger and hatred against the US-coalition forces among some of the Afghans is because of collateral damage resulting from anti-resistance operations and night raids. Therefore, on 8 April General Abdul Rahim Wardak, Afghanistan's defence minister, and General John Allen, the American commander of the international coalition in Afghanistan, signed an agreement transferring leadership of special operations, particularly the so-called "night raids" to Afghans.⁽²⁵⁾ Third, Pak-US relations, which should have been better after the launching of Af-Pak and the Kerry-Lugar Act, reached their lowest ebb. Seldom in the history of their relations the level of mistrust, animosity and antagonism has any parallel. It is therefore, the most noticeable failure of Af-Pak that the two countries, perceived to be allies in the war against terrorism, blame each other for letting each other down. Fourth, resistance and terrorist activities in Afghanistan remain a major threat to Nato/Isaf forces, a fact, which cannot be denied either by the United States or its western allies because of periodic incidents of suicide bombings and other forms of violence perpetrated by the Taliban and other resistance groups. The killing of various Al-Qaeda leaders in drone attacks conducted by the CIA on the tribal areas of Pakistan caused no tangible setback to resistance against foreign forces and their Afghan allies.

The future of Af-Pak?

With the death of the architect of Af-Pak policy, Richard Holbrooke, on 13 December 2010, one can observe the diminishing role of Af-Pak in strengthening strategic axis between the United States, Afghanistan and Pakistan on combating terrorism, extremism, militancy and radicalization. His successor, Marc Grossman, tried to keep the momentum of Af-Pak policy but unfortunately with the dawn of the year 2011, Pak-US relations plummeted to their lowest ebb. As mentioned earlier, back-to-back events in 2011 (the Raymond Davis episode, the Seals raid that killed OBL, and the Salala attack), even though not the primary factor, put a question mark on the future of Pak-US relations and the Af-Pak policy. These events not only contributed to straining the relations but also led to the suspension of Nato supplies by Islamabad and curtailment of US aid to Pakistan. President Obama's exit strategy and its endorsement by the Nato allies means the beginning of the most critical phase in Af-Pak policy.

Even if Af-Pak policy is close to its logical conclusion, there is no indication on the part of the United States and its allies to abandon Afghanistan and cause a power vacuum to the advantage of the Taliban and other anti-US forces including Al-Qaeda. The Nato summit held in Chicago in May 2012 also made it clear that the international community would not give space to groups who might take advantage of the withdrawal of US forces and has pledged to continue its pivotal security role in that war-torn country. How the US intends to replace Af-Pak with another policy in the post-2014 period and what shall be its priorities while dealing with Afghanistan in future remains to be seen.

The time-line from the end of 2012 until 2014 is quite critical in Af-Pak because of two main reasons. First, the role of Pakistan in assisting the smooth

and safe withdrawal of US-Nato forces from Afghanistan and second, the capability of the Taliban and various resistance forces in filling the void resulting from that withdrawal. The surge of anti-Americanism in Pakistan because of periodic drone attacks and what many Pakistanis perceive “humiliating” attitude of American officials when they repeatedly blame Pakistan for not eliminating Al-Qaeda and other terrorist network, particularly in the tribal areas, also raise the stakes in Af-Pak policy and its successful conclusion.

The role of India

America’s Afghan predicament is blamed often on Pakistan but one interesting development which has taken place is a trilateral understanding between Washington, Kabul and New Delhi on the issue of Afghan security bypassing Islamabad. On 14 June 2012 the US and India signed an agreement for holding regular trilateral talks with Afghanistan in order to help it strengthen its hold over power particularly in the post-American withdrawal period. By giving India a pivotal role in Afghanistan, the United States intends to give a clear message to Pakistan that it has other options rather than merely relying on Islamabad for the support which it requires for security and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. The agreement, which was signed after the conclusion of third US-India strategic dialogue on 13 June, also included a joint statement which said, “they reiterated that success in Afghanistan and regional and global security require elimination of safe havens and infrastructure for terrorism and violent extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”⁽²⁶⁾ Denying that Washington aims to squeeze Pakistan from both sides, US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Robert Blake stated in a press briefing that “a trilateral agreement which brings the United States and India in a new arrangement with Afghanistan, is not directed against Pakistan. On the contrary, it’s to talk about the situation inside Afghanistan but also how we continue to support Afghanistan.”⁽²⁷⁾ But Pakistan’s preconceived notions *vis-à-vis* US-Afghan-Indian trilateral forum are not misplaced. Till 2010, the United States acquiesced to Pakistan’s suggestions that India should not be given a role in Afghanistan because of its reservations against New Delhi’s activities on the Afghan soil directed against Pakistan’s volatile province of Balochistan. But since 2011, Washington as a result of deteriorating relations with Islamabad has seriously tried to provide strategic depth to its Afghan policy by co-opting India and marginalizing Pakistan.

Even before the US policy of engaging India in Afghanistan, the two South Asian countries had developed close strategic ties on security and political matters. Harsh V. Pant, an Indian writer, is of the view that

New Delhi and Kabul agreed that the strategic partnership between the two neighbours, to be implemented under the framework of a partnership council headed by the foreign ministers of the two nations, will entail cooperation in areas of security, law enforcement and justice, including an enhanced focus on cooperation in the fight against international

terrorism, organized crime, illegal trafficking in narcotics and money laundering. Until now, India has relied on its soft power in wooing Kabul. It is one of the largest aid donors to Afghanistan and is delivering humanitarian assistance as well as helping in nation-building projects in myriad ways including: building roads, providing medical facilities and helping with educational programmes in an effort to develop and enhance long-term local Afghan capabilities.⁽²⁸⁾

One thing that needs to be noted about the future of Af-Pak and the role of India is: neither Pakistan can marginalize the role of India in Afghanistan nor can India use its influence in Kabul to neutralize the role of Pakistan in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the United States cannot have a smooth sailing in its Af-Pak policy and the withdrawal process without taking Pakistan on board. For the Pakistani military establishment, one thing which it should not ignore is: neither the United States nor its allies, including the Kabul regime, would allow cross-border infiltration and activities of “Haqqani network” and other groups targeting coalition-Afghan forces. The red lines which are drawn by the Obama administration *vis-à-vis* Pakistan are clear: that its territory should not be used to destabilize Afghanistan and cause more hardships to the US coalition forces. Likewise, for Pakistan, the red lines in its relations with the United States are also clearly drawn: no more killing of Pakistani forces by the US drones or by its forces. When that line was crossed on 26 November 2011 by attacking the Salala post killing 24 Pakistani soldiers and officers, Islamabad’s reaction was swift. It stopped Nato supplies across its territory to the US-coalition forces in Afghanistan and froze its strategic-military ties with Washington pending a formal apology by the US on the Salala incident. Allegations of cross-border infiltration levelled by the Kabul regime and the United States are however countered by Pakistan. For instance, on 27 June Chief of Army Staff Gen Ashfaq Pervaiz Kayani in a meeting with Isaf commander General John Allen held in Islamabad “demanded action by Isaf forces against Afghanistan-based militants who attacked a Pakistani checkpost in Dir.”⁽²⁹⁾ Consequently, as a result of the meeting between Isaf and Pakistan’s military, the joint communiqué released by the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) and Isaf on 29 June “resolved that territories of Pakistan and Afghanistan will no longer be used as safe havens for cross-border attacks.”⁽³⁰⁾ Will such meetings help ensure regional stability and to what extent incidents of cross-border attacks from both sides of the Durand Line will stop? These are the questions that are raised from time to time in order to contemplate prospects for stability in the West and South Asian regions.

Conclusion

Since 2011, the United States and its Nato allies are caught in a dilemma: the military exit from Afghanistan in the later part of 2014 will leave a power vacuum. That vacuum can only be positively filled by a broad-based government in Kabul capable of establishing its writ in the whole of Afghanistan and preventing those forces who intend using the opportunity for destabilization

and re-establish a Taliban-type government. The future of Afghanistan in post-2014 era however largely depends on internal ethnic and political cohesion and the role of the neighbouring countries. The stability of Afghan institutions, including political parties, and the role of civil society in stepping up the pace of human development with minimum foreign assistance will contribute immensely to ensuring a bright future for the people of Afghanistan. Kabul's heavy dependence on foreign aid and assistance while not tapping domestic resources will not help gain political or economic stability.

The transition phase of US engagement in Afghanistan has numerous pitfalls ranging from the issue of security in the post-withdrawal period to the formation of a regime which is not corrupt and enjoys the support of different segments of society. Washington knows that Islamabad cannot be bypassed while formulating a new security mechanism for Afghanistan but its concerns about its perceived Taliban-Al-Qaeda influence in Pakistan cannot be underestimated. The road map for the normalization of Pak-US security and strategic ties needs to reach its logical conclusion.

Here it is interesting to observe the circumstances which led to the decision of Islamabad to reopen Nato supplies for Afghanistan which remained closed after the Salala incident in November 2011. After weeks of negotiations, the Obama administration announced on 3 July about the understanding reached with Pakistan government on the reopening of Nato supplies. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's "sorry"⁽³¹⁾ to Pakistan on the Salala raid casualties paved the way for Pakistan's decision to reopen the supplies. To what extent the breakthrough in Pak-US ties will impact on the US-Nato withdrawal from Afghanistan and how groups opposing the reopening of Nato supplies would react? Pakistan's tightrope walking on the US-led war on terror will also have its implications for future strategic and security cooperation between Washington-Kabul and Islamabad on pursuing counter-terrorism measures and denying space to militant and terrorist groups in the post-Nato withdrawal phase in Afghanistan.

Since Af-Pak has seldom been mentioned by Washington in the recent past, one can contemplate the review of that policy and its replacement by a new one. No final word has been given by the Obama administration on winding up the Af-Pak policy, but it seems the failures and adverse circumstances engulfing Pak-US relations since 2001 seem to have contributed to transforming Af-Pak from a proactive to stagnant form.

Two major factors which will shape the US policies impacting on Afghanistan and Pakistan relate to political dynamics in Pakistan and the United States. First, the outcome of US presidential elections scheduled for early November 2012 and the holding of national elections in Pakistan due in 2013. The fact that the Obama administration failed to take concrete policy steps on Afghanistan reflects the election dynamics in the United States. If President Obama is re-elected and is also able to get a majority in both Houses of Congress he will be able to pursue a more proactive approach on Afghanistan and Pakistan. Whereas, presidential elections results culminating into the defeat of his Democratic party may cause a major setback to Af-Pak policy under the

new US administration. As far as Pakistan is concerned, if political parties pursuing a clear anti-American policy on Afghanistan are able to win an electoral victory, it will have a far-reaching impact on Pakistan's relations with Washington, drone attacks on the tribal areas of Pakistan and the future of strategic-security ties with the United States. Second, the process of nation-building in Afghanistan is the need of the hour because, without removing the internal faultlines in that country, having stability and peace may remain an uphill task. Without focusing on securing the Afghan identity and good governance, the future of Afghanistan would remain chaotic with negative implications for neighbouring countries, including Pakistan.

Notes and References

1. See, Alissa J. Rubin, "Afghan capital confronts toll of attacks," in *International Herald Tribune*, The Global Edition of the *New York Times*, 17 April 2012. According to senior Afghan officials, "the attacks that immobilized much of Kabul and touched the capital cities of three eastern Afghan provinces ended Monday morning in all but one province with 38 of the attackers killed, 16 of them in Kabul." Also see, "attacks in Afghanistan," *The Economist*, London, 21 April 2012, p.34.
2. "Afghanistan and the United States Agreement, at last," *The Economist*, 28 April 2012, p.27.
3. Afghanistan was the only country which voted against Pakistan's admission to the United Nations on 30 September 1947 having its irredentist claim over the Pashtun territories located east of Durand Line.
4. Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (New York: I.B. Tauras & Co. Ltd, 2004).
5. Jon Bonne, "Taliban launch spring offensive," *The Guardian Weekly*, London, 20 April 2012, p.4.
6. In September 1998, after the bombings in the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar-as-Salam, the Clinton administration conducted missile attacks on the perceived hideouts of Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda organization based in Afghanistan. These attacks however failed to cause any substantial damage to Al-Qaeda control and command system present in Afghanistan under the patronage of the Taliban regime led by Mullah Omar.
7. "Nato sets 'irreversible' road map to withdrawing troops from Afghanistan," in *The Telegraph*, 22 May 2012.
8. Ibid.
9. Christine Fair, "Clear, Build, Hold, Transfer: Can Obama's Afghan Strategy Work?" *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 2010, pp. 113, 115.
10. Kevita R. Khory, "Assessing Af-Pak Strategy: Regional Perspectives on the Obama Administration's Foreign Policy in South Asia" in *Asian*

Affairs: An American Review, Vol. 37, No. 3, 2010, p. 105. She further states that “in the short-term, the Obama administration’s strategy in Afghanistan can claim only limited success by most measures. Despite the military surge and a vast expenditure of human and material resources, the Taliban insurgency is proving to be far more resilient than anticipated, and US and international forces have been forced to modify their tactics in areas such as Kandahar, Afghanistan’s second largest city, because of much stiffer local opposition to military action than expected. See *Ibid.*, p.107.

11. “India linchpin in new US military strategy, says Panetta,” *Dawn*, Karachi, 7 June 2012.
12. “Panetta’s remarks unhelpful: FO” *Dawn*, 10 June 2012.
13. Ishtiaq Ahmed, “The US Af-Pak Strategy: Challenges and Opportunities for Pakistan,” in *Asian Affairs. An American Review*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2012, p. 192. On convergence of Pak-US interests at the time when Af-Pak policy was launched, he writes: “I agree that during the time the Af-Pak strategy has been in operation, the counterterrorism policies of the United States and Pakistan have converged in some areas, while noticeable incompatibilities remain in others. The convergence may be largely coincidental, as the enormity of domestic terrorist threat facing Pakistan and the country’s military response to it have occurred simultaneously with the evolution of the Af-Pak strategy.” *Ibid.*, p.192.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
15. *Ibid.*, Further elaborating the major aspects of Af-Pak, he argues that, “the Af-Pak strategy is presumed to have evolve in accordance with the changing political and security realities in the two countries, although the review and policies formulated on its basis have thus far largely conformed to the strategy principles initially articulated. Given its evolutionary nature and the fact that it aims to defeat al-Qaeda and its allies simultaneously in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, the new US strategy has a great scope for adopting to new political realities of the two countries, besides reinforcing and re-shaping their respective counter-insurgency mechanisms. Af-Pak strategy is originally coined to adapt to intricate circumstantial realities in Afghanistan and Pakistan as they evolve is apparent from the manner in which the Obama administration has recently started to reach out to Pakistan’s powerful military leadership and co-opt it in US counter-terrorism mission in the region” *Ibid.*, pp. 193-194, 201.
16. *Ibid.*, p.194.
17. “Af-Pak border security introduced,” *Dawn*, 9 May 2009.
18. Emma Graham-Harrison and Ewen MacAskill, “Double blow to Nato’s Afghanistan strategy,” *The Guardian Weekly*, 23 March 2012, p.6.
19. Shahid Javed Burki, “Af-Pak policy a mistake” *Dawn*, 17 November 2009.

20. Ibid.
21. Quoted in, "Zardari rejects US Af-Pak strategy," *Dawn*, 11 September 2009.
22. Elisa Giunchi, "What is missing in Obama's Strategy Towards Af-Pak?" *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, <http://doi.org/10.1080/03932727.2010.489310>, accessed on 19 May 2012, p.12.
23. "Pakistan and the United States Bazaar bargaining," *The Economist*, 9 June 2012, p.31. According to the newsmagazine, "Mr. Libi's presumed death only deepened the rift between two supposed allies. Patriotic Pakistanis greatly resent the drone attacks over their territory. The country's armed forces felt humiliated by the secret American raid on Abbottabad a year ago that got Osama bin Laden. They were furious that 24 soldiers manning a position on the border with Afghanistan were killed last November by American aircraft in a 'ghastly friendly fire' incident and the government demanded an apology it has yet to receive."
24. Ibid.
25. "American-Afghan relations: Over to you," *The Economist*, 14 April 2012, p.34. The night raids are deeply unpopular among ordinary Afghans. Mr. Karzai has long insisted that the raids, in which foreign troops often forcibly enter Afghan homes in search of insurgents, must either cease or be "Afghanized,." See, Ibid.
26. "US, India sign pact on Afghanistan," *Dawn*, 15 June 2012.
27. Anwar Iqbal, "US to allay Pakistan's concerns over new Afghan forum," *Dawn*, 18 June 2012.
28. Harsh V. Pant, "India's Af-Pak conundrum," *Orbis*, Winter 2012, p.100-105.
29. "Kayani asks Isaf commander to curb cross-border attacks," *Dawn*, 28 April 2012.
30. "Pak-Afghan soil not to be used," *Dawn*, 30 June 2012.
31. "Pakistan and America Making up, a bit," *The Economist*, 7 July 2012. The report further says that "after seven months of bitter haggling the word "sorry" has at last been uttered in Washington. That allows Pakistan to begin to restore its ties with America, after they were strained, almost to breaking, following the deaths, in November, of 24 Pakistani soldiers manning a post on the Afghan border".