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US-Afghan-Pakistani Relations During Obama's Second Term

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SALIH DOGAN, DEC 10 2012

Barack Obama was entitled to sit in the presidential chair for another 4 years by winning the U.S. presidential election, which took place on November 6, 2012. Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari were among the leaders who offered their congratulations to Obama right after the election. They also sent a very clear message to him by stating that they hope to continue to have good relations, and strengthen and expand ties between the countries. What they really wanted to say was both leaders were not very pleased with the first term of Obama, which is very well known to the people around Karzai and Zardari.[1]

The Taliban also sent a message to President Obama. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid called on Obama to announce that the United States accepts that they lost the war in Afghanistan and withdraw all troops immediately.[2]

In fact, both complaints and demands lie behind the messages from both leaders and the Taliban.

Pakistan-U.S. Relations

U.S.-Pakistan relations during the first term of the Obama administration were not positive for the region's future security and stability. U.S. warplanes killed 24 Pakistani troops in November 2011. When the U.S. didn't meet Pakistan's official apology and compensation demand for the troops' families, Pakistan, first of all, closed its border with Afghanistan that was widely used by NATO and then kept a very limited relationship with the U.S. until May 2012.[3] Thus, in Pakistan's 65-year history since independence in 1947, Obama's first presidential term had become the period that the U.S.-Pakistan relations were at their lowest level.[4]

It is undeniable that the internal issues of Pakistan, such as the dispute between important figures including the army and the judiciary, also play a dominant role in its relations with the United States. However, Pakistani authorities sense that this situation is not the primary problem that needs to be solved. Pakistani officials are annoyed at Washington as the United States does not inform Islamabad, let alone ask for approval, before carrying out operations in Pakistani territory.[5] The most serious incident of these operations was the May 1st, 2011, Operation Neptune Spear, which killed Osama bin Laden.

Conversely, the U.S. is angry at Pakistan on the same issue, from a different perspective. U.S. officials instinctively feel that they need to question how Pakistani authorities and intelligence services could have no information about the compound that Osama bin Laden was killed at while it was very close to the capital city, Islamabad, and only less than a mile from one of the most important military training academies of Pakistan.[6] Therefore, it seems that President Obama and his team evaluated the possibility of not finding Osama bin Laden in his compound if they had have informed Pakistani officials in advance and decided to carry out the operation.

In addition, U.S. officials also believe that Pakistan has not shouldered enough responsibility to ensure security and stability in the region despite the billions of dollars of aid given to them because of the Afghan war. Even though the U.S. administration takes a dim view of the Pakistani administration for these reasons, they still want to continue constructive relations with Pakistan as they know it is not possible to achieve peace, security and stability in the heart

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of Asia without Pakistan.

Afghanistan-U.S. Relations

Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who does not hesitate to express negative views towards the Obama administration, also does not hesitate to mention the warmer relations he enjoyed with the Bush administration, whom, in a sense, he owes his present position to. For example, the Obama administration did not stand behind Hamid Karzai during the 2009 presidential election whilst there were several complaints about undemocratic elections, which led Karzai to a controversial presidency.[7] Besides, the United States is unhappy with the Karzai administration as well since it's not clear where Karzai uses all of the international aid Afghanistan receives and he is not open to transparency and accountability. By bringing the warlords of 1980s and 1990s to strong positions in the post-2001 period and not keeping them at a distance, Karzai discomforts the U.S. administration once again.[8]

The next 18-month period between Barack Obama, who will be the U.S. president until January 2017, and Hamid Karzai, who is constitutionally barred from re-election for the third time and has to hand over the presidency in April 2014, will be a critical process that will determine the fate of Afghanistan. While the United States asks for a democratic, free and fair presidential election in Afghanistan, it would not be shocking if Karzai supports a candidate who has strong ties with him so that he could still have authority over the administration. Even though the Afghan government has a large enough budget, the \$115 million *new election project* will probably not be finished before the April 2014 presidential election.[9] However, some regulations regarding the *Independent Electoral Commission* (IEC) and *Electoral Complaints Commission* (ECC) may allow a more democratic election. If not, as being an alternative non-democratic environment, the Taliban will be ready to fill this political gap.

Despite these difficulties, both sides must maintain good bilateral relations in the near future. President Obama has already announced that he will completely withdraw American troops and transfer the responsibility of security to Afghan National Security Forces by the end of 2014. He also said that there would be a mutual agreement on security-related issues -even though it might not be open-ended- in the post-2014 era. U.S. Vice President Joe Biden also stated in the Vice Presidential Debate on October 11, 2012, that they completed their primary objective in Afghanistan, so they should leave the country as soon as the Kabul administration comes to a position that it can provide its own security since it will be their main responsibility.

The reality of these statements is based on the *U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement*, which was signed by Barack Obama and Hamid Karzai on May 2, 2012. James Warlick, the U.S. State Department's deputy special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Ekil Hakimi, Afghanistan's Ambassador to Washington, will be co-chairing the negotiations in order to prepare a *bilateral security agreement* which will be very important to shape the future of Afghanistan between 2014-2024.[10]

The negotiations are on and the deal is not signed yet, but it is almost certain that the content of the agreement will allow both the U.S. and NATO to have troops in Afghanistan after 2014. The task of NATO troops will likely be training and advising the Afghan National Security Forces whereas the American troops will also be conducting counter-terrorism operations if needed.[11] Because if the Afghan Army and Police cannot pull their weight, this situation will directly affect the government and it will not be able to provide even the basic services to the public. In the midst of all this, the heavy weapons, air support, intelligence and logistic support needed by the Afghan army, and financial and political support needed by the Afghan government will probably come from the U.S.-led NATO countries.

Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations

The relations between the Pakistani and Afghan administrations, who believes certain groups based in Pakistan are responsible for the recent large-scale terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, particularly in Kabul[12], is not very strong and healthy. Even though there were some positive developments, thanks to the *Turkey-Afghanistan-Pakistan Tripartite Summits* organized and mediated by Turkey, it is still not sufficient to establish a mutual trust environment.[13] While the perception of Pakistan in Afghanistan is of a *hot bed of terrorism* because both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban

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leaders are based in Pakistan, the perception of Afghanistan in Pakistan is the *center of insecurity and instability in the region*.

At this point, the fears of Afghan people should be listened to carefully. Living with fears of a civil war after 2014, just like what happened after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, and return of Taliban to Kabul and Afghan administration, Afghan people seek for an answer to an important question:

Will Pakistan still support the Taliban and deny it?

Without knowing the answer of this question and thinking of the possibility of lacking a functioning state by 2015, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras have begun rearming and gathering *the Northern Alliance* which had fought against Soviet Union and Taliban under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Massoud.[14] They want to be ready for a battle against Taliban in the case of insufficiency of the Afghan security forces, which will be fully responsible for the security of the country after 2014.

Relations with the Taliban

The Taliban should be brought to the table before the Afghan presidential election that will be held in April 2014. Since the Taliban knows the withdrawal deadline of U.S. and NATO troops, they may have developed their strategies accordingly. They might perform low-profile attacks until the end of 2014 and start a large scaled and effective uprising in the post-2014 era. This is very risky and both Afghanistan and the U.S. administrations must be aware of it.

The Karzai administration has made important mistakes and never took serious steps in regard to negotiations with the Taliban. In the meantime, the Taliban lean towards to negotiations with the U.S. under some certain conditions, but also point out Karzai and his administration as the biggest obstacle.[15] Last year's talks between the U.S. and Taliban didn't end well because Washington has not grasped the importance of these talks.

Therefore, the U.S. administration has to get ready very seriously for the potential talks. Herein, Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid[16] offers a very clear step by step recipe to Obama which may help to solve the problem; gather a team of experts and diplomats with the support of European countries (*S.D.: Turkey should take an important role in this regard*)[17], start negotiations with the Taliban and follow a path that should lead to a cease-fire, bring the neighboring countries -especially Iran and Pakistan- together and constitute a *regional pact* for the future of peaceful Afghanistan.

President Barack Obama's new Af-Pak Team -it is essential there is one and it should be functioning as soon as possible- has to know that there is no way back on this issue and they have the primary liability of casualties that will occur from now on.

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