

Pakistan's relations with both the United States and Afghanistan continue to be strained and are likely to remain so. The recent spat in which President Trump denounced Pakistan's "lies and deceit" in a New Year's Day Tweet, and Pakistan's response that it would "let the world know who is lying", coupled with the US withholding \$255 million of US aid since Summer 2017 is very public evidence of that strain, says Dr Sohail Mahmood.

The Ghani government in Afghanistan alleges that Pakistan provides safe havens for the Taliban militants seeking to destabilise Afghanistan. Both it and the USA have repeatedly argued that the leadership councils of the Taliban and the Haqqani terrorist network are based in Pakistan, where they plan and coordinate attacks inside Afghanistan. The United States also blames Pakistan for allowing terror groups to operate from its soil.

The powerful Pakistan Army vehemently refutes these charges and claims that that is no organised infrastructure of any banned organisation in Pakistan. It maintains that there are no facilitators of terrorist groups in Pakistan. The border between Pakistan and Afghanistan is mostly unsecured and for the first time the Pakistan Army has started to fence it for effective border management.

The Pakistan Army has reacted very strongly to Trump administration demands on Pakistan to clean up its act. It has warned the United States against taking unilateral action against armed groups inside Pakistan. The covert drone war has returned with President Trump authorising the CIA to assassinate militant commanders. It is supposed to alert Pakistan before any such strikes in its territory.

The Pakistan Army has long been battling armed groups, including the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), al-Qaeda and their allies, launching several military operations to regain territory from them. It has been largely successful in this endeavor. Violence has dropped since the launch of the latest operation in 2014. Today, Pakistan is indeed much safer, with only one terrorism-related incident occurred in Karachi 2017.

However, sporadic, attacks continue to occur resulting in scores dead. The presence of Taliban militants inside Pakistan cannot be denied, as the country is home to more than 2.7 million Afghan refugees many of whom have lived in Pakistan for more than three decades. It is in this refugee community that Afghan Taliban find safe havens. Very recently, the Pakistan Army has connected the difficulty of acting against armed groups such as the Haqqani Network to the Afghan refugee factor in the country. Meanwhile, Pakistan alleges that the United States and the Ghani Government itself are facilitating India to interfere in Pakistan's internal affairs, supporting terrorist groups in the country and siding with India against Pakistan's national interests in good relations with Afghanistan (giving it the potential for strategic depth against its bigger neighbor). It is a matter of perceptions and a clear majority of Pakistanis view the United States as being in a partnership with its perpetual enemy India.

Meanwhile, the war in Afghanistan is far from over. The Taliban still has control over and is well established in large parts of the country. The Islamic State (IS) also known as Vilayat Khorasan, first appeared in eastern Afghanistan in 2015 and has extended its reach steadily ever since. The IS has carried out several attacks in Afghanistan recently in which hundreds had been killed. There have been at least 12 attacks on Shia targets since the start of 2016, in which almost 700 people were killed or wounded, according to United Nations figures. Before that, there had only been one major attack, in 2011.

The IS has targeted Shiites in Afghanistan. More than 40 people were killed, and dozens wounded in a suicide blast targeting Shia Muslims in Kabul on December 28, 2017. This was the third deadly attack it has claimed in the Afghan capital in that month. It has repeatedly targeted Afghanistan's Shiite minority, viewed as apostates and proxies of neighbouring Iran. A U.N. report released in November 2017 documented 51 attacks on places of worship in Afghanistan since January 2016 in which more than 270 civilians have been killed and hundreds more wounded.

It appears that IS is trying to spark a Sunni-Shia sectarian war in Afghanistan. It uses mainly guerrilla tactics and is estimated to have a force of between 5,000 to 10,000 fighters. The Islamic State has been competing against the Taliban since gathering support from local militants in 2014. The recent growth of the Islamic State group in Afghanistan is due to radicalisation of the country; new recruits from the Pakistani Taliban; Uzbek militants belonging to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and finally disenchanting insurgents quitting the Afghan Taliban.

Meanwhile, US-led foreign forces continue to engage IS in eastern Afghanistan (including the UK which is boosting its contingent numbered in the hundreds). Very recently, US President Trump had pledged to root out IS in Afghanistan, as it has been in Iraq and Syria.

The US has continuously alleged that Pakistan provides safe havens to the Taliban and other terrorist organizations. Very recently, President Trump gave notice to Pakistan to stop doing so immediately or else face American wrath so to speak. Recently, President Trump gave notice to Pakistan to stop doing so immediately or else face American wrath so to speak. Meanwhile, Pakistan is convinced that the United States wants India to have a bigger role in not only South Asia but also west Asia at the cost of both China and Pakistan.

Meanwhile, the assistance provided by the United States to Pakistan has seen a massive decline; from \$2.2 billion a year following 9/11 to a mere \$350 million for 2017. Moreover, most of the aid is for the Coalition Support Fund which reimburses Pakistan for monitoring the 2,200-kilometre-long Afghan border. The funds are to be used for the security of the border which is monitored for cross-border movement of Afghan militants.

A recent new development in the region is China's new diplomatic role. As China's power and influence in the region steadily grows it desires that the world take its role as a global power very seriously. China is attempting to mediate the conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan, positioning itself as a regional peace broker. China's leader Xi Jinping is engaging his country more internationally through the Belt and Road Initiative by building economic partnerships throughout the region. China is investing \$57 billion in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Pakistan that would link China's Xinjiang province to the Arabian Sea. China is now interested in extending the CPEC into neighbor Afghanistan. China is also facilitating talks between the Taliban and Pakistan.

Very recently, China convinced both Pakistan and Afghanistan to work together to tackle the threat of terrorism. China is concerned about the issue as it is intricately linked to the security of its restive Xinjiang province. China relies on Afghanistan and Pakistan to help control its border areas where its repression is at an all-time high.

Beijing blames exiled Uighur separatist groups, such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), of orchestrating attacks in resource-rich Xinjiang and other parts of China. In response to attacks mostly by members of the Muslim Uyghur ethnic minority, China has drastically curbed their religious activities. It has clamped down on open observance of Islamic rituals and has tightened state control over the entire province. Beijing's concern remains that Uyghur militants would find sanctuaries in Afghanistan and Pakistan and so closer cooperation with and between these two nations is viewed as essential.

It is impossible to avoid Chinese regional activity that is connected to the One Belt One Road (OBOR) project of which the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is but a small part. The OBOR project passes through two continents and several areas of instability along the way, with Pakistan and Afghanistan being two. Both countries are vital links in the OBOR chain and China has a large vested interest in there being peaceful relations between them that will feed through to a placid security environment. Pakistan has entered a period of relative stability with terrorism trending downwards over the last two years, whilst Afghanistan is still very much in flux with the Taliban holding or controlling as much as two-fifths of the country. Alongside that there is the festering border conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan that produces regular casualties and stokes the climate of distrust between the two.

Thus, China has several incentives to play a mediation role in the region. Very recently, the first China-Afghanistan-Pakistan foreign ministerial dialogue was conducted in Beijing which all the participants declared to be a success. Thus, China gave a push to the Afghanistan peace process, which has been in limbo since 2015, calling on the Taliban to join the peace process. Pakistan, which claims to be the flag-bearer of Islamic identity, continues to ignore China's repressive anti-Islamic policies in Xinjiang against Muslim Uighurs. At the request of China, the Pakistan Army has handed over Uighur Chinese Muslim separatist in the past.

Given the complexity on the ground, it is unlikely that the trust deficit between the United States and Afghanistan with Pakistan will reduce soon despite Chinese mediation. Notwithstanding claims by the governments, the strain in relations between Pakistan and the United States and Afghanistan will continue unabated.

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